

Samuel Noble King (1834-1913) and Mary Reed King (1842-1928)

Samuel Noble King (known as S. Noble to most) was born in Tarlton, Ohio, on October 22, 1834, one of David and Almena (Caldwell) King's nine children. In 1840, David King moved his family to Springfield, Ohio, to accommodate David's budding **mercantile** business.

S. Noble attended Wittenberg College (now Wittenberg University) in Springfield, Ohio and, in 1853 at the age of 19, headed west on horseback to another Springfield—this one, the capital of Illinois. S. Noble decided to become a farmer rather than follow his father into the mercantile business. After a year in the employment of John Reed of New Berlin (located roughly 17 miles from Springfield), he had saved enough money to buy a small plot of his own and engaged in farming, a **vocation** which he remained committed to for the next half-century.

When the United States Civil War broke out in 1861, S. Noble enlisted as a private in the 26th Illinois Infantry Regiment, Company D, **mustering** in on August 17, 1861. S. Noble was quickly recognized by his superiors as officer material, and though a series of promotions rose to the rank of captain by the time he mustered out on October 26, 1864. The 26th Illinois saw action near Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Savannah, Georgia, and in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Overall, the regiment marched a total of 6,931 miles, fought 28 battles, and participated in an **innumerable** number of **skirmishes**. S. Noble was neither wounded nor ill during the entire four years he served in the Union army.

Following the war, S. Noble disposed of his property near Springfield, IL and sought to make his fortune in McLean County. He bought 240 acres of “unfenced prairieland” two-and-a-half miles from Bloomington on what is now Towanda Avenue (Normal Township). Soon after, he purchased 160 acres a mile-and-a-half northeast of his original plot. He became a prominent farmer, and his name became **synonymous** with scientific farming and was recognized not only in McLean County, but throughout the entire state of Illinois.

S. Noble set aside, at any given time, five to ten acres of his “north” plot for trials in soil enhancement, crop rotation, and fertilization **utilized** by the University of Illinois in Urbana, Illinois. These “test plots” contributed to the work of Cyril G. Hopkins, chair of **Agronomy** at the U of I and among the foremost authorities on soil fertility in the United States. The faculty of the College of Agriculture at the U of I called S. Noble “a farmer of wide practical experience” and “an **ardent** student of scientific principles as applied to modern methods of permanent soil improvement.”

S. Noble was considered a pioneer in the development of crop rotation and fertilizers. He developed a three-year crop rotation plan involving corn, oats, and clover. In an interview with *The Pantagraph* in 1900, S. Noble stated that only about a third of his land was planted in corn in any given year. The rest was in oats and clover. After a field was planted in corn one year, the following year would be oats and then clover. He observed that this method of crop rotation tended to make soil more fertile and reduce the risk of crop failure in the event of drought or disease.

He experimented with **phosphorus** as a fertilizer, applying half-a-ton per acre, and was thought to be among the first in McLean County to use **statistics** in evaluating the effects of fertilizer, as well as a **surface cultivator**, of which he was McLean County's first known operator. S. Noble also abandoned the common practice of burning off corn stalks after harvest. Instead, he decided to try plowing them under into the soil instead, along with using straw bedding, to build **tilth** in the soil. The result was an increased yield of nine bushels per acre. Any increase in yield would make farmers very happy come harvest time.

Because of his investment in the field of agriculture, S. Noble became a member of the **Illinois Farmer's Institute**, which was founded on June 24, 1895. The goal of this organization was to assist and encourage "useful education among the farmers, for developing agricultural resources of the State," and to develop greater interests in "cultivation of crops, in the breeding and care of domestic animals, in dairy **husbandry**, in **horticulture**, in farm drainage, in improved highways, and general farm management."

S. Noble was a very active member of the Farmers' Institute. He led discussions at annual meetings and presented programs on a variety of agricultural topics, including horse breeding and training. While S. Noble did not find all speakers at each and every Farmers' Institutes to be compelling, he apparently found the gatherings quite educational for the question-and-answer sessions and the collaboration among attendees that often followed the lectures.

