

## Sarah Withers (1815-1897)

Sarah Rice Withers was born to John M. Rice and Patsy (Polly) Johnson Rice<sup>1</sup> in Jessamine County, Kentucky on October 25, 1815. She spent her childhood and young-adult years in Lexington, KY. In 1836 Allen Withers, her childhood playmate and ten years her senior, traveled from Bloomington, Illinois to Kentucky to marry her. After a brief engagement, they wed on May 2, and returned to Bloomington that same year. Sarah proved to be a loving and supportive wife throughout the hardships they faced.

Upon their return, Allen resumed work with his father at their dry goods store. The Panic of 1837 devastated the local economy and forced many businesses to close including the Withers'. Allen and Sarah sought a fresh start in Waterloo, Clark County, Missouri in the spring of 1839. Shortly after this move they transplanted to Alexandria, MO on the Mississippi River. Allen found work in a grocery store owned by Sarah's brother. At the same time, he built a house on land his brother-in-law had given him. For extra income Sarah housed up to ten boarders when the local hotel filled. Although accustomed to a genteel upbringing, Sarah adapted well often cooking outside to accommodate her guests.

In 1847 at the behest of Allen's father Allen and Sarah returned to Bloomington. When they came back to McLean County, the couple brought with them their slave Henry Clay Dean whom Allen had purchased for several hundred dollars.<sup>2</sup> 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 Cemetery.

Sarah and Allen lived comfortably on the corner of East and Washington Streets in Bloomington near the Washington Street entrance to Charles Northrup's store.<sup>3</sup> By 1860 Bloomington was booming. The town's population soared to around 8,000. Railroads brought prosperity and new Irish and German immigrants. Allen was a prosperous merchant whose success also spread to land speculation. Among other areas, he bought land on South Hill, divided it into lots, and sold those lots to newly-arrived Germans. It was a dynamic time to live in Bloomington.<sup>4</sup>

Their success led the couple to entertain thoughts of buying a fine home on Lee and Locust Streets. The Withers had already purchased land near Baton Rouge, Louisiana where they longed to settle down and become plantation owners. Indeed, the Withers owned slaves to develop and manage their Southern land. Allen regarded the situation as an economic necessity and was sympathetic to the Southern position on slavery. Sarah's father owned slaves as well where, according to her, "slavery ... was of the lightest form." During the mid-nineteenth century many Southern families lived in Bloomington. The Withers' sympathetic views on slavery no doubt matched those of many residents. However, in the 1850s 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

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<sup>1</sup> "Sarah Rice," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, [http://www.familysearch.org/eng/search/frameset\\_search.asp?PAGE=/eng/search/ancestorsearchresults.asp](http://www.familysearch.org/eng/search/frameset_search.asp?PAGE=/eng/search/ancestorsearchresults.asp).

<sup>2</sup> "A Noble Woman Gone: Death of Mrs. Sarah B. Withers," (*Pantagraph*, January 5, 1897).

<sup>3</sup> "A Noble Woman Gone"

<sup>4</sup> Alice McCarty Schlenker, "The Heretics": 1-5.

violence in the West in what became known as “Bleeding Kansas.” Furthermore, the topic of slavery dominated the election of 1856. To be sure, slavery drove a bitter wedge through society.

In the 1850s 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 also the church itself. In 1850 the church had hired a new minister, a southern man named Fiedler Ewing. At a prayer meeting he read an article commending slavery and that did not bode well with some members of the church. 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 remained a member of First Presbyterian Church until 1871 when she joined the congregation at Second Presbyterian Church.<sup>5</sup>

Allen and Sarah produced one child, Henrietta, who died at the age of two.<sup>6</sup> Undeterred from parenthood, they adopted several needy children including 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.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, Jessamine died at the age of 38 in 1893.<sup>8</sup>

Allen frequently traveled for business. During his absence Sarah became depressed and longed for his return. She wrote to him almost every day and displayed great impatience when he did not reply. In her diary Sarah laments “Am very sad about my husband’s leaving home. Can scarcely keep from crying all the time. My husband—how handsome he is. Oh, if I should never see that face again. Oh, horrible thought.”<sup>9</sup> Her diary brims with similar exclamations.

Later, after two brief partnerships with dry goods merchant William H. Temple and a three-year run as a hardware store owner, the growing market for military provisions prompted Allen to raise livestock and to farm. He purchased 320 acres three miles south of Bloomington where he and Sarah lived until his death on March 3, 1864.

Allen and Sarah knew Abraham Lincoln personally and were his early friends. However, the issue of slavery caused them to repudiate Lincoln and his policies toward it. In the 1860 election Allen voted for Stephen A. Douglas. Mary Withers, Sarah’s sister-in-law, and her family were Lincoln supporters and Sarah was sure they would be disappointed when Douglas became President. Lincoln’s election shocked Sarah: “Town full of people. All excitement. Lincoln elected. Republicans in extacies [sic]. Oh how sad I feel.”<sup>10</sup> And upon Lincoln’s inauguration on March 4, 1861 her diary read, “This

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Fraker. “Early History 1855-1900,” *Sharing the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the Community: Second Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Illinois*. (Bloomington: Illinois Graphics) 9

<sup>6</sup> Withers Family Bible

<sup>7</sup> “Ended Her Long Suffering: Mrs. Jessamine B. Winter Passes Away After a Long and Painful Illness,” (*Pantagraph*, September 15, 1892).

