

## Lieutenant Colonel William McCullough (1811-1862)

William McCullough was born on September 11, 1811 in Flemingsburg, Kentucky. He was the son of Peter and Levina McCullough. In 1826 the family moved from Kentucky to McLean County, Illinois to the township of Dry Grove. Here, his father ran a tavern or what was then referred to as a “place of entertainment.” As a boy, William helped the family financially by working on a farm. It was said by his wife Mary, who knew him when they were children, that he was very determined and a hard worker even at an early age.

On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1832 he enlisted as a private in the Army in Brigadier-General Samuel Whiteside’s Brigade. His company was commanded by Captain M.L. Covell in the Fifth Regiment of Mounted Volunteers. This was during the time of the Black Hawk War which fought in the upper Midwest in 1832 against several Native American tribes in the region.

The Black Hawk War was the last full-scale Indian war in Illinois. It lasted less than three months with over 9,000 Illinois militiamen and about 1,300 Regular Army involved in this conflict.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1800s Native Americans were being pushed further and further west because of the settlement of land by white settlers. Two tribes in particular, the Sauk and the Fox, were duped into signing a treaty with the U.S. Government in 1804 which relinquished their claim to their homeland in northwestern Illinois. This treaty also mandated that they move west across the Mississippi River. They were allowed to retain temporary ownership until white settlers arrived in large enough numbers to warrant them finally moving across the Mississippi River to Iowa in the 1820s. Not all of the Sauk and Fox agreed with this treaty and maintained that they still owned the land in Illinois. In 1832 a band of these Native Americans under the leadership of Chief Black Hawk crossed back into Illinois to try and regain the disputed land. They began to terrorize the settlers in this area which made those settlers panic and they turned to the Illinois state government for help.<sup>2</sup> Governor of Illinois, John Reynolds, informed the superintendent of Indian affairs and also the representative of the U.S. Army in Illinois about the situation. Not only were federal troops sent to quell the disturbances, but Governor Reynolds issued a call for volunteers to help put a stop to the violence.<sup>3</sup> After a series of skirmishes, raids, and massacres, Black Hawk surrendered and was captured in August of 1832. A month later a treaty was signed which put an end to the hostilities between whites and Native Americans in Illinois. The treaty also gave the U.S. Government all of the lands east of the Mississippi River, a large portion of the Iowa Territory, and forced the Native Americans out of Illinois further west.<sup>4</sup>

After his service in the War, William married Miss Mary Williams in December of 1833. They were schoolmates when they were younger and were taught by Milton H.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ellen M. Whitney, ed. *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library Volume XXXV, The Black Hawk War 1831-1832, Volume 1, Illinois Volunteers*. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1970) vii

<sup>2</sup> Dr. James Lewis, “The Black Hawk War of 1832,” <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/blackhawk/>

<sup>3</sup> Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County, Illinois*. (Bloomington: McKnight and McKnight Publishing Co. Sesquicentennial Issue, 1968) 98-99

<sup>4</sup> Duis, *The Good Old Times in McLean County, Illinois*, 120-121

Williams, Mary's father. William and Mary had eight children but only four survived to adulthood: Nannie L., Fannie M., William A., and Howard M.<sup>5</sup>

In 1840 William lost his right arm due to an unfortunate accident. His arm was torn off by a threshing machine, a piece of farm machinery used for separating the grain from the wheat stalk. His arm needed to be amputated so he asked his good friend Osborn Barnard to hold his arm in place while the doctor amputated it. At the time, they did not have anesthetics to numb the pain so during the operation William sat back and quietly smoked a cigar. As the story goes, William was very calm during the entire operation but Barnard trembled a little while holding William's arm. This story is thought to be very truthful as Barnard told this story himself.<sup>6</sup>

In the fall of 1840 William was elected Sheriff of McLean County. He would hold this position for three consecutive terms. He was then elected as Circuit Clerk in 1846 and remained for four terms. He was proved to be a most efficient county officer in both capacities. He was a diligent and hard worker.<sup>7</sup> Several well known attorneys such as Judge R. M. Benjamin, Hon. James S. Ewing, and Ezra M. Prince, "recall their associations with him with much pleasure."<sup>8</sup> William's reputation also helped Mr. Routt win the candidacy for sheriff in 1860. As the story goes, Judge Davis, then the 8<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit judge in Illinois, said to Mr. Routt, "You are going to get it, ain't you? Of course you are going to get it; McCullough says so and that is enough."<sup>9</sup> He was a very active member of the Whig Party.

