

## Sarah Rice Withers (1815-1897)

The lives of Sarah Rice Withers and Mary Todd Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's wife, were amazingly alike. Sarah and Mary Todd were both raised in Lexington, Ky, by well-to-do families. Both women married ambitious men who had migrated to Illinois and worked in dry good stores. Both families experienced economic ups and downs, and both women took on household chores they had never experienced as children. Both women came from slave-owning families, both experienced heart ache, suspicion and social shunning as a result of the Civil War, and both suffered the terrible loss of their children.

Sarah was born on October 25, 1815 in Jessamine County, Kentucky. Sarah came to Bloomington in 1836 after her childhood friend and playmate, Allen Withers, returned to Lexington, KY, to woo and wed her. The very next year the financial Panic of 1837 ruined the Bloomington economy and the Withers moved to Missouri looking for work. While there, Sarah helped out by running a boarding house, cooking and cleaning for up to ten guests.

In 1847, Sarah and Allen returned to Bloomington which was again prospering. In fact, it had grown to about 8,000 people. When they came back, they brought their slave, Henry, whom Allen had purchased for several hundred dollars, with them. Upon entering Illinois, Henry was legally free, but remained with the couple for the rest of his life and was considered a part of the family.

The Withers store was very successful, and Allen expanded into a hardware store, and later, real estate. They bought land in Baton Rouge, LA, and dreamed of building a plantation there. But times were changing, and in the 1850's, the national debate over slavery exploded with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This new law allowed territories becoming states in the West to decide for themselves whether to be slave or free. Soon the nation and Bloomington was talking about "Bleeding Kansas" as open warfare broke out there.

In the 1850s, many prominent Bloomington citizens, including the Withers, were Whigs. As the issue of slavery destroyed this party, pro-slavery Whigs joined the Democratic Party. Those favoring the end of slavery joined the newly formed Republican Party. The Withers knew Abraham Lincoln personally and were his early friends. But the debate over slavery ended this friendship. Sarah also saw this great issue destroy her church, the First Presbyterian Church of Bloomington. Following a fiery sermon regarding slavery, many members stalked out of church and founded a new one, the Second Presbyterian Church, which still is in Bloomington today.

Sarah had only one child naturally, Henrietta, who died at the age of two. The Withers then adopted several needy children. Only one, Jessamine, lived to adulthood. These children are buried here in Evergreen Cemetery in the Withers family plot.

Allen traveled frequently on business, and again, like Mary Lincoln, Sarah missed him terribly. She kept a diary, and wrote of her longing for her handsome husband and how

she missed him. In this same diary, she recorded how sure she was that Stephen Douglas would be elected in 1861, how sad she felt when Lincoln won. “How humiliating for our nation...” she wrote. Then in 1861, she recorded the start of the Civil War: “How horrible to think of this glorious nation being rent asunder.”

The Civil War was hard for Sarah. While her husband became a Union supporter, she found it hard to balance her old loyalties to family, and her new loyalties to her home in Illinois. Sarah’s brother, James Rice, was a successful merchant in Bloomington. After Louisiana seceded from the Union, Rice offered 2,000 bushels of McLean County corn to the governor of Louisiana to be paid when and if the new government could afford it. The *Daily Pantagraph* attacked Rice for “feeding the enemies of this country.” Outrage at Rice swept through the city. Sarah wrote in her diary, “My brother’s effigy is hanging in the streets of this city. For what. Giving corn to his friends.”

In 1864, Allen died, leaving Sarah a considerable estate. She lived on many years, dying in 1897 at the age of 82 in her home on West Locust Street. Five years earlier, she had donated the land of the Withers original home to the City of Bloomington for a public library. This library served the community for 89 years. The land where it stood is Withers Park today. In her will, she left the land and her home on West Locust to be used as a home for Aged and Indigent (Poor) Women. She named it after her adopted daughter, the Jessamine Withers Home. Finally, she left \$2,000 to help construct Second Presbyterian Church. She died on January 4, 1897.

### **Discussion Questions:**

**Review what events Mary Lincoln and Sarah Withers shared. What else might they have had in common?**

**What do Sarah’s bequests in her will say about her values, beliefs, and attitude toward Bloomington?**