

HAMER J. HIGGINS (1840-1902)

Hamer J. Higgins was a Valentines' Day baby, so it was fitting that his career as a monument maker was filled with **cherubs** and angels.

Higgins was born in Ohio, and many of his father's relatives were in the legal profession and the military. Higgins' **namesake**, Thomas L. Hamer, was a congressman and is noted for **inadvertently** causing Hiram Ulysses Grant (better known as President Ulysses S. Grant) to go by Ulysses after he recorded Grant's name incorrectly upon his nomination to the famous military academy known as West Point.

In 1861, after graduating from high school, Higgins continued his family's military tradition and enlisted in 59th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (where he served three years), and then reenlisted in the 192nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry, serving one year before again **mustering out** in 1865. During his service, Higgins fought in several well-known battles. In 1864, he fought 120 consecutive days during the Atlanta Campaign! After the war ended, Higgins enjoyed telling stories of his army experiences to friends.

When Higgins returned to Ohio, he was appointed a court clerk and worked to pay his widowed mother's debts. When he had finished, and with only 10 dollars in his pocket, Higgins left Ohio for Bloomington, Illinois. He could see that conditions were good for business, so in 1868 he began an apprenticeship as a marble cutter at Haldeman's Marble Works.

By November 1875 he was a partner in the company, then known as the Great Central Marble and Granite Company. This partnership didn't last long. The company had so much debt that he was forced to sell the business the same month he bought it! Higgins was determined, though, and reacquired a partnership in the business the next year. Two years later, Jacob Phillip Jung, Sr.—another former apprentice who had worked at Haldeman's with Higgins—joined the firm, now called H.J. Higgins & Co. Charles A. Kleinau, who began working at the company as a stonecutter in 1878, joined them in partnership in 1890.

It was hard at first, but Higgins and his partners made the business a success. They made improvements to the business that included a new showroom and a wooden plank sidewalk outside the building. In 1886 they built a new three-floor, marble-fronted building at their East Front Street address. The new building was beautiful, with decorative marble **pilasters** and **intricate** carvings on the outside. It was meant to remind people of the wonderful carvings they could have on their tombstones.

H.J. Higgins & Co. usually employed between 10 to 25 people at a time throughout its history. Those people employed as stonecutters earned about \$3.25 a day. By 1889 the business sold \$50,000 worth of goods (which is well over one million dollars in today's money) across eight or nine states each year.

Over the years, the company did have its problems. There was vandalism, a lawsuit, and a small fire that started after a box of sulphur suddenly combusted.

It also had competition, since there were usually two or three other monument making companies in business at any time. *The Pantagraph*, though, said that the "reputation of Higgins & Co. as men who thoroughly understand their profession and turn out monuments of the most exquisite finish and design, has made them celebrated all over the State." In Bloomington, H.J. Higgins & Co. **dominated** in their field.

During their eight decades in business H.J. Higgins & Co. created monuments that went to places near and far, including Los Angeles, New York City, and Winnipeg, Canada. There are a lot of their monuments in McLean County, including many in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Higgins' favorite monument that he created still stands in Lexington. It is twenty-two feet high,

and covers a plot of land as big as a house! It has a marble angel **flanked** by two life-sized stone dogs, large curved walls, marble columns, and a gated entrance.

Statues like the dogs and angels were not carved onsite. The company ordered all marble statuary from eastern states, had it transported to Bloomington by railroad, and then added it to the monument.

In order to make it harder for their competition, H.J. Higgins & Co. did not advertise their prices. Instead, sketches of the monuments were coded with letters that stood for numbers that indicated the prices. For example, one of the company's codes was based on the phrase "HOPEANDTRY." In this case, the numbers one through nine, plus zero, represented each of the ten letters in the phrase. "H" equaled one, "O" equaled two, "P" equaled three, and so on. Therefore, if the code "HED" appeared next to a sketch, the cost of that monument equaled \$147.

While Higgins was very involved in his business, he also had a family life, which included many children. He married fellow Ohio native Alice Devore in 1870, and the couple had eight children before Alice died in 1887. Less than eighteen months later, Higgins married Mary Stuart Lane. The couple had one child.

Higgins maintained the majority control of H.J. Higgins & Co. until his death in 1902. He didn't leave a will so his wife and children divided his **assets**, with each of his surviving children receiving stock in his company. At that time, Higgins' share was valued at \$20,000.00, which would be over half a million dollars today.

After Higgins died, H.J. Higgins & Co. was renamed Higgins, Jung, and Kleinau, and partners Jung and Kleinau served as president and vice president. Descendants of the three original partners, including some of Higgins' children, continued to operate the company until it closed in 1956.

Higgins died abruptly at his home on April 15, 1902 after **waning** health and a brief illness. The *Pantagraph* reported that less than a week before his death, Higgins was struck with an "aggravated attack of grip... and paralysis of the brain following the rupture of a blood vessel." "Grip" was another name for the flu. According to the article, Higgins experienced two or three days of intense pain before slipping into a "**comatose state**."

His funeral service included **elaborate** floral arrangements, singers, and a procession to the cemetery that extended multiple blocks. The funeral service began at the family's residence and was so well attended that less than a third of the mourners would fit inside! A \$200 bill from Beck Memorial Home included the cost of a fine walnut casket and the rental of eight family carriages, seventy-two chairs, and four singers. Higgins' body was laid to rest next to his first wife at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in a family plot that he now shares with his two wives, several of his children, and their spouses.

Discussion: What does it mean to be a partner? What impact did having two other partners have on Higgins' monument company?