

# MAPLE HEIGHTS HISTORY

## SUMMARY

Maple Heights sits on what used to be the Blair family farm. This family played a key role in the history of Bloomington, Monroe County, and Indiana University. James Blair was a leader among the local Covenanters and also served as a trustee of Indiana University. His son, John, was very active in the Underground Railroad. John's sons, James N. and William, were both active in local government throughout their adult lives.

John Blair built the Blair farmhouse (now the Blair House) most likely between 1850 and 1860. During the late 1800s, much of the Blair farm was sold off to be developed into Maple Heights, although the family continued farming the northwest portion until the 1940s. (The remains of an old silo can still be seen not far from the Blair House.) James N. Blair, John's son, also built architecturally contributing houses for his daughters near the Blair House.

## THE BLAIR FAMILY

### *JAMES BLAIR*

James Blair was born in South Carolina in 1789. He belonged to the Reformed Presbyterian denomination, or Covenanters. The Covenanters were strongly opposed to slavery and, because of this, decided as a group to leave South Carolina and move north. In 1816, James and his wife Jane, along with at least one young child, migrated with other Covenanters to Tennessee. They remained there until 1824, when they packed up again and set out with a wagon train to Indiana, which had outlawed slavery.

James was about 36 years old when he and his family arrived in Monroe County. The Blairs' new farm, purchased from Henry Wampler in August of 1825, was mostly dense forest. In present-day terms, it included all the land between Madison Street to the east, 10<sup>th</sup> Street to the south, Monroe Street to the west, and 17<sup>th</sup> Street to the north. The Blair's log cabin reportedly stood somewhere between 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Streets. At the time, Bloomington was a small town and the farm was at about half a mile from the town limits.

James was a major figure in the Bloomington Covenanter community. In 1825, he was made one of two ruling elders of the Covenanter settlement in Bloomington (Woodburn, p. 12) and he served as an elder for the rest of his life. In 1833, when the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America divided into the New Side and Old Side branches, James and a portion of the Bloomington Covenanters elected to follow the New Side doctrine which held that civil duties such as voting, sitting on juries, and supporting the government were consistent with Christian obligation, despite imperfections in the Constitution of the United States. In 1838, these New Siders called Rev. Theophilus A. Wylie, a professor at Indiana University and the cousin of the university's first president, as their pastor. His first sermon was delivered at the Blair's log cabin. (ibid, p. 13)

James was also an important figure in Indiana University history. In 1828, before he was even 40 years old, James became a trustee of the university. He served in this position until 1841.

### *JOHN BLAIR*

After James' death in 1849, his son John inherited the farm and built the large farmhouse which still stands today on Maple Street at the end of 13<sup>th</sup> Street. From tax records, it seems likely that the house was built sometime between 1850 and 1860. Like his father, John was strongly opposed to slavery, and he was among the ten or so people in the county who were most active in the Underground Railroad. He and his wife Hannah are reported to have fed and sheltered many slaves who were escaping to Canada and freedom.

### *WILLIAM T. AND JAMES N. BLAIR*

John had six children, including two sons who both became well-known in the community.

John's elder son, James Neill Blair, inherited the farm from his father. James continued to run the farm, but also engaged in road contracting and ran a stone quarry business in the northwest corner of the farm. (The remains of the quarry are still visible near the Willowbrook Apartments.) He built homes for his daughters—which still stand today at 715 W 13<sup>th</sup>, 721 W 13<sup>th</sup>, and 813 N Maple—but sold much of the original farmland to be developed into what is now Maple Heights.

James was very active in local politics. He began campaigning when he was 16 years old and served as a city councilman, county councilman, and county commissioner. He also served on the city police board in his later years.

The younger son, William T. Blair, had a shoe store downtown before organizing the Bloomington Cut Stone Company. He married Julia Waldron, the daughter of John Waldron (director of First National Bank and a leading citizen of Bloomington) and, like his brother, became active in local politics, serving as county auditor and as a member of the Bloomington City Council. He and Julia lived on West Kirkwood Avenue in what was known as the Blair-Waldron house before it was torn down sometime after 1973.

## REFERENCES

Woodburn, J. Albert. (1910). *The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in Monroe county, Indiana: a paper read before the Monroe County Historical Society, November and December, 1908*. Indianapolis: E. J. Hecker.