

William Trabue Major (1790-1867)

William Trabue Major was born on March 1st, 1790 about three miles from Frankfort, Kentucky. His parents were John Major and Judith Trabue Major. His father was of English decent and his mother was of French decent. William was the oldest of six children and was from a long line of rugged pioneer stock. His grandfather, John Major, came from Virginia and had served in the Army for the State of Virginia during the Revolutionary War. He was stationed for some time at Valley Forge as well as being present at the victory at Yorktown.¹ Before he left Virginia, the Governor of Virginia, Patrick Henry, granted John Major a land patent of 1,000 acres in Kentucky near the junction of the North-South Elkhorn Creeks on the waters of Dry Run. This land is now in Franklin County.²

William's father wanted him to study law which he did for a time at Georgetown College in Kentucky. Unfortunately, due to poor health a physician advised him to not pursue law but to instead find another profession. After discontinuing his career path in law, he traveled to North and South Carolina to visit relatives where he participated in horse riding and other outdoor activities as a way to revive his health. After returning to Kentucky, he began farming as a way to continue to rebuild and maintain his health.

On February 18th, 1812 at the age of 22, he married Miss Margaret Shipp in Bourbon County, Kentucky. During their marriage they had nine children, all born between the years 1813 to 1831. All of their children lived into adulthood. Three of the four sons became physicians.³

Early in his life he affiliated with the Baptist Church but, in 1830 he switched to the Disciples of Christ Church because of disagreements with the Baptist Church doctrine. He was a strong believer that "the Bible alone should be the rule of faith."⁴

William and his three brothers, Benjamin, Joseph, and Chastine, inherited a plantation in Kentucky from their father along with a large holding of slaves. This land had originally been their grandfather John's property and was located in Christian County, Kentucky.⁵ In 1834 William and his brothers sold the plantation and moved to "free soil." His brother Benjamin freed all of his slaves and paid passage for all of those who wished to go to Liberia and supported his older slaves until they became self-sustaining.⁶ William sold most of his slaves to friends whom he knew would give them good homes before leaving for Illinois in 1835. Chastine sold his slaves to the highest bidders. William was quoted saying as, "I believe slavery the most terrible curse to America."⁷ His view that slavery was wrong came from his strong religious faith.

In 1835 William settled in Bloomington, Illinois when the population was about 450 people, eight years before it was organized as a town. He brought along to Illinois his wife, all nine children, and three of his ex-slaves (Joe, Tip and Rose), to work for his family.⁸ William

¹ John D. Trefzger, *Discipliana*, Oct. 1967, 44

² John D. Trefzger, "Pioneer Disciple: William T. Major"

³Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County*. (Bloomington: 2nd Edition McKnight and McKnight Publishing Co. Sesquicentennial Issue 1968), 288

⁴ Trefzger, *Discipliana*, 44

⁵ James Amemasor. "A Taste of Freedom: The Benjamin Major Collection of Letters from Emancipated American Slaves in Liberia, 1836-1851," Illinois State University Master's Thesis, 2004, 6

⁶ Amemasor, "A Taste of Freedom," 7

⁷ Trefzger, *Discipliana*, 52

⁸ Amemasor, "A Taste of Freedom," 7

posted a \$1,000 bond so Rosanna Johnson, one of his ex-slaves, could move to Illinois with the family. The bond, along with a certificate of freedom, was mandatory by the state of Illinois in order for an African-American to settle in the state.⁹ To get to Illinois, they rode in wagons through the unbroken wilderness and prairies carrying their furniture, including their Chickering piano.¹⁰ When they arrived in Bloomington, according to William's grand-daughter, Eugenia Jones Hunt, "he bought the largest house in Bloomington-a two-room frame building."¹¹ The house was located on the southwest corner of Front and East Streets. He also purchased land suitable for farming. As time progressed, more settlers moved into the area and he was able to sell his land for good profit.

William was known as Elder Major to most people in the community because he was an Elder in the Christian Church and because Bloomington's First Christian Church was founded by him in the parlor of his home in 1837. There were 13 charter members and with Major as their first pastor of the Church. By 1840 the new congregation had quickly outgrown Major's house. Because of this, William helped fund the building of a small white frame church on the lot directly behind his home on East Street between Front and Grove Streets.¹² Once this church became too small, he helped the Church purchase new land at Jefferson and West (Roosevelt) Streets for \$1,500.¹³ The members of the Church then built an \$8,000 brick building there in 1857.

