

John Edward McClun (1812-1888)

John Edward McClun was born on February 19, 1812, in Frederick County, Virginia. He was the youngest of eight children born to Thomas and Elizabeth (Bailey) McClun. His family was originally from Northern Ireland and they settled in Pennsylvania before moving to Virginia. John's father, Thomas, was a Quaker who later moved the family to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Their home was a log cabin with a stone chimney. John wrote in his memoir that his childhood in Virginia was beautiful, and he had great relationships with his older siblings. As the youngest, he was very close to his brothers and would run to meet them after they worked all day, so they could carry him back inside.

However, John's early life was filled with sadness. His brother Jefferson died when John was very young, and he called it the "most tender event" of his life. Then, in 1819, when John was only seven, his father died. John believed his father's love for alcohol led to his early death. This influenced John's lifelong work in fighting alcohol use (called Temperance). His mother, with help from the older children, kept the family going by working on the farm. John admired his mother for her strength and energy. She took care of the animals, the garden, and the dairy, while his brothers worked the land.

John learned about sales from his mother. As a boy, she would send him to the market in Winchester, Virginia, to sell butter, eggs, chickens, and vegetables. Over the years, John became a skilled salesperson. One story he told was about almost giving up on selling some old geese that no one wanted to buy. But when an old woman offered to buy one, John convinced her to buy both by saying the geese had been together for twenty years and it would be sad to separate them. The woman agreed, and John sold the geese.

At 18, in 1830, John was able to attend school for the first time, thanks to the money he and his mother had saved. He worked hard and even studied while working in the fields during the summer. After a year, he became a teacher in a small schoolhouse, teaching students ages 6 to 21. After teaching for three years, he decided to explore the western states. He traveled alone on horseback through parts of the Midwest, liked what he saw, and went back to get his mother. In 1835, John and his mother moved west. They traveled in a two-horse wagon and eventually reached Springfield, Illinois. Springfield was growing but lacked job opportunities. After several failed attempts to start a business, John found a job as a store clerk in Waynesville, Illinois. However, after only working there for six months, the store owner died. John decided to move to Bloomington, where he had visited six months prior. Upon returning to Bloomington, he opened his own store. John described Bloomington as a small, beautiful town with about 300 people. There were only five stores, and he did well. He also bought land and started buying and selling property.

In 1839, John married Hannah Harkness, and they had eleven children, but only five survived to adulthood. Most of the children died at a young age. His mother passed away in 1843, and John credited her with teaching him important values like honesty and hard work. He was a deeply religious man and was active in the First Methodist Episcopal Church, where he served as a trustee and Sunday school superintendent for many years. His faith helped him cope with the many tragedies in his life.

In the 1840s, John's store faced tough times due to a national economic downturn. But by being honest and trusted by his creditors, he was able to continue his business. Later, he made money by winning contracts for several mail routes, which helped his business grow.

In 1849, John was elected County Judge for McLean County, even though he had no legal training. He worked hard, reducing the county's debt and lowering taxes during his three years in office. In 1860, he helped open a bank, the Home Bank of Bloomington. Unfortunately, the bank failed in 1876 due to tough economic times.

John was also very involved in his community. He helped start Illinois Wesleyan University, the county Bible Society, the McLean County Thief Detecting Society, and the Central Illinois Female College. He served in the Illinois House of Representatives from 1853-1855, was on the State Board of Education, and was a member of the committee which created Bloomington's first public library.

After his bank failed in 1876, John retired from business. He lived a quiet life until he became ill in 1888 and passed away on July 30 at the age of 76. His funeral was large and held at his church, First Methodist Episcopal Church. Many people from Bloomington, including prominent citizens, attended to pay their respects. He was buried in the family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. His wife, Hannah, passed away three years later, and she was buried next to him.