

William Trabue Major (1790-1867)

William Trabue Major was born on March 1, 1790, about three miles from Frankfort, Kentucky. His parents were John Major and Judith (Trabue) Major. His father was English, and his mother was French. William was the oldest of six children, and his family had a history of pioneering. His grandfather, John Major, came from Virginia and served in the Revolutionary War. He was stationed at Valley Forge and was part of the victory at Yorktown. Before leaving Virginia, the Governor of Virginia, Patrick Henry, gave John Major a land grant of 1,000 acres in Kentucky, which is now part of Franklin County.

William's father wanted him to study law, so he went to Georgetown College in Kentucky. However, because of health problems, a doctor told him not to continue studying law, so he decided to find a different profession. He traveled to North and South Carolina to visit family and participate in outdoor activities to improve his health. Afterward, he returned to Kentucky and started farming to help his health.

On February 18, 1812, at age 22, William married Margaret Shipp in Bourbon County, Kentucky. They had nine children, all of whom grew up to be adults. Three of their four sons became doctors.

William originally attended the Baptist Church but switched to the Disciples of Christ Church in 1830 because he disagreed with the Baptist teachings. He strongly believed that "the Bible alone should be the rule of faith."

William and his three brothers inherited a plantation in Kentucky with many enslaved African American people. This land had originally belonged to their grandfather. In 1834, the brothers decided to sell the plantation and move to areas where slavery was not allowed. William's brother, Benjamin, freed all the enslaved people he owned and helped some move to Liberia. William sold most of the enslaved people he owned to other white people he knew would treat them well. William believed slavery was wrong, influenced by his strong religious beliefs.

In 1835, William moved to Bloomington, Illinois, which only had about 450 people at the time. He brought his wife, children, and some former slaves with him. In Illinois, he bought land, and as more people moved to the area, he was able to sell it for a profit. He also built a large house.

William became known as Elder Major because he was a leader in the Christian Church. He helped found Bloomington's First Christian Church in 1837 and became its first pastor. As the congregation grew, they built a new church in 1840. Later, in 1857, they built another church at a new location.

In the 1850s, the church split into two groups, probably because of disagreements over slavery. William continued leading the anti-slavery side, and the church he helped build still exists today. William also became involved in real estate, buying land for settlers and using the money to support his community.

In 1852, William built a three-story building called "Major's Hall." This was where Abraham Lincoln gave his famous "Lost Speech" in 1856, speaking out against the expansion of slavery. Lincoln's speech was so powerful that the audience cheered for him afterward. The first classes of Illinois State Normal University were also held in this building from October 1857 until the fall of 1860 when the first building on ISNU's campus was completed. Unfortunately, the building was torn down and turned into a public parking lot in 1959. Historical markers now mark this location and the history that was made there.

William was also a strong believer in education. In 1855, he donated \$1,000 to Eureka College, helping them build their first building. He also helped establish Major's Seminary in Bloomington, a school for young women. It was the first school of its kind in the area, and it was very affordable for students. William believed it was important to educate young women because they would become the mothers of future generations.

William passed away on January 11, 1867, at the age of 77. The First Christian Church in Bloomington honored him with a bronze plaque. Today, there is a street named Major in Bloomington to remember his contributions. William was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, and his life and work are remembered as being important to the community.