

## **John Laurens Wolcott (1808-1887)**

John Wolcott was born in Berkshire County, Massachusetts on August 30, 1808. He learned his trade by working with his father, a cabinet maker and undertaker. He married Caroline Baker in 1834. John and his wife moved to Bloomington in 1843 and he went into business with Goodman and Lyman Ferre. John Wolcott stayed in business with the Ferre brothers until 1859 when he went out on his own to concentrate on the undertaking business.

When he started he was probably the only person in the community serving as an undertaker. In a small community like Bloomington, there might only be one or two funerals a month. However in 1855 the Asiatic cholera hit this area and Wolcott's records show he sold 200 coffins that year which included 127 in June, July and August. He sold 66 in August alone.

Throughout much of his early career people were buried in Evergreen Cemetery or St. Mary's Catholic cemetery.

His first burial was in 1843 and was the infant child of Absalom McClung. The body was carried to the cemetery. Until 1845 all bodies were carried to the cemetery. It wasn't until that year that the first horse drawn hearse was used by Wolcott and the Ferre brothers. Early in his career funerals and burial tended to be pretty simple and quick. Embalming was rare and bodies were often buried the next day. By the end of his career more embalming was being done and funerals had become more formal and complex. Until 1870 he built his own coffins almost always out of walnut and lined with cloth. The quality of the cloth depended on what the family could afford. Some costs associated with a funeral in the 1840s were coffins for 6 to 8 dollars, a hearse for \$2.50, and a cemetery lot for \$10. By the 1880s the coffin was 12 to 16 dollars, the hearse was \$8, and a plot at Evergreen was \$50 to \$60. In fact, he held two patents; one for a display case to sell coffins and another for removable handles so they could be used to take the coffin to the grave and then used again.

In a newspaper interview in 1883 Wolcott was asked two questions that seem to hold interest to many about the funeral business. One was about gruesome deaths and the other about fear of the dead or ghosts. On the second question he pointed out that this was what his father did and from a young child he was accustomed to dead bodies. He also had some stories about unusual burials to answer the first. One concerned a worker for Barber's Mill who got caught up in the machinery and ground up and dumped on the lower floor. Wolcott said they had to use brooms and shovels to gather the body and when put in the coffin it was a "shapeless mass". The other was the drunk who lay down on the track and was run over by the C&A train to Jacksonville. The arms and legs were intact but the body wasn't. Wolcott said he had many more stories like this one.

Wolcott was also widely known as an apiarist, or beekeeper. Wolcott kept bees for both pleasure and profit. He recalled in an 1883 interview that he was one of the very first beekeepers in the county. Wolcott said that during his forty years in apiary that he had as few as six colonies some years and as many as one hundred and eighty at other times.

The profit in bees was in honey and to some degree in wax. Weather was always a concern for the beekeeper. A harsh winter would mean not enough blooming clover or other plants that bees liked to produce the honey necessary to keep the colony going. Wolcott said that 1871 or 1872 was his worst time in the bee business.

Wolcott kept careful records of his colonies in his daily journals often referring to them as "little chaps" or, when they might sting someone as a "little cuss." In 1883 Wolcott made

\$350 dollars from his bees which was almost all profit but his main line of work during all this time was the undertaking business.

Until the last year of his life Wolcott lived as a respected businessman and community leader. He was a well known and active Mason in the same group as the Ferre brothers. He was an ardent Republican and a regular at church. But in August of 1887 the aging and frail John Wolcott had to deal with the tragedy of his son William being accused of killing another man.

William was about 45 at the time of the incident, a widower with children who lived in a boarding house operated by George Kurtz who was only 24 years old. Apparently, in violation of house rules, William was trying to take a bucket of beer to his room when confronted by Kurtz. Though there was some conflicting testimony, it was clear that Kurtz died of a knife wound. William spent four months in the county jail awaiting trial. In his father's daily journal can be found entries about taking food to William as well as seeking legal help.

After almost four months, the trial began on November 29, and on November 30, the jury found William guilty of manslaughter and sentenced him to five years. In Wolcott's journal the entry read, "The jury gave William a verdict of five years. I am surprised he is satisfied with it."

On the same day John was visited by the doctor and the next day's entry commented that he was still sick. For three of the next four days there is no entry, unheard of for a man who kept a daily account of his life. From then until December 19 there are a few sporadic mentions of his health and one about William leaving for prison.

On December 19, 1887 in his daughter's handwriting, "Father died at 6:30 pm." He was buried three days later in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.