

Napoleon B. Heafer (1823-1898)

Napoleon B. Heafer was born on December 14, 1823 in Charleston, West Virginia. At the age of ten, after spending only six months in school, Heafer began to learn the brickmaking trade. He moved to Kentucky and in 1840 married Elizabeth C. Clark of Jamestown, Kentucky. Heafer and Elizabeth had seven children: Edgar, Arthur, Waldo, Laura, Parthenia, Hallie, and Cora. They moved to Bloomington in 1852.

Not much is known about Heafer's life in Bloomington before 1857. The earliest information that has been found about Heafer was an advertisement for a brick yard owned by him, located a half mile south-east of Bloomington on what was then known as Leroy Road.¹ That same year, he also journeyed West when gold was discovered at Pikes Peak in Colorado. Napoleon, along with several other Bloomington men, left to find their fortunes there. However when he reached the plains of Kansas, Napoleon became ill and was forced to return to St. Joseph, Missouri where his family joined him and he built a hotel. It was also in Missouri where he began to engage in brick making. In 1859, Heafer and his family finally made it to Colorado. Sadly, their prospecting endeavors were unsuccessful and after 3 months, they returned to Bloomington. In this endeavor Heafer lost everything he had except one piece of property in Bloomington, which would become the foundation of the fortune he would make in years to come.

Heafer still managed to become quite wealthy though not in the way he expected. Instead of gold, he made his fortune in bricks. In 1861 Heafer and James McGregor established a brick yard at the corner of Hannah Street and Croxton Avenue. Over the next 23 years, N.B. Heafer and Co. expanded to include seven acres of ground and multiple brick yards as well as a large pond that was often used for swimming parties. By 1883 Heafer claimed that it was the largest clay tile factory in the United States.

In the late 1880s, the brick and tile industry peaked due to an incredibly high demand from farmers needing a way to drain their swampy fields. Prior to clay tiles, the mole ditcher was the first crude instrument used to dig underground passages for excess water. Unfortunately nearly all of these ditches would eventually fill up with loose dirt. Clay was abundant in McLean County and after much experimentation, Heafer made his first brick tile pipe in 1879. It was a round tile with a diameter of about 3 inches. Later he made them as large as 24-30 inches in diameter which was more effective. Eventually nearly every farm in the county was drained to some extent, employing clay tiles.

The growth and development of downtown Bloomington also helped Heafer. Bloomington was in need of better streets to accommodate increasing amounts of traffic. The city of Bloomington experimented with different types of pavement with little success before bricks were used. Cedar wood paving blocks were used but were often damaged by sharp horseshoes and weather-related expansion and contraction. They also employed macadam, layers of crushed rock put down in such a way that traffic compacted it into a smooth surface. Creosote soaked wood with tar binder was also employed.² The City Council also tried coal shaft debris to be used in the paving of streets. In fact, in a report by the City Council printed in *The Daily Pantagraph*, the coal shaft debris, which had

¹ Brick Ad, *The Pantagraph*, March 3, 1857

² William D. Walters Jr. "Bloomington's Brick Streets," William D. Walters Jr. Collection, Folder 9, McLean County Museum of History Archives

previously been touted as the best paving method, was then called “worse than useless³” and was henceforth abandoned. In the spring of 1875 Heafer persuaded the City Council to permit him to lay a test patch of brick pavement at the corner of Washington and Center streets. At the same time on the Nicholson Block, a tar-soaked pine wood block was laid for comparison.⁴ In the fall, the bricks were examined and appeared to have held up better than the wood blocks but many members of the City council were still not convinced that bricks would make better pavement. Finally, in 1877 Heafer convinced the council to let them pave the entire block of Center Street west of the courthouse with their bricks.⁵ The pavement held up well so many more of Heafer’s bricks began to be used in paving more streets in Bloomington.

Because of his success with brick paving, Heafer began to claim that he was the inventor of brick pavement which is untrue. If he had been, he would have become a multi-millionaire. In reality, the first full brick block of pavement laid in the U.S. was in Charleston, West Virginia (Heafer’s hometown) in 1873. In the years after his death, a popular local legend grew that Bloomington was the site of the “first block of brick pavement in the United States.”⁶

The bricks for his many projects were made in Heafer’s factory, which was one of the few brick and tile factories in the United States with facilities for drying bricks in the winter. In the summer the bricks were made by “gangs” of men which included a mud-wheeler, a molder, and two off-bearers. The mud-wheeler would bring wheelbarrows of clay and dump it on the molder’s table and the molder would then throw chunks of clay into the mold. When he was done, the off-bearers would carry the mold to the level brickyard surface to dry. The average wage that these men would make was \$3.75 a day for the molder, \$2.25 a day for the mud wheelers, and \$1.00 a day for the off bearers. These gangs were quite efficient and made up to 5,000 bricks a day allowing the factory to have a total output of 200,000 bricks each day. In 1883 Heafer’s factory turned out 4,000,000 feet of clay tile in all sizes from three to twelve inches using an auger machine. The auger machine would extrude fairly stiff clay through a die and then the bricks were cut apart with a wire. This type of brick making was common in the Midwest.⁷

Heafer bricks were used in many McLean County buildings including the Durley Hall block, the McLean County Courthouse, the Ferre Building, the Waterworks Standpipe, the Roush building, Stevenson Flats, and the Arctic Ice Company. In August 1880 Heafer and McGregor were awarded a contract for \$40,800 to provide bricks for the new McLean County Jail on Madison Street. The new jail was three stories high and included a residence for the sheriff. It was built in the Victorian Romanesque style.

The brick and tile factory burned in 1888, a year after McGregor withdrew from the company. It was reported that the fire was possibly the work of an arsonist. Very little of the original structure could be reclaimed so Heafer decided to fully retire at that point. Heafer’s health had begun to fail beginning in 1883. From that point on, he slowly began to withdraw from the business turning more of his responsibilities over to his eldest son

³ “The Paving Question Being Discussed by the Council,” *The Daily Pantagraph*. June 11, 1877.

⁴ Don Munson and Greg Koos. *History You Can See.* (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1991) 16

⁵ William D. Walters Jr. “Bloomington’s Brick Streets.” 1-2

⁶ Munson and Koos, *History You Can See*, 16

⁷ William Walters Jr. “Nineteenth Century Midwestern Brick,” *Pioneer America*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1982) 132

and partner, Edgar. On July 10, 1898 Napoleon succumbed to his failing health (which was attributed to heart trouble) and died at his home located at 505 E. Jefferson Street. He had always been known as a hard worker and during his life had endured and survived many hardships. He was buried next to his wife, who preceded him in death, in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Laurie Peterson 2008