

Georgiana Trotter (1836-1904)

Remembered as a “veritable steam engine of energy,” Georgiana Trotter came to the United States as a young immigrant, worked as a nurse in the Civil War, owned and managed a successful business here in Bloomington, and spent many years working to improve education and civic life in her adopted city. Many believe her to be the first woman naturalized as an American citizen. This means that although she was born Irish, she completed the legal process to become a citizen of the United States.

In Ireland the Trotter family belonged to the Protestant landowning class, aristocrats who rented to tenant farmers. When the potato famine began in 1845 it caused widespread suffering across the country. John Trotter Sr. decided to pack up his family and move to the United States looking for better economic opportunities in the mid-1850s. Although better off than many Irish, he probably grew tired of watching his crops fail and tenants starve. Unfortunately, John Trotter, Sr. died of cholera after arriving in Chicago. In the late 1850s or early 1860s, the family, now led by John’s son, John Jr., moved to Bloomington, IL.

In 1861 the Civil War began with the attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Georgiana enlisted as a nurse in the Union Army and traveled to St. Louis, MO. with Dr. George Stipp, a Bloomington doctor. Here she began caring for wounded Union soldiers being transported on river boats, becoming “one of the most trusted nurses on the Mississippi River.” By April of 1862 she was in Tennessee treating the wounded following the Battle of Shiloh, one of the major battles of the war. Nurses were responsible for washing, feeding, giving medicine, and preparing patients for surgery. They also read to soldiers, wrote letters for them, and brought them comfort.

While stationed at a hospital in New Orleans, Georgiana complained to the Major General that many soldiers were dying for lack of medicine denied to them because of army “red tape.” When he asked what she would do about it, she said she “would lop the ears off a dozen or two idlers if they did not obey orders.” He replied by putting her in charge of securing supplies for the hospital. This solved the problem at this hospital.

After the war Georgiana returned home and joined her brother John in his lumber, grain, and coal business. She had a shrewd talent for business and proved a very successful asset for the company. When John died in 1892, he left the entire business to Georgiana. Under her leadership, the company continued to thrive. Soon other Bloomington businessmen sought her advice in running successful, profitable companies.

Sometime before 1875 Georgiana became a naturalized as a citizen of the United States. Even though women were denied the vote at that time, being a citizen enabled Georgiana to serve in an elected office. In 1875 she was the first woman elected to the Bloomington Board of Education. She served on that board for 18 years working alongside Sarah Raymond, a close friend who was the Superintendent of Public Schools in Bloomington. During her years on the board she helped implement many changes to improve education including more varied course work for students and the elimination of corporal punishment with “rod, cane or paddle.” Her business sense helped keep the school district out of debt during her many years of service and save money during the construction of new school buildings and the renovations of others.

Georgiana with her friend Sarah Raymond and another prominent Bloomington woman, Sarah Withers, worked to fund, build and stock a new library for Bloomington, The Withers Public Library, which served the community for 89 years and continues to do so today as the Bloomington Public Library.

Later in her life she also worked to insure that Bloomington remained a railroad hub. After several damaging fires, the Chicago and Alton Railroad threatened to move its Bloomington shops elsewhere. Being a business woman, she knew the importance of the railroad to an industrial city. The shops provided jobs for many local workers, and the railroads were central to the commerce and future growth of the city.

Georgiana never married but she did become a “mother” to a girl named Bessie Becker whom she raised from the age of three. She also was kind to many of the poor and needy of the community, remembering many with gifts at Christmas. Friends later recalled that “she had probably assisted more poor people to build houses than any other person in Central Illinois.”

Georgiana Trotter died February 6, 1904 after a brief illness brought on by a stroke. She was 68. *The Pantagraph* called her “one of the most remarkable women Bloomington has ever claimed as a citizen.” She is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her friend, Sarah Raymond.

Discussion Question: List Georgiana’s achievements. What personal qualities enabled her to achieve so much? Which achievement do you find most significant?

**Georgiana Trotter was a “naturalized” citizen. What does that mean? What contributions have other naturalized citizens made to our society?