

Georgiana Trotter (1836-1904)

Georgiana Trotter was born on August 15, 1836 in Drogheda, Ireland to John and Ann Trotter. The Trotter family was Irish Protestant and belonged to an “aristocratic clan of agriculturists.”¹ Her father, a sister, and a brother came to America first in 1849 and settled in Chicago. In 1850 Georgiana, her mother, and the rest of her siblings then came to America.² Although the Trotter family was wealthy, they too were affected by the famine which plagued the whole of Ireland.

In 1840 almost 2.5 million Irish people relied on potatoes for profit, nourishment, and their livelihood. The English landowners of Ireland rented out pieces of their land to poor Irish Catholics. The Irish would work these lands to produce a profit for the landowner. Enough potatoes were grown on these tracts of land to ensure sustenance for the tenant families to survive as well.³ In 1845 a plant pathogenic fungus (*Phytophthora infestans*)⁴ ruined the potato crop. The fungus continued to spread the following year destroying most of the crop. By 1847 (known as Black '47) the entire crop was wiped out leaving a fully fledged famine in its wake.⁵ The fungus continued to wipe out crops annually until 1852. Although there were relief efforts, between 1.2 and 1.4 million people starved or died from the famine. Migration became the only solution for hundreds of thousands of Irish people. Between 1851 and 1855 around 740,216 Irish migrated to the United States.⁶ Georgiana's father, who was probably tired of watching his tenants starve and his crops fail, packed up his family and moved to the United States where there would hopefully be better economic opportunities for them.⁷

Before purchasing a home in Chicago, Illinois her father succumbed to cholera. This left Georgiana's brother, John Trotter Jr., to support the family. John set out to look for land near Woodford County and they settled in Palestine Township. However, the area was not fully developed and the Trotter's were not suited for life on the open prairie. Eventually the family moved on to Bloomington in the late 1850s or early 1860s.⁸

On April 14, 1861 the Civil War began with an attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Georgiana answered the call of duty by enlisting as a nurse in the Union Army. She did so after attracting the attention of a Bloomington doctor, George Stipp. Together, they traveled to St. Louis and joined the Union cause.⁹ As a nurse, Georgiana escorted wounded Union soldiers from the South to the North on riverboats.¹⁰ She was one of the most trusted nurses on the hospital boats that ran up and down the Mississippi River and were operated by Commodore

¹ “Miss Trotter Dead,” *The Pantagraph*, February 8, 1904.

² “Miss Trotter Dead.”

³ Greg Koos, “The Greening of the Prairie: Irish Migration and Settlement in McLean Co.” McLean County Museum of History

⁴ William E. Fry and Stephen B. Goodwin. *BioScience*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (Jun., 1997) p.363

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1313151>

⁵ Koos, “The Greening of the Prairie”

⁶ Koos, “The Greening of the Prairie”

⁷ Nola Marquardt, “Georgiana Trotter” (Researched 1998)

⁸ Marquardt, “Georgiana Trotter” and Martin Wykoff & Greg Koos. *Illustrated History of McLean County*. (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary, 1982) p. 133

⁹ Don Munson, *It is Begun! The Pantagraph Reports the Civil War*, (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary: 2001) p.41

¹⁰ “Miss Trotter's Dead”

Andrew Hull Foote.¹¹ She also escorted wounded soldiers to hospitals at the Battle of Shiloh in Southwestern Tennessee which was one of the first major battles of the Civil War in April 1862. The Union forces, under the command of General Ulysses S. Grant, were attacked by Confederate forces. After briefly retreating, the Union Army gained ground and pushed the Confederates back to Mississippi. Although both sides claimed victory, the 10,000 casualties suffered by both the North and South made it more of a stalemate.¹²

Nurses like Georgiana were responsible not only for washing, feeding, giving medicine, and preparing the wounded for surgery, but also reading to soldiers aloud, writing letters, and entertaining them day and night. While stationed at a hospital in New Orleans, Georgiana was put in charge of securing supplies for the hospital. Prior to this, it had been very difficult to “secure the necessary supplies, medicines, etc... from the store houses of the various wards” at the hospital. She complained to Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler about the “annoying army red tape stating that many soldiers were dying for lack of such medicine which was but a short distance away, but which was kept from use by red tape until too late.” Butler asked her what she would do about this problem. She replied that she “would lop the ears off a dozen or two of the idlers about here if they did not wake up and obey orders.” To which Butler replied; “Go ahead and do it. I appoint you in charge of the hospital stores.” After her appointment, there was no future trouble in securing the proper supplies to care for the sick and wounded Union soldiers.¹³

