A Page From Our Past: Wesleyan Grad One of the Immortalized “Four Chaplains,”
*The Pantagraph*
Bill Kemp, MCMH Librarian

In 1948, the U.S. Post Office issued a 3-cent stamp memorializing the Four Chaplains. Illinois Wesleyan University graduate George L. Fox is on the left. (Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)

One of the more tragically moving tableaus of World War II involves a torpedoed and sinking American troopship and four chaplains arm-in-arm in prayer on the listing deck as they slip into the icy waters of the unforgiving North Atlantic.

The “Four Chaplains,” as they are called today, were 42-year-old Methodist minister and Illinois Wesleyan University graduate George L. Fox; Jewish rabbi Alexander D. Goode; Reformed Church minister Clark V. Poling; and Catholic priest John P. Washington. This story is made more poignant not only because the four men represented a diversity of faiths, but for the reason that they willingly sacrificed their lives by surrendering their lifejackets to save others.

On Jan. 23, 1943, the USAT (United States Army Transport) Dorchester departed New York for Greenland with more than 900 souls aboard. The tightly packed, vulnerable troopship headed directly into U-boat infested waters with three Coast Guard cutters as escort. Eleven days later, Feb. 3, at 12:55 a.m., a German torpedo slammed into the ship.

Many men were killed in the explosion or drown below deck as water poured into the breach. The ship’s electrical system was knocked out, and in the ensuing pitch-black confusion many aboard never made it to one of the 13 lifeboats or 45 rubber rafts. When the cutters arrived to pickup survivors they were greeted by lifeless bodies bobbing in the freezing water, kept afloat only by lifejackets. All told, about 675 men from the Dorchester died that night.

Eyewitness accounts by survivors told how George Fox and the three other chaplains served as a calming presence on deck, helping men to the lifeboats and forestalling further panic. And when there were no more lifejackets to go around, the chaplains removed theirs and gave them to those without.

Although George Fox is considered an exemplar of American heroism, his life was far from idyllic or all-American. Born in Lewiston, Penn. in 1900, he had a painfully
difficult childhood, and when the U.S. entered World War I, he left school and lied about his age to get into the Army. Fox drove a medical corps ambulance, receiving several Purple Hearts from mustard gas and artillery attacks, and a Silver Star for removing his gas mask and pulling it over the face of a wounded officer.

After the war he left his biological family and was adopted by Percy and Florence Fox, a Staten Island, NY couple with seven children of their own whom he befriended while in the Army. He also turned away from Catholicism in favor of Protestantism.

He briefly attended Moody Bible Institute in Chicago in 1923, and it was there he met his future wife Isadore Hurlbut of Vermont. After several years as an itinerant minister he received a scholarship to attend IWU (this was in 1929), though he had to support his family by ministering in several nearby rural Methodist churches, including the one in Downs.

In 1931, Fox attended Boston University’s School of Theology, and a year later (and still in Boston) he finished his bachelor’s degree at IWU. Consecrated a minister in the Methodist Church, he spent the years before World War II serving in a series of New England churches.

During his ministerial career, George Fox struggled financially, if not professionally. When she received word of her husband’s death, Isadore Fox found little solace in the fact he died a hero. “I do not want a hero,” she said. “I want my husband. I always knew he was a hero, the way he worked in those small churches and never complained, even when the pay was so small he could not get proper food for his children.”

After the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, Fox decided to reenter military service as an Army chaplain. He began active duty on August 8, 1942, the same day his son Wyatt enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Given the patriotic and spiritual tenor of this story, it’s not surprising to find a wide range of Four Chaplain memorials, sculptures and assorted remembrances throughout the country. Locally, the small chapel in IWU’s Memorial Center features a few items related to the chaplains, as well as a plaque with the names of 51 students who died in the Second World War.

It’s been said that a brief passage in Talmund, the tome of Jewish law and ethics, speaks to the heart of the Four Chaplains story. “And whoever saves a life,” it reads, “it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”