

John Laurens Wolcott (1808-1887)

John Wolcott was born on August 30, 1808, in Berkshire County, Massachusetts. He learned how to work with wood by helping his father, who was a cabinet maker and undertaker.

In 1834, John married Caroline Baker, and in 1843, they moved to Bloomington, where John started a business with two brothers, Goodman and Lyman Ferre. He worked with them until 1859 when he decided to run his own undertaking business.

At first, there were only a few funerals each month in Bloomington, but in 1855, an outbreak of Asiatic cholera caused many more deaths. John Wolcott sold 200 coffins that year, with 127 of them being sold in the summer months alone. Throughout much of his early career, people were buried either in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery or St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery.

John's first burial was in 1843 for the infant child of Absalom McClung. In the beginning, all bodies had to be carried to the cemetery, and it wasn't until 1845 that they used a horse-drawn hearse. Funerals back then were simple, and embalming was not common. Bodies were often buried the day after death. Over time, however, embalming became more common, and funerals became more formal.

John Wolcott also made his own coffins out of walnut and lined them with cloth. The cost of a coffin in the 1840s was around \$6 to \$8, and a cemetery plot cost about \$10. By the 1880s, coffins cost \$12 to \$16, the hearse cost \$8, and a cemetery plot could cost \$50 to \$60. He also invented two things: a display case for coffins and removable handles that could be used to carry the coffin to the grave and then reused.

In 1883, Wolcott was asked about gruesome deaths and fear of the dead in a newspaper article. He said he had grown up around dead bodies because of his father's work, so he wasn't afraid. He shared stories about unusual deaths, including a worker who was killed in a mill accident and a man who was run over by a train. He said he had many more stories like these.

Besides his work as an undertaker, Wolcott was also known for being a beekeeper. He started keeping bees for fun and profit and he was one of the first beekeepers in the county. He kept up to 180 bee colonies at times, though the number would go down in bad weather. In 1883, he made \$350 from his bees, which was mostly profit. However, his main job was always as an undertaker.

Wolcott was a respected businessman and community leader. He was a member of the Masons, a fraternal organization who supported each other and worked to improve the community, and was an active member of his church. He was also a strong supporter of the Republican Party.

In August 1887, when John Wolcott was older and not feeling well, his son William was accused of killing a man named George Kurtz. William had gotten into a fight with Kurtz over a bucket of beer. William was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to five years in prison. John wrote in his journal that he was surprised his son seemed satisfied with the verdict.

After the trial, John's health worsened. He had not been feeling well for a while, and on December 19, 1887, John passed away. His daughter wrote in his journal that he died at 6:30 p.m. He was buried three days later in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.