Because of his leadership and expertise in the field of agriculture, S. Noble was elected to the board of directors of the state organization, representing the 13th District (which included McLean County) on February 23, 1899. During his tenure on the board of directors of the Illinois Farmers' Bureau, he and the other board members requested that U of I create a scholarship program for **prospective** students interested in the study of agriculture at the university. This program established a fund to "encourage many a farmer's boy and girl to work for a higher education which they might not otherwise hope to obtain."

S. Noble's progressive thinking also led him to **advocate** for **infrastructure**. He knew that, for a variety of reasons, farms needed **reliable** rural roads. To bring awareness to the matter and, he hoped, a solution to the generally poor conditions of **secondary** roads (especially in the winter and spring months), he accepted the nomination of his fellow landowners as chairman of the local executive committee to organize a "Good Roads" convention.

In this pre-**mechanization** age, S. Noble also became interested in the quality and durability of work animals. He decided to breed, use, and retail his own. According to advertisements for his horses, S. Noble had been breeding his horses "to the best horses imported by the Dillions and Stubblefields," (who bred **Percherons**) since the early 1870s. Percheron horses were a strong and durable breed of horse that was bred as a workhorse. They could pull more weight, withstand the heat better, do the work of two regular horses, had a quiet **disposition**, and were perfect for farm work.

S. Noble richly enjoyed farming. "A farmer's life," he was heard to say, "is most independent and happy." He saw **agrarian** life as liberating. In spite of his expressed contentment with farming and all that went with it, he realized something was missing. After building a farming enterprise, he found himself ready for companionship. S. Noble wed Mary Amelia Reed on June 27, 1871, in Ottawa, Illinois.

Mary Amelia Reed was born in Franklinville, Cattaraugus County, New York on September 20, 1842, one of Abram V. and Rachel (Freeman) Reed's six daughters. An **itinerant** farmer, Abram moved his family around until landing in Ottawa, Illinois; and, finally, to Normal Township, Illinois, where he apparently formed a partnership of some kind with S. Noble King. Mary and S. Noble were, thus, "thrown together" by circumstance. She had been an educator by trade, teaching for seven years in the Peru and Ottawa, Illinois areas and, for another three years, filling the role of principal at East Ottawa Grammar School.

Mary adapted well to life on the farm; but, like her husband, she **aspired** to higher purposes. She became active in the local chapter of "The King's Daughters" (now the "International Order of the King's Daughters and Sons"), a Christian organization formed to do **charitable** work.

While she and S. Noble had no children of their own, Mary was interested in how children were raised and about their early education. She belonged to two organizations who were founded with the goal of being a safe and caring place for working mothers to leave their children who were not of school age. In 1890, the King's Daughters, Bloomington Chapter, repurposed a cottage in Bloomington and established the "King's Daughter's Home," and in 1908, Mary began serving on the board of the Day Nursery and Settlement Association which established a home on Bloomington's west side with the same purpose.

Another cause Mary joined was the education of women in the **domestic sciences**. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women were still "at home;" however, they observed the task of managing a household as becoming increasingly complex, perhaps even more so than their husbands' work. As such, women needed **expertise** and, thanks to people like Mary King, learning opportunities emerged.

In 1898, the **Illinois Association of Domestic Science** was founded. It was organized as a branch of the Illinois Farmers' Institute "to arouse a wider interest in the science and art of housekeeping" and was designed to assist farmers' wives and "to **stimulate** mutual helpfulness in their methods of housekeeping." The system of organization was exactly the same as the Farmers' Institute, in that each county had its own domestic science association. Mary was a co-founder the McLean County chapter and, for the ensuing 30 years, worked for its growth and development into a **viable** institution. She also served as secretary and president of the state association. She helped organize, and often led sessions at, conventions for women to learn important applications, e.g. preparing and cooking meat, the uses of different **cereals**, bread-baking, management of a **cellar**, **sanitations** and cleaning, preventing **contagious** diseases, and budgeting.

The Kings were also active members of the Second Presbyterian Church of Bloomington. S. Noble served as an officer on the church council and Mary combined her **devotion** and teaching skills in conducting a Bible study class for adult women.

