

Napoleon B. Heafer (1823-1898)

Napoleon B. Heafer was born on December 14, 1823, in Charleston, West Virginia. At the age of 10, after just six months of school, he started learning the brickmaking trade. He moved to Kentucky, where he married Elizabeth C. Clark in 1840. They had seven children: Edgar, Arthur, Waldo, Laura, Parthenia, Hallie, and Cora. In 1852, they moved to Bloomington.

Not much is known about Heafer's life in Bloomington until 1857, when he owned a brick yard located southeast of the city. That same year, Heafer traveled to Colorado after hearing about the gold discovery at Pikes Peak. He went with several other Bloomington men, but he became sick on the way and had to return to Missouri. He built a hotel there and also worked in brickmaking. In 1859, he and his family moved to Colorado, but after three months of unsuccessful prospecting, they returned to Bloomington. Heafer lost most of his money but kept a piece of property in Bloomington, which became the foundation of his future success.

Heafer made his fortune not by finding gold, but by making bricks. In 1861, he and James McGregor started a brick yard at the corner of Hannah Street and Croxton Avenue. Over the next 23 years, their company grew to include seven acres of land, multiple brick yards, and a large pond for swimming parties. By 1883, Heafer's company became the largest clay tile factory in the U.S.

In the late 1880s, there was a high demand for clay tiles to help drain swampy fields. Before clay tiles, farmers used a tool called the mole ditcher, but it didn't work well. Heafer began making clay tile pipes in 1879, starting with small ones and later producing larger, more effective tiles. Eventually, almost every farm in the county used clay tiles for drainage.

Bloomington also needed better streets to handle more traffic. The city had tried different materials for paving streets, such as cedar wood blocks and crushed rock, but none worked well. In 1875, Heafer convinced the City Council to let him test brick paving on the corner of Washington and Center Streets. The bricks held up better than wood blocks, and by 1877, Heafer paved an entire block of Center Street. Soon, his bricks were used to pave more streets in Bloomington.

Although Heafer's bricks were successful, he wrongly claimed to be the inventor of brick pavement. The first brick-paved block in the U.S. was actually in Charleston, West Virginia, in 1873, the same city Heafer was born in. However, after his death, people in Bloomington started to believe that the first brick pavement was there.

Heafer's brick factory was one of the few in the U.S. that could make bricks in the winter. During the summer, workers called "gangs" would make bricks by mixing clay, molding it into shapes, and leaving it to dry. The workers earned between \$1 and \$3.75 a day, and the factory produced up to 5,000 bricks a day. In 1883, the factory made 4 million feet of clay tiles. Heafer's bricks were used in many important buildings in McLean County, including the McLean County Courthouse and the new McLean County Jail.

In 1888, a fire destroyed the brick factory, and McGregor, his business partner, left the company. Heafer's health had also begun to decline, and he retired soon after the fire. Heafer's health continued to worsen, and he died on July 10, 1898, at the age of 74. He was buried next to his wife in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. He was known for his hard work and perseverance, having faced many challenges throughout his life.