<sup>8</sup> “Noble Woman Gone”

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in Schlenker, “The Heretics”: 2.

<sup>10</sup> “Diary,” November 7, 1860, 58.

day our nation is to be disgraced by the inauguration of Abe Lincoln as President. How humiliating.”<sup>11</sup> Sarah’s dislike for Lincoln and his policies persisted for years.

Despite her sympathies toward the South and her distaste for the President, Sarah did not favor war. “The War began last night,” she wrote on April 13, 1861. “Oh how horrible to think of Fratricidal War, and of this once Glorious nation being rent asunder.”<sup>12</sup> The Civil War brought great unrest to the nation and to Sarah Withers and her family in particular. James Rice, Sarah’s brother, was a successful Bloomington dry goods merchant and had even partnered with Allen in a grocery and auctioneering business.<sup>13</sup> After Louisiana’s secession, Rice offered 2,000 bushels of McLean County corn to Louisiana at 39 cents per bushel and explained that the cost of the corn could be repaid when convenient for the state government or not at all, depending on the finances of Louisiana. An appreciative article appeared in the Baton Rouge *Advocate* and found its way to the *Daily Pantagraph* where a portion was reprinted. On January 31, the Bloomington paper attacked Rice fiercely for his “abetting and feeding the enemies of this country.”<sup>14</sup> Outrage at the revelation swept the city and Rice’s effigy hung in Bloomington streets. On February 10, Sarah wrote, “Rainy, muddy, mirky Sabbath.... My Brothers Effigy is hanging in the streets of this city. For what. Giving corn to his friends. Oh ye righteous blackhearted Abolitionists. How cowardly.”<sup>15</sup> Eventually after such harassment, the Rice family could no longer stay in Bloomington.<sup>16</sup>

Sarah found plenty of problems in Bloomington that stemmed from this incident and from a general hostility toward the South:

*My head aches and my heart too. Oh how it wounds me to know that everything I say or do in this community is misrepresented and put down to my injury. Well those things seem very unkind to me. So far as I know myself I am innocent of ever having done wrong or injured anyone in any way and those who have always professed so much friendship are now my worst enemies. A consciousness of not deserving such things only makes me look on with contempt and wait for the time to come when we can go where we will be understood and appreciated.*<sup>17</sup>

The war distressed Sarah terribly: “The whole weight of the nation seems to hang on me. Oh dear, what a dreadful thing to see this torn and bleeding nation.”<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile Allen, not wanting to alienate business associates and friends in Bloomington, became a Union supporter. Sarah found it difficult to balance her sympathy for the South and her desire to maintain her friendships in town. Some high-society women shunned Sarah because of her opinions especially after the incident with her brother. Nevertheless, both Sarah and Allen desired a quick and peaceful end to the conflict.

Following Allen’s death in 1864 Sarah inherited his entire estate, left the farm, and returned with her sister-in-law to Bloomington where Allen had previously

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<sup>11</sup> “Diary,” March 4, 1861, 75.

<sup>12</sup> “Diary,” April 13, 1861, 79.

<sup>13</sup> “James Rice”

<sup>14</sup> “Another Offer,” (*Daily Pantagraph*, January 31, 1861).

<sup>15</sup> “Diary,” February 10, 1861, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Schlenker, “The Heretics,” 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> “Diary,” May 19, 1861, 85.

<sup>18</sup> “Diary,” April 27, 1861, 11.

purchased a home at 305 West Locust Street. In May, 1882 Sarah donated the land which was the site of their first home on Washington and East Streets to the Bloomington Library Association to erect a public library. Noted Bloomington architect George Miller designed the “Withers Public Library” building which was dedicated on December 27, 1887. On May 18, 1894 budget woes, caused by a lack of paying members, forced the Library Association to tender the property to the City of Bloomington to establish a city supported public library.<sup>19</sup> The Withers Public Library served the community for 89 years until the Bloomington Public Library was built in 1977.<sup>20</sup>

Sarah Withers died on January 4, 1897 at her home on Locust Street due to old age and illness. Her possessions were divided among charities, relatives, and friends, according to her will. Sarah donated her property on West Locust and her farm to found the “Jessamine Withers Home for Aged and Indigent Women,” which operated from 1914 through 1963. Withers also donated lots east of and adjacent to the Withers Public Library to the City of Bloomington for the creation of “Withers Park,” which still exists today.<sup>21</sup> In addition, she donated \$2,000 to help construct the Second Presbyterian Church. Sarah Withers is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her husband and children.

By: Anthony Bowman, 2009

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<sup>19</sup> Prince and Burnham, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County* (1908), 780; McLean County Historical Society, *History of Public Library*, 234-235.

<sup>20</sup> “Withers Public Library,” *Illustrated History of McLean County* (1982), 217.

<sup>21</sup> “Sarah Withers of Bloomington,” <http://www.alliancelibrarysystem.com/IllinoisWomen/files/mc/html/withers>.