Georgiana’s brother John also briefly served in the war. He enlisted in Company B, 1st Regiment of the Illinois Militia on May 26, 1862. He served for 15 days and was charged with the duty of guarding prisoners of war at Camp Butler outside of Springfield, IL

After the war ended on April 9, 1865 Georgiana returned home and joined her brother John in his lumber, grain, and coal business, which he opened in 1866.¹⁴ Their lumber and coal yard, *J.W. & G. Trotter Lumber & Grain Merchants*, was located on West Market Street.¹⁵ Georgiana had a shrewd talent for business and proved a very successful asset for the company. She seemed to never tire; “she was a veritable steam engine of energy, and nothing could tire or affright her in the way of bodily exertions in the pursuit of many plans for the good of the city.”¹⁶ In fact, when her brother John passed away in February 1892 he left the entire business to Georgiana over their brother James. Under her leadership the company continued to thrive. Georgiana’s talents for business were sought out by other local businessmen who came to her for advice, establishing her ability as a woman capable to run a profitable company on her own.¹⁷

Miss Trotter also concerned herself with the railroads in Bloomington. When there was question as to whether the Chicago and Alton shops should stay open, (most likely due to several years of fires and the cost to rebuild each time) she roused the citizens of Bloomington to support the railroad. As a business woman she knew the importance of the railroad to an industrial city.¹⁸ They were central to the commerce and future growth of the city. Also, an increase in

¹¹ “After Life’s Fitful Fever,” *The Daily Bulletin*, February 8, 1904

¹² “The Battle of Shiloh,” <http://www.answers.com/topic/battle-of-shiloh> (September 14, 2011)

¹³ “After Life’s Fitful Fever”

¹⁴ John Burnham, George P. Davis, and Ezra Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Bloomington, Illinois, Volume II: School Record of McLean County with Other Papers*. “John W. Trotter,” by Ira Merchant. (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1903) p. 583

¹⁵ Wykoff & Koos, p.133

¹⁶ “Miss Trotter is Dead”

¹⁷ Marquardt, “Georgiana Trotter”

¹⁸ Marquardt, “Georgiana Trotter”

population gave assurance to the improvement of education with the promise of possible new student enrollment. In a 1904 interview with *The Pantagraph* weeks before she became ill, Trotter suggested that the matter be settled, meaning that the railroads must remain in Bloomington.¹⁹

In 1875 Georgiana became involved in the educational matters of Bloomington. She was the first woman elected to the Bloomington Board of Education even though, as a woman, she did not have the right to vote. It is thought that sometime before she was elected to the Bloomington Board of Education, that she was probably the first female naturalized citizen of the U.S.²⁰ Becoming a naturalized citizen was required for her to be able to serve in an elected office. While it is known that she became naturalized, it remains unclear as to whether or not she was the first woman to be naturalized in the U.S.

Though she did not have a desire to be in public service, she could not refuse the position on the Board of Education. Georgiana said in her letter of acceptance that a “conviction of duty and a high appreciation of your substantial and practical recognition of the rights of women compel me to accept the invitation which you have generously extended.”²¹ She served on the board for eighteen years and served alongside Sarah Raymond, a close friend who was the Superintendent of Public Schools in Bloomington. As a member of the school board, Trotter implemented many changes that improved the education of the children of Bloomington. During her time on the board, more classrooms were added, they shortened the course of study in high school and assigned more courses to the earlier grades, and eliminated corporal punishment (a form punishment in which a rod, cane, or paddle was used to hit a student).²² Overall Miss Trotter witnessed 1,637 graduates and 40,000 pupils during her 18 years on the school board.²³ She also saved the school district a “good deal of money” in the construction of new buildings and the renovation of others due to her business savvy. Her business sense helped keep the school district out of debt during her tenure in office.²⁴

