

## Georgina Trotter (1836-1904)

Georgina Trotter was born on August 15, 1836 in Drogheda, Louth County, Ireland. She was one of six children born to John and Ann (Kelley) Trotter. The Trotter family was Irish Protestant and Georgina's father, John, engaged in **agriculture** and was a **prominent architect**.

In 1849, Trotter's father, a sister, and a brother came to the United States and settled in Chicago, Illinois. Trotter, her mother, and the rest of her siblings arrived in the U.S. the following year. Although the Trotter family was wealthy, they too were affected by the **famine** which plagued the whole of Ireland.

In 1840 almost 2.5 million Irish people relied on potatoes for profit, **nourishment**, and their **livelihood**. The English landowners of Ireland rented out pieces of their land to poor Irish Catholics. The Irish would work these lands to produce a profit for the landowner and enough potatoes were grown on land to provide enough food for the tenant families to survive as well. In 1845 a plant **pathogenic fungus** ruined the potato crop. By 1847 (known as Black '47) the entire crop of potatoes was wiped out, leaving a full-**fledged** famine in its wake. The fungus continued to wipe out crops annually until 1852. Although there were **relief efforts**, an estimated one million people died due to **starvation** or related diseases due to the famine by 1851. **Migration** became the only solution for millions of Irish people. By 1851 over two million people had **emigrated** from Ireland, with around 740,216 Irish **immigrating** to the United States by 1855.

Prior to Trotter's arrival in the U.S., her father died of cholera in 1849. This left Georgina's older brother, John Trotter, Jr., to be the one responsible for supporting the family. Eventually the family moved on to Bloomington by 1855, settling at a home located at the corner of Main and North Grove Streets, and then at a home at the corner of Allen and Market Streets by 1866.

On April 14, 1861, the United States **Civil War** began. Trotter answered the **call of duty** by **enlisting** as a nurse in the Union Army. She served at various posts during the war, including the U.S.A. Post Hospital in Jefferson City, Missouri (November 1, 1861 through February 1862) where she **escorted** wounded Union soldiers from the South to the North on riverboats as part of her duties as a nurse. It was said that she was one of the most trusted nurses on the hospital boats that ran up and down the Mississippi River.

By January 1863, Trotter was stationed at Union Hotel U.S.A. General Hospital in Georgetown, located outside of Washington, D.C. She worked there for several months. Nurses like her were responsible not only for washing, feeding, giving medicine, and preparing the wounded for surgery, but also reading to soldiers aloud, writing letters, and entertaining them day and night.

By May 1863, Trotter was transferred to the U.S.A Hospital in New Haven, Connecticut where she continued to treat the soldiers who were wounded in battle. She worked at this hospital through the month of October that year. Following this posting, she was transferred to a hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana. Trotter was put in charge of securing supplies for the hospital. Prior to this, it had been very difficult to "secure the necessary supplies, medicines, etc... from the store houses of the various wards" at the hospital. She complained to Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler about the "annoying army **red tape**, stating that many soldiers were dying for lack of such medicine which was but a short distance away, but which was kept from use by red tape until too late." Butler asked her what she would do about this problem. She replied that she "would **lop** the ears off a dozen or two of the **idlers** about here if they did not wake up and obey orders." To which Butler replied, "Go ahead and do it. I appoint you in charge

of the hospital **stores.**” After her appointment, there was no future trouble in securing the proper supplies to care for the sick and wounded Union soldiers.

After the war ended on April 9, 1865, Trotter returned home and joined her brother John in his lumber, grain, and coal business, which he opened in 1866. Their lumber and coal yard, *J.W. & G. Trotter Lumber & Grain Merchants*, was first located at 1302 West Market Street. Trotter had a **shrewd** talent for business and proved a very successful **asset** for the company, so much so that by 1876, Georgina and her brother, John, were ready to expand their company and purchased twelve **lots** of land and moved the business to 1111 West Market Street. In 1885, they expanded the company again by purchasing additional lots of land.

Trotter seemed to never tire; “she was a veritable **steam engine** of energy, and nothing could tire or **affright** her in the way of bodily **exertions** in the **pursuit** of many plans for the good of the city.” In fact, when her brother John passed away in February 1892, he left the entire business to Georgina over their brother James. Under her leadership the company continued to thrive. Georgina’s talents for business were sought out by other local businessmen who came to her for advice, establishing her ability as a woman **capable** of running a profitable company on her own.

