

**William McCoslin (1830-1878)** was born in Vandalia, Illinois on July 27, 1830. While the names of his parents are unknown, we do know that he was not born into slavery. Census records also indicate that he was a “mulatto,” an **antiquated** term for a mixed-race individual.

McCoslin’s later military records describe him as light-skinned and five foot, eight inches tall.

McCoslin, a barber, arrived in Bloomington in June 1850 when he was in his twenties. An advertisement in Bloomington’s *Western Whig* newspaper announced that McCoslin “takes pleasure in announcing to the white folks of this city and vicinity, and would be happy to wait upon all favoring him with their **patronage**.” He offered shaving, shampooing, and hair cutting services and promised his clients “a superior style.” At that time, African American barbers could not serve both Black and white customers.

Later in 1850, McCoslin coordinated with two other Bloomington barbers—J.W. Hill and Edwin Barnett—to create a standard pricing structure for all their clients. The trio agreed that a shave for regular customers would cost five cents (approximately \$1.60 in 2020). That price was doubled for out of town, customers. A standard hair cut would cost 15 cents. They charged 15 cents for sharpening razors, 20 cents for shampooing, and 25 cents for serving “sick persons out of the shop.” The most lucrative offering was shaving the dead in preparation for burial at \$5.00 (approximately \$161.00 in 2020). Hill, Barnett, and McCoslin also agreed to eliminate credit accounts and required “cash in hand” at the time of service.

At that time, McCoslin boarded with a white family and lived at the corner of Prairie and Jefferson streets, just east of downtown Bloomington. He lived with that family until he married Caroline Allin on September 17, 1850.

In January 1851, J.W. Hill and McCoslin partnered together and announced their services, which included laundry “cleansed in the best possible manner, on terms that will give satisfaction.” Hill and McCoslin also continued in-home service to “visit ladies at their residences, and curl and dress hair in the latest and most approved styles.” Since barbering was considered a **servile** job (even though it was one of the best job opportunities for African Americans at this time), it was not unheard of for a Black, male barber going to a woman’s home to fix her hair for a special occasion.

McCoslin and his family moved to Springfield about three months later. Since Black children were not allowed to go to school with white children, school funding was a source of much debate at the time. Black Springfield residents paid school taxes but were not allowed to attend public schools. Therefore, some Black residents, like William McCoslin, preferred to be exempt from school taxes and build their own educational system. It is not clear if William and Caroline had any children of their own, though.

In 1861, the United States of America broke out in civil war. McCoslin mustered into the Union Army in Quincy, Illinois, on November 30, 1863, not long after African Americans were first permitted to join the Union Army. He joined Company A of the 29<sup>th</sup> United States **Colored** Infantry for a three-year term. He mustered in on April 24, 1864 at the rank of sergeant.

McCoslin could read and write quite well, which was not always the case among his fellow Black soldiers. His letters provide a window into the experiences of Black soldiers serving in the Union Army. Writing from Petersburg, Virginia, in late July 1864, McCoslin recounted his journey east. McCoslin recalled: “We had a pleasant journey, but very tiresome, on account of having to stay on board the cars all the time, until we arrived in the city of Chicago, when we were marched to the Soldiers’ Rest, where a fine breakfast was in waiting for us. We charged on it immediately, and captured it without any loss whatever.” After resting for the day, they continued their journey eastward.

Thirty hours later, they had arrived in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania where they were treated to a “splendid supper” and much kindness by the women of the city. Only a few hours later, around midnight, they continued on to Baltimore using the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. McCoslin commented that the Black soldiers were “in good spirits, feeling proud of the treatment we have received, being the same if not better than some of the white soldiers received.” Furthermore, “crossing the mountains was quite an undertaking, especially when we went through the tunnels [...], which was “a new thing to some of our Western boys, who have never been away from home.”

Around June 7, 1864, they were ordered to escort “a large train of supplies” to the front lines. It was their first true march, and a grueling one at that. In fact, many of the men discarded their packs in order to keep up. Hoping for a rest, they were again disappointed because their superiors ordered them to immediately march to Petersburg. They proceeded and rested for one day at Dawson Bridge near the Chickahominy River.

Although they were “anxious to give fight to their enemies,” the men were glad to receive orders to pause and await further orders. After two days, they finally moved toward the front and took positions in the **rifle pits**, “which we consider healthier than going into the fight; but, when ordered, we are ready and willing to fight.” Despite their willingness, it appears that the regiment was “not in good fighting trim at present, on account of an insufficiency of officers.”

On July 30, McCoslin and his comrades finally saw combat during the Battle of the Crater. Union forces had dug a tunnel under the Confederate line and packed it with four tons of **black powder**. At 4:45 in the morning they ignited the powder. McCoslin recalled that “there was about five or six men buried up when the fort was thrown up, it blowed everything, guns and men into the air and scattered them in every direction.” The explosion left a crater “170 feet long, sixty to eighty feet wide, and thirty feet deep.”

At six o’clock in the morning, General George Meade ordered all divisions (white and Black) into the crater. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division, made up of the Black regiments, sustained the heaviest losses, totaling 1,327 killed, wounded, or missing. The 29<sup>th</sup> specifically suffered losses including 11 officers killed or wounded, 19 enlisted men killed, 47 wounded, and 47 captured or missing—a total loss of 124. McCoslin, himself, injured his left leg and side during this battle. Despite these **casualties**, rumors spread that the reason for the loss was the **incompetence** of the Black troops. After the battle, McCoslin wrote home and pleaded: “Give my respects to all my friends, tell them that the colored soldiers can fight and have the honor of being brave.”

McCoslin finally mustered out on November 6, 1865. He was owed \$100.00 (approximately \$1,560 in 2020) for his **bounty** and back pay for the months of January through April 1864 “for which time he received but seven (\$7.00) dollars per month” (approximately \$109 in 2020). In honor of his military service, and the service of all Black soldiers of the Union Army, McCoslin’s name is listed on the African American Civil War Veterans memorial in Washington, D.C.

McCoslin worked as a barber for the rest of his life. From 1868 to 1873, his shop was located below C.D. Swett’s Fancy Goods located at 112-114 W. Front Street in Bloomington. In 1873, McCoslin partnered with Robert C. Allen to run a barbershop (named Allen & McCoslin) located at 108 E. Front St. Around 1874, William and Caroline moved to Normal where he ran a barbershop in the basement of the Normal Hotel on Beaufort Street for three years.

William McCoslin’s health began to decline starting in April 1876, when the *Pantagraph* announced that he was “suffering from asthma.”<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the next two years,

McCoslin's health **ebbed and flowed**. Occasionally, his poor health forced him to temporarily close his shop. Several fundraisers were held by friends in an attempt to raise money to help replace his lost income.

William McCoslin died on June 23, 1878 at the age of 47. His death certificate lists his cause of death as "General Dropsy" (or edema, the retention of fluid in the body) and a "Hob-nailed Liver" (or **cirrhosis** of the liver). At the time of his death, McCoslin was one of the oldest residents among the Black community in Bloomington-Normal. Burial took place on June 24, 1878 in Bloomington and was performed by the "colored **Masons**," of whom he was a member.

Although we do not know with 100 percent certainty, it is highly probable that he is buried in the Old City section of Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. According to his death certificate, McCoslin is buried in Bloomington, and Old City was the only public burial ground in the city at that time.