

Aaron Mayers (1827-1888)

Aaron Mayers was born in Manheim, Pennsylvania in about 1827.¹ It is unknown when exactly Mayers moved to Bloomington and there is little information available about his life prior to coming to this area. He was the son of Mary (Jones) Mayers, who also moved to Bloomington at an unknown date. His father's name is unknown.

After establishing himself in Bloomington, Mayers married Jemima Enlow on June 1, 1851. They spent 37 years together, becoming the parents of four children: Cora, Effie, Lucy, and Nellie. Cora, their first-born, died at the age of 29, six years before her father's death. Effie married Charles Bruce of Brooklyn, New York and Lucy married Charles R. Hyde. Their youngest daughter, Nellie, never married and remained at home.

Mayers began a career as a cabinet maker at the age of 27. In 1870 he partnered with Jay N. Ward and opened a furniture business located at 203 North Main Street called Ward and Mayers. The partnership officially dissolved on January 1, 1876, but Ward remained at the location selling furniture under his own name.²

In addition to his career, Mayers was also involved in the community. He became a member of the Bloomington Fire Department and in 1858, was listed as a member of Prairie Bird Fire Company #1.³ In 1865 Mayers also served as a City Collector, whose primary task was the collection and distribution of local property taxes.⁴

Around 1878 Mayers began a new career in the undertaking business. At this time it was common in Illinois for furniture manufacturers to take on the construction of coffins as well as oversee burial arrangements.⁵ Mayers partnered with William B. Myers and purchased the undertaking business from Montell B. Jeter, renaming it Mayers and Co.⁶ Myers is thought to have been the brother of Aaron, as Aaron's last name was sometimes spelled Myers. Mayers and Co. was located at 114 West Front Street "underneath the new post office."⁷ The new firm took care of everything related to a funeral; from crafting the coffin to comforting mourners. After William left the business two years later for unknown reasons, Aaron kept the firm going on his own until 1886 when he was joined by Jesse Enlow, his wife's brother and a former grocer. Mayers then renamed the firm "Mayers and Enlow."

Undertakers and the undertaking business had an unsavory reputation. It was said that those engaged in the business of undertaking would visit the sick and dying to size them up to return home and make a casket even before the individual had passed away.⁸ An article from *The Pantagraph* offered to repudiate this negative image of undertakers. The author takes on a defensive tone throughout the article, attesting to the sincere intentions that undertakers like Mayers had when visiting a friend or family of the "expected deceased or the one who has a possible chance of dying."⁹ This article was prompted by an incident that occurred when Mayers was visiting Samuel Rhodes, who had been shot, in order to offer sympathy and see how he was doing. As Mayers was entering the gate to Rhodes's home, an acquaintance of Mayers standing

¹ "Death of Aaron Mayers," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 19, 1888

² "Dissolution: The Furniture House of Ward & Mayers," *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 24, 1875

³ "Fire Department," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 28, 1858

⁴ "Council Proceedings," *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 15, 1865

⁵ Researchers notes on Funerals and Terms

⁶ "The City. Pantagraphs," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 28, 1876; *Bloomington-Normal City Directories 1878-1881*

⁷ "Funeral Furnishings: Some Facts and Figures regarding the last Habitation of the dead," *The Daily Bulletin*, April 19, 1884

⁸ "Unpleasantness of an Undertaker," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 24, 1883

⁹ *Ibid.*

one and a half blocks away, “hallowed and told him the man was not dead yet.”¹⁰

An 1884 article in *The Daily Bulletin* offered its readers a glimpse into the inner workings of the undertaking business. Not only did the article shed light on the current practices in the business, but it enlightened readers on the advances that had been made and how the business had changed over the years. Before Mayers’s time, funerals were simple and quick affairs. Customers had to wait for a coffin to be made for roughly half a day after requesting one. Two men would take this time to craft the coffin which was typically made plainly without any handles or special ornamentation. There “was no lining save a few shavings covered with the cheapest sort of muslin.”¹¹ The process had to be quick, as bodies were rarely embalmed. The body was then carried to the cemetery the next day. It wasn’t until 1845 that the first horse drawn hearse was used to transport bodies in Bloomington.¹²

Undertakers like Mayers sold a variety of caskets, coffins, and services for all income levels. By 1884 it only took 30 minutes to craft a coffin, and undertakers like Mayers were able to create them in various styles upon request. His business consisted of “a large basement divided by halls and passageways” with “hundreds of coffins and caskets in every imaginable style and pattern, all standing upright in gloomy silence and awful mystery. . . .”¹³

Mayers’s patrons had the option between a variety of woods and adornments, as well as a range of costly fabrics. An example of a “high end” coffin included one for \$500 that was “almost covered with silver, with a plate glass front and lined with silk, satin, and silver fringe.”¹⁴ For those who wished a more reasonably priced final resting place, Mayers had a coffin that sold for \$85 and came in either black walnut or genuine rosewood.¹⁵ Today these coffins would cost about \$12,000 and \$2,000, respectively.¹⁶ For customers who could not afford a specialized coffin, they could choose from cheaper materials such as oak and chestnut for \$30 to \$65.¹⁷

Mayers didn’t just sell caskets; he sold all the necessary items for a funeral, right down to the clothes the deceased would wear. The reporter from *The Daily Bulletin* was shown examples of burial garments for men and women sold at the establishment. Women could be dressed in white clothing made of quality cashmere and trimmed in lace for \$12 to \$15 (around \$300 in 2014).¹⁸ The men were outfitted in a standard suit including a “black gown, black vest, white vest, white shirt, and black shirt for \$4.50”¹⁹ (about \$100 in 2014).²⁰ It appears that Mayers had something for everyone. More costly options were available for those who could afford it, including grief stricken widows for whom money was no object. Parents seemed to be a little more considerate when working to arrange an elegant funeral for their children. But even Mayers admitted that there were also those who had no idea what they wanted and were very hard to please. Nonetheless, Mayers did what he could to make the process easier for the families of the deceased.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “John Wolcott Biography,” *McLean County Museum of History*, <http://mchistory.org/research/resources/john-wolcott.php>

¹³ “Funeral Furnishings: Some Facts and Figures regarding the last Habitation of the dead”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “CPI Inflation Calculator,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm (Date Accessed January 26, 2016), in 2014 figures

¹⁷ “Funeral Furnishings: Some Facts and Figures regarding the last Habitation of the dead”

¹⁸ “CPI Inflation Calculator,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

¹⁹ “Funeral Furnishings: Some Facts and Figures regarding the last Habitation of the dead”

²⁰ “CPI Inflation Calculator,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

On the morning of Tuesday, September 18, 1888, Aaron Mayers passed away at 8:05 a.m. at the age of 61. He had been ill for several weeks prior to his death due to kidney troubles.²¹ His funeral was held on Friday, September 20 at his home located at 214 East Washington Street. The service was officiated by Dr. John L. Jackson in the presence of many intimate friends. Mayers was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

His widow Jemima continued the undertaking business with her brother, Jesse Enlow, after Mayers's death. They moved the business to 217 East Washington Street and kept it going until about 1905, when the business was sold to John W. Birney.

By: Lisa Elleson, 2016

²¹ "Death of Aaron Mayers"