In the 1850s First Christian Church split into two separate congregations. There is no evidence indicating what exactly caused the split but it was most likely caused by the issue of slavery with some members supporting slavery and others not. The portion of the congregation that was against slavery would have continued under the leadership of Major (since Major was against slavery). He purchased property and built a new church on the 400 block of West Jefferson Street (which is the current location of First Christian Church to this day). The original Christian Church continued operating until 1862 when the building was sold to the German Lutheran Church.¹⁴

William also had a hand in the real estate business in the 1850s. He bought land at \$1.25 to \$5.00 an acre and sold it to the settlers moving into Illinois. With his earnings, he contributed greatly to the community. In 1852 on the site of his original home he constructed a three story building. On the third floor of this building, Bloomington's first public hall named "Major's Hall" was located.¹⁵ This building became famous as the place where Abraham Lincoln gave what has become known as his "Lost Speech" on May 29th, 1856 at the Anti-Nebraska Convention. The Anti-Nebraska Convention was held to oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 which allowed the expansion of slavery into the free western territories.¹⁶ During Lincoln's speech the audience was "spell-bound" for an hour and a half "by the power of his argument, the intense irony and his invective, and the deep earnestness and fervid brilliancy of his eloquence." In his speech, Lincoln spoke out against slavery and the expansion of slavery into free territories in the west. He stated that "he was here ready to fuse with anyone who would unite with him to

⁹ John W. Muirhead. *A History of African-Americans in McLean County, Illinois, 1835-1975*, (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1998) 4

¹⁰ Trefzger, "Pioneer Disciple: William T. Major"

¹¹ Trefzger, *Discipliana* , 45

¹² Trefzger, *Discipliana* ,45

¹³ Trefzger, *Discipliana* ,47

¹⁴ John D. Trefzger, *An Early History of Bloomington, Illinois (1822-1869)*, 2

¹⁵ Trefzger, *Discipliana*, 46

¹⁶ Bill Kemp, "Bloomington was the scene for Lincoln's famous 'Lost Speech,'" February 14, 2009

oppose [the] slave power.” He also rebuffed the slave holding states threats to secede from the Union if an anti-slavery candidate won the White House by stating that “the Union must be preserved in the purity of its principles as well as in the integrity of its territorial parts” and “We say to our Southern brethren: ‘We won’t go out of the Union, and you shan’t!’”¹⁷ When Lincoln concluded, the audience sprang to their feet and cheered him and how much his speech touched their hearts and minds.¹⁸ This speech was of special importance because on August 27th, 1858 during the Freeport debate with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln stated that, “I have supposed myself, since the organization of the Republican Party at Bloomington, in May 1856, bound as a party man.”¹⁹

Major’s hall was also where the first classes of Illinois State Normal University were held from October 5, 1857 until the fall of 1860, when the first building on ISNU’s campus, Old Main, was completed enough to houses classes. Unfortunately, on November 8th, 1872 a fire burned the third floor, causing it to be torn off. The remaining two floors continued to be used for the next 75 years. The building was completely torn down and turned into a public parking lot in 1959. After some public outcry, historical markers now mark this location.

Major was a firm believer in universal education. In 1855 he gave \$1,000 to the newly founded Eureka College, allowing them to build their first building which still stands today. He also supported Butler College in Indianapolis, Indiana and Bethany College in West Virginia.

Major was also very aware that young women did not have the same educational opportunities as boys did during this time so in 1853, he was instrumental in founding a preparatory school for young women in Bloomington. He fully funded the building and operations of Major’s Seminary at the cost of \$20,000. This being a large sum at the time, the building was five stories and made of brick.²⁰ He charged students no more than \$4.00 a week to attend. It was originally intended as a female orphan school but was used as a young woman’s seminary for several years.²¹ Major was also insistent that every girl was to be instructed in the Christian faith according to scripture because they would be the mothers of future generations.²² The Christian Church operated the school for a time but found this very difficult when the public high schools in Bloomington were reorganized for boys and girl in 1858. Unfortunately, the college stumbled across financial hardships and the building was given back to Major’s heirs. After Major died, the family then gave the building to Illinois Wesleyan University. It was re-named Henrietta Hall and was used to house IWU’s first women students. The building has since been torn down, but the street is still called Seminary Street.

At the age of 77, William Major passed away on January 11th, 1867. The First Christian Church of Bloomington placed a bronze plaque in the dining room of the Church, known as Majors Hall, stating “In memory of William Trabue Major (1790-1867) Pioneering business man, active foe of slavery, dedicated builder for church, college, and community.” The obelisk marking his grave also states, “Here lies a Christian.” It was said that almost every Bloomingtonian paid their respects to Major at his death. He was a man of firm conviction and decision and was always ready with a kind word or smile. He was also a good Christian steward

¹⁷ Michael Burlingame. *Abraham Lincoln, A Life, Volume I.* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) 418-420

¹⁸ “Hon. A. Lincoln,” *Daily Illinois State Journal*, June 3, 1856

¹⁹ Trefzger, *Discipliana* , 46

²⁰ *Daily Bulletin*, March 4, 1906

²¹ *History of McLean County, Illinois.* (Chicago: Wm. LeBaron, Jr. & Co., 1879). 442

²² “In Memorium,” *The Pantagraph*, January 21, 1867

and shared his income generously.²³ Today a street is named Major in honor of the great contributions from the Major family, especially those by William Trabue Major. He was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

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²³ Mary Helen Haskell, Researcher notes on William Major, 1999