Trotter and Raymond “worked side by side to improve the lives of others in the community through their social and professional lives.”²⁵ Trotter and Raymond also helped develop Bloomington’s public library. Trotter contributed funds to help construct the building and lent her business sense to the administration of the library. This library was a continuation of the first library which had been opened in 1857 in a single room on Center Street by the Ladies’ Library Association. The library relocated in 1871 to a hall at 105 West North Street, but closed in 1880 due to lack of funding.²⁶ After Sarah Withers, another prominent woman in Bloomington, donated land to the library association, Trotter and Raymond lead the efforts to secure funds and members. In 1887 the public library reopened, (renamed Withers’ Public Library), and was located on the corner of East and Washington Streets. The library remained

¹⁹ “Miss Trotter is Dead”

²⁰ “Georgiana Trotter,” Politics Gallery, McLean County Museum of History

²¹ Monica Noraian. *Women’s Rights, Racial, Integration and Education from 1850-1920.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)p.76

²² Noraian, p.89

²³ “Close of a Career,” *The Pantagraph* (Date Unknown)

²⁴ “Miss Trotter,” *The Daily Bulletin*, February 8, 1904

²⁵ Monica Noraian. Master’s Thesis: *Sarah Raymond Fitzwilliam* (Illinois State University:2007)

²⁶ “Bloomington Public Library Historical Timeline,” http://www.bloomingtonlibrary.org/find/library_history/ (September 16, 2011)

there for 89 years. In 1977 a new Public library opened on Olive Street in Bloomington. Today, there is a fountain dedicated to the Trotter Family next to the Wither's Library site.²⁷

Georgiana never married and neither did her brother John (who served three terms as mayor of Bloomington). She was considered to be a master of the English language and her impromptu speeches at gatherings were fondly remembered. Georgiana also organized lecture series in town which brought great literary minds to the city. Unlike many women at the time, Georgiana was also a talented horsewoman and enjoyed friends accompanying her in her sleigh or carriage.²⁸

Even though she never had children of her own, she became a "mother" to a girl named Bessie Becker whom she took in at the age of three. It is not known why she did this as Bessie's family apparently lived in town. Georgiana cared for her as a mother would have and "gave her the best education obtainable and spared nothing that would promote the welfare and accomplishment of the young girl."²⁹ Bessie later worked for the Trotter Lumber and Coal Yard as a bookkeeper. Upon Georgiana's death, Bessie assisted Sarah Raymond in finding a buyer for the company. Bessie then left the Trotter home and moved to her sibling's home in Bloomington. She eventually married an insurance agent.³⁰

Not only did Georgiana care for Bessie, but she was kind to many of the poor and needy in the community. Many of her friends recalled that she had "probably assisted more poor people to build houses than any other person in Central Illinois." Come Christmas time, the children of her friends always found gifts from her, especially those children from poorer families.³¹

After she retired from the School Board, she devoted her attention to her lumber and coal business and built a large number of houses for tenants, including herself. However, she did not live long enough to occupy it.³² Georgiana Trotter died at her home located at 710 N. Madison Street on February 6, 1904 after a brief illness brought on by a stroke. Although her death seemed imminent, residents of Bloomington were still shocked and saddened. Her funeral was held at St. Matthews Church in Bloomington. *The Pantagraph* called her "one of the most remarkable women Bloomington has ever claimed as a citizen."³³ Georgiana was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

Georgiana's good friend Sarah Raymond served as administrator of her estate. Charged with this duty, Raymond paid bills, collected debts, and kept the Lumber Company running until she found a buyer.³⁴ In an extended trip to Ireland, Raymond even visited the site of Trotter's home and visited with Trotter family cousins.³⁵ As a testament to their close friendship, when Sarah Raymond passed away in 1918 she was buried next to Georgiana Trotter at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

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²⁷ "Bloomington Public Library Historical Timeline"

²⁸ Marquardt, "Georgiana Trotter"

²⁹ "After Life's Fitful Fever"

³⁰ Nola Marquardt. "Bertha (Bessie) M. Becker"

³¹ "After Life's Fitful Fever"

³² "Miss Trotter"

³³ "Miss Totter Dead"

³⁴ Nola Marquardt, "Georgina Trotter's Estate," (May 5, 1998)

³⁵ Noraian, *Sarah Raymond Fitzwilliam*, Master Thesis