On April 6, 1874, she became involved in the educational matters of Bloomington as the first woman elected to the Bloomington Board of Education even though, as a woman, she did not have the right to vote. She was also one of the first women in the United States to serve on a school board. According to *The Pantagraph*, “no election for members of the Board of Education that has ever been held in Bloomington has excited so much interest...the cause of this was doubtless not that issues more important than common involved or that party or **clique** had entered into the struggle, but that a woman, Miss Georgina Trotter, had entered the lists as a candidate.” In the days leading up the election, *The Pantagraph* reported that the time had come “when public opinion recognizes the fitness of woman to occupy positions of trust and responsibility, especially in the education of youth.”

Though she did not have a desire to be in public service, she could not refuse the position on the Board of Education. Trotter said in her letter of **acceptance** that a “**conviction** of duty and a high appreciation of your **substantial** and practical **recognition** of the rights of women **compel** me to accept the invitation which you have generously extended.” She served on the board for fifteen years (five consecutive terms), right alongside Sarah Raymond, a close friend who was appointed the Superintendent of Public Schools in Bloomington that same year.

Trotter, and her friend Sarah Raymond, had an uphill battle to prove they were worthy of these positions to members of the community. Some individuals were opposed to women (childless women for that matter), running the schools, when these offices had traditionally been held by men.

As a member of the school board, Trotter implemented many changes that improved the education of the children of Bloomington. In March 1875, she suggested the idea of shortening the course of high school “from six to three years, or at least to a shorter time than six years.” Trotter claimed that the course, as it was then, “was too complete—far beyond that **contemplated** by the law.” She stated that very few students who entered high school completed the necessary course. Trotter also noted that the incoming class of high school students for the 1874-75 school year was 75 students, but only 7 students would be graduating. She felt that if some of the course work was moved to the **ward schools** that it would reduce pressure on the high school, encouraging more students to graduate and reducing expenses too.

Trotter and the rest of the board wasted no time in **implementing** this change. The proposal was given to the high school committee to study this matter. The following month, the committee reported back, stating that state law only required “a good **practical** business education at public expense,” and that the course work created by their **predecessors** included “many branches of science that are far above the requirements of our practical business men.” It was their **recommendation** that students who wished to take classes above and beyond what the state required, should do so at their own expense. After several meetings throughout the summer, by the July meeting, the board and Superintendent Raymond had **solidified** a plan to cut the high school curriculum from six years down to three years.

In October 1876, Trotter made a motion that the committee on school examiners be instructed to inquire into the possibility of opening an evening school, which would benefit those individuals who are “compelled to labor during the day.” Her fellow board members **wholeheartedly endorsed** this idea and instructed the school examiners committee to look into the **feasibility** of putting the plan into action by November 1.

During her second term, in addition to being the head of the Janitors and Supplies Committee, she was also appointed to the School Buildings and Grounds committee and the Finance and Auditing Committee. Right before the beginning of the 1879-1880 school year, as the head of the Janitors and Supplies Committee, Trotter had the important task to have the furnaces at all of the schools evaluated. The report she presented to the full board found that the furnaces at five of the school buildings needed to be **overhauled** or completely replaced. Her committee’s findings brought about much discussion and **debate** from her fellow (male) board members as to if all of this **expenditure** would be necessary. Trotter did not back down and eventually the rest of the board members fell in line and voted to **authorize** her committee to seek **bids** for the project to be completed.

Trotter and Sarah Raymond did much to improve the schools. Their efforts added more classrooms and almost completely **eliminated corporal punishment** (a form punishment in which a rod, cane, or paddle was used to hit a student). And by 1881, the school district’s debt was completely gone. Trotter’s **keen** business sense helped keep the school district out of debt during her **tenure** in office and saved the school district a “good deal of money.” Overall, she witnessed 1,637 graduates and 40,000 pupils during her 15 years on the school board. Trotter retired from office in 1889 due to ill health.

Trotter and Raymond “worked side by side to improve the lives of others in the community through their social and professional lives.” Their hard work is evident as they worked together to develop Bloomington’s public library—Withers Public Library. Not only did Trotter **contribute** funds to help construct the building, but she helped gather donations from other members of the community to raise the necessary funds to construct the library. She also **lent** her business sense to the administration of the library. Today, there is a fountain dedicated to the Trotter Family in Withers Park, next to the site of Withers Library.

Georgina Trotter died in her cottage on North Mason Street on February 6, 1904 after a brief illness brought on by a **stroke**. Although her death seemed **imminent**, residents of Bloomington were still shocked and saddened. Her funeral was held at the family home and St. Matthew’s Church in Bloomington. *The Pantagraph* called her “one of the most remarkable women Bloomington has ever claimed as a citizen.” Trotter was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.