In 1907, at 72 years of age, S. Noble had enjoyed unusually good health and remained quite active, considering that the average American male at the time did not survive much beyond 50. However, he experienced a life changing event that spring. The Kings' nephew, David Ward King of Missouri, came for a visit. As S. Noble departed the **depot** platform after picking up David in his buggy, he crossed the tracks and was struck by an east bound **Big Four** freight train engine. As *The Pantagraph* reported, "one arm fell under the wheels and was horribly **mangled**." He otherwise suffered non-life-threatening bruises and **contusions**. He was taken by ambulance to Brokaw Hospital and **Chicago & Alton railroad** surgeons were called to treat him. Unfortunately, his arm was badly damaged, and the surgeons were forced to **amputate** his left arm near the elbow. S. Noble was released from the hospital within the week, **recuperated** at home for a time under Mary's care, and eventually resumed his active lifestyle, but with some limitations.

In January 1911, the Kings retired from farming. They rented out their property in Normal Township, sold his entire herd of Percheron horses (19 **mares** and **fillies**, and 5 **stallions**), and moved to 903 Main Street in Bloomington. In an interview with *The Pantagraph* that announced his retirement from farming, he recalled that he had raised "fifty-four crops of corn" since he began farming in Illinois in 1854. He also stated that he had been crazy about horses for as long as he could remember. S. Noble said that his father "kept a carriage horse and from the time I was six years old I took care of that horse. That led me to the farm, my love for **stock**, more for horses.... there is no other animal that has as good sense as a horse." While he was born and

raised in town, he enjoyed working on the farm and didn't know of anything he would have liked better.

Just two years into retirement, after the New Year in 1913, he caught a cold, which, within a month, complicated into **septicemia**. He died on February 3, 1913, at the age of 78 and was **interred** in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery two days later.

Mary remained an active **philanthropist**, and even traveled to Europe in the summer of 1914. Mary also split her time between her Bloomington residence and a second home in Pasadena, California (where she and S. Noble had spent the winters of 1911 and 1912 after their retirement). May passed away in Pasadena after a gradual decline of health on December 20, 1928, at the age of 86.

In his will, S. Noble understandably left his earthly possessions to Mary. He added, though, a **provision** for the disposal of his property upon Mary's death. He and Mary desired that a **considerable** portion of their estate—the 240-acre plot in Normal Township where they farmed and lived—be left to fund, in **perpetuity**, the **Jessamine Withers Home**, also known as the “Old Ladies Home of Bloomington.”

At the time of her death in 1897, philanthropist Sarah Withers left her second private residence at 305 West Locust to establish a home for **impoverished** elderly women. She requested that it be named the Jessamine Withers Home after her adopted daughter, Jessamine, who died in 1892. Sarah had **designated** her first home, at the corner of East and Washington Streets, for the establishment of the Withers Library (now known as the Bloomington Public Library).

Though Sarah Withers dedicated a building for the Jessamine Withers Home, she was not able to provide operating **capital**, and, despite several small donations and **legacies**, the project remained **dormant** for the next 17 years. Enter the Kings. Within a month of the reading of her husband's will, Mary decided to donate part of her **inheritance** and order that the 240 acres of farm ground be, as soon as legally possible, placed in a trust, with the annual income **designated** to support the home. Leaders of Second Presbyterian Church of Bloomington were to be the trustees. By the end of April, that same year, Mary **conceded** additional properties to the trust, expanding it to more than one-half of her and her husband's entire estate.

Owing largely to the King trust, the Home opened on May 12, 1914, with the Board of Lady Managers supervising operations and a superintendent handling day-to-day affairs. As it entered its 50th year in the 1960s, **regulations** on nursing homes had been made more **stringent** by the State of Illinois and, because women now enjoyed the benefits of **Social Security** and **Medicare**, very few women were able to qualify for residence. The Home closed in 1963.

Starting in 1957, the Withers Home property—the 240-acre plot willed by the Kings—was gradually **liquidated**. That year, 75 acres were sold to **General Electric**, and in 1965, the remaining 165 acres was sold to the Bloomington Industrial Development Corporation. Today, this site is now home a variety of commercial properties, including the Chateau Hotel and Conference Center and Best Buy. A pink **granite** monument commemorating the Kings' legacy remains in a prominent place just north of Best Buy in the parking lot.