After the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, McCullough joined the Union Army because of his patriotic sense of duty. He felt he could serve his country best in the cavalry. Even though he only had one arm and a defective eye, with the permission of his friend President Abraham Lincoln (whom he met when Lincoln was a lawyer on the 8<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit, which McLean County was a party of) he joined the Fourth Illinois Cavalry. He was immediately commissioned Lieutenant Colonel of the unit. The Cavalry suited him because he was a superb horseman. He enlisted on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1861. He was present with his regiment at the battle to capture Fort Henry, the taking of Fort Donelson, and at the battle of Shiloh. However on December 5, 1862 William was killed in battle near Coffeeville, Mississippi. Confederate forces had surrounded William's regiment on both sides at night. It was reported that William took the reins of his horse in his teeth, carried a sword in his left hand, and galloped up and down the troop line. The Confederates ordered his unit to surrender.<sup>10</sup> While some of his soldiers surrendered, William, with "a very emphatic refusal," refused to surrender and with that, the enemy opened fire and killed William in a volley of musketry.<sup>11</sup> William's men escaped the same fate as their colonel. They put up a flag of truce to recover his body and sent it back

---

<sup>5</sup> D.E. Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," *Sunday Bulletin*, February 4, 1906, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 2

<sup>7</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 2

<sup>8</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 2.

<sup>9</sup> Duis, *The Good Old Times in McLean County, Illinois*, 860.

<sup>10</sup> Don Munson. *More of Don Munson's WJBC Sesquicentennial Stories, Glimpses of McLean County's 150 Years*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1981) 75-76

<sup>11</sup> John Burnham, George Davis, and Ezra Prince ed. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society Volume I War Record of McLean County with Other Papers*. (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1899) 522

to Bloomington.<sup>12</sup> According to Major W. Packard, a member of the McLean County Bar and close friend of McCullough's, William never surrendered and fought to his death.<sup>13</sup>

William received high honors after his death. He was honored by the McLean County Bar. Even though he was not a lawyer, he still held his position as Circuit Clerk when he died because he did not resign the position upon entering the Army. He gained the attention of his commanding officer, General Wallace when he said "in the death of Colonel William McCullough we feel that we have lost a warm-hearted, faithful friend, but our greatest regret is that the government has lost a brave, accomplished and patriotic soldier, and liberty a valiant champion."<sup>14</sup>

When Abraham Lincoln received news of Colonel William McCullough's death, he wrote a letter to Miss Fannie McCullough, William's daughter. Lincoln, "a long practitioner at the McLean Co. bar, knew and admired the sterling character and inherent bravery of McCullough."<sup>15</sup> In the note dated December 23, 1862 he sent his sincerest regrets to Fannie and her mother. He continued by telling her there would be better days in the future and told her to not be sad and "that the memory of her father instead of agony will be a sad, sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer and holier sort than you have ever known before."<sup>16</sup> He signed the letter "Your sincere friend, A. Lincoln."<sup>17</sup>

The funeral for McCullough was not to be the first for a Civil War hero, but it was called the largest in McLean County up to that time. He was one of the most popular and well liked officials McLean Co. ever had. He was laid to rest at the Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

By: Lisa Dretske, 2009

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2010

---

<sup>12</sup> Don Munson, ed. *It is begun! The Pantagraph Reports the Civil War*. (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 2001) 85

<sup>13</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 3

<sup>14</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 3

<sup>15</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 4

<sup>16</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 4

<sup>17</sup> Frink, "Biography of Col. William McCullough," 4