

## Allen Withers (1807-1864)

Allen Withers was born on a farm in Jessamine County, Kentucky about seven miles from Nicholasville, on January 21, 1807. His father married twice and produced a total of twenty-one children; seventeen of whom, including Allen, survived to adulthood. Although most educational opportunities were closed to him, Allen succeeded in “obtain[ing] a pretty good English education.”

Withers’ first major business **venture** took place in the Southwest where he purchased mules and horses in Missouri and **drove** them into Mexico. During his two years in the region, Withers familiarized himself with a local **Indigenous** tribe and became quite comfortable in their culture. He learned both Spanish and the Indigenous tribes’ **dialect** and could easily communicate in either language. He often faced hardships. He regularly went without eating and did not make much money as his livestock frequently ran **astray**.

Allen’s father migrated to Bloomington, Illinois in 1832 and Allen followed two years later. Shortly after his arrival, Allen completed the first **census** for Bloomington which totaled 180 persons. In the spring of 1835, Merritt L. Covell hired him as a clerk in his dry goods store located at the south-east corner of Front and Main Streets. Not long after Allen began work, his father purchased the store from Covell and managed it as a father-and-son business. That same spring, Allen returned to Kentucky to marry his childhood playmate, Sarah B. Rice. The couple wed on May 2, 1836. Sarah proved to be a loving and supportive wife throughout the **hardships** they faced. The **newlyweds** returned to Bloomington shortly after their wedding. Upon his return, Withers completed a second census in 1836. In just two years, the population had grown two-and-a-half times and totaled 450 individuals.

The **Panic of 1837 devastated** the local economy and forced many businesses to close, including the Withers’. Allen and Sarah relocated to Alexandria, Missouri on the Mississippi River. Withers was again hired as a clerk, this time in his brother-in-law’s grocery store. A few years later in 1847, Allen’s father requested that Allen and Sarah return to Bloomington as business was beginning to grow again. When they came back to McLean County, they brought their enslaved person, Henry Clay Dean, with them. Upon entering Illinois, Henry was legally free, but remained with the couple for the rest of his life and was considered to be a member of the family. Henry died in 1894 and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Sarah and Allen lived comfortably on the corner of East and Washington Streets in Bloomington. By 1860, Bloomington was **booming**. The town’s population soared to around 8,000. Railroads brought prosperity and Irish and German immigrants. Allen was a **prosperous** merchant whose success also spread to **land speculation**.

In 1847, Withers began a partnership with William H. Temple, a **prominent dry goods merchant**, and maintained a store with him on Front Street. The partnership ended quickly for Withers sold his share and began a hardware store. After three years, Withers sold the hardware store and re-partnered with Temple. The second partnership did not last long either as Allen purchased 320 acres, three miles south of Bloomington and decided to raise livestock and farm. He and Sarah moved to this new property where they remained until his death.

Allen and Sarah produced one child, Henrietta, who died at the age of two. **Undeterred** from parenthood, they adopted several needy children. One of whom was

Jessamine, who was also the only adopted child to survive to adulthood. She married John F. Winter in 1870 and had two children with him. Sadly, Jessamine died at the age of 38 in 1893.

*The Pantagraph* described Allen as “a large, portly, fine looking, **aristocratic** gentleman,” whose “aristocracy oozed from every pore.” Furthermore, the paper stated he conveyed true aristocracy, “which comes from the test of life, good breeding, culture, wealth and the association with the best of society.” He stood tall at six-foot-and-three-inches, was very muscular, and was physically and mentally **dominating**.

During the mid-nineteenth century, many Southern families lived in Bloomington. Having come from Kentucky, Allen and Sarah were **sympathetic** to the institution of slavery. These opinions no doubt matched those of many Bloomington residents. In the 1850s, however, the national debate over slavery exploded. **Stephen A. Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act**, which allowed a territory’s population to determine whether it was slave or free, created **controversy** across the nation and **incited** violence in the West in what became known as “**Bleeding Kansas**.” Furthermore, the topic of slavery dominated the election of 1856. At that time, many prominent McLean County residents including Allen Withers were members of the **Whig Party**. Fearing slavery’s **abolition**, Withers and some other pro-slavery Whigs, became Democrats. Those who opposed slavery, including several of Withers’s friends, joined the ranks of the newly formed Republican Party. The issue of slavery also affected the church that the Withers attended, First Presbyterian Church. Some members of their church did not agree with the fact that slavery seemed to be supported by other members (like the Withers) and the church itself. So, in 1855 a group of people, mostly members of First Presbyterian Church, formed their own church with a strong foundation against slavery. This new church would come to be known as Second Presbyterian Church, (which still exists today). Sarah later joined the congregation at Second Presbyterian Church.

Following the Civil War, Allen did not want to **alienate** business associates and friends in Bloomington, Allen soon became a Union supporter. And, being too old to fight, he helped raise money for the Union. During the April 17, 1861 meeting of the McLean County Board of Supervisors, Allen was selected as a member of the War Bonus committee which handled and distributed \$10,000 in enlistment bonuses for military volunteers and their families.

Allen Withers owned several buildings in Bloomington in addition to the farm south of town. In 1864, he prepared to return to the city where he had purchased a home at 305 West Locust Street. Unfortunately, he never made the move; a “congestive chill” struck him, and he died very quickly on March 3. Reverend Fielding W. Ewing of Chicago led the funeral at the Withers’ farm on March 6. Allen’s estate passed to his wife, Sarah. Judge David Davis of Bloomington wrote Withers’ will in 1854 and was named as the executor of his estate. When Withers passed away however, Davis resigned from the position because of his work on the United States Supreme Court. Allen Withers was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.