

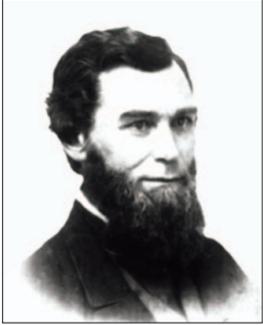


Medina 1818 - 2018

This month's feature focuses on H.G. Blake and his contributions to Medina. This series will continue the first Saturday of every month through November of 2018. The Gazette and the Bicentennial Committee for the City of Medina are pleased to bring you this ongoing series. These feature stories are made possible by the sponsors located at the bottom of this page. This story and others in the series can be viewed online at medina-gazette.com/history

The legacy of H.G. Blake

By Gloria Brown



COURTESY OF MEDINA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Harrison Gray Blake

Medina's picturesque and graceful Public Square owes its existence in no small part to Harrison Gray Blake, a citizen who dominated village life in the mid-eighteen hundreds to an extraordinary degree. His roles were numerous – businessman, lawyer, banker, state representative, Congressman, mayor, newspaper editor. His contributions included leading the effort to rebuild Public Square after the devastating 1870 fire, founding the Old Phoenix National Bank, and helping to bring the railroad to Medina.



COURTESY OF DAVID BROWN

The Blake House.

Blake arrived in Medina in 1836. He was 17 years old and had walked from Seville to respond to an ad for a clerk in the dry goods emporium of Durham and Woodward. All he possessed in the world was one shabby suit of clothes and fifty cents.

Hardship, even at the tender age of 17, was nothing new to Blake. He had been born in Vermont in 1818, and when he was two years old, his mother had perished in a sudden blizzard while traveling through the Green Mountains. In the same incident, his father suffered severe frostbite and lost the use of his feet and hands. As a result, he could not work and was compelled to give his children away to relatives and friends. Blake was given to a friend, Jesse Rhoades, who brought him to Guilford Township in Medina County, then still a frontier settlement. There, the young boy

helped clear the land and, whenever he could be spared from work, attended school.

Although life on the Ohio frontier was harsh, it did provide opportunities for an industrious and ambitious young man. Blake worked in the dry goods store in the daytime and studied law in the evenings under the supervision of Judge J.S. Carpenter.

In the nineteenth and even into the early years of the twentieth century, attending law school was not required to become a licensed attorney. Most aspiring lawyers "read law" as Blake did, and gained practical experience by working for an established attorney.

Several years after Blake was hired, the owner, Mr. Durham, moved away and Blake took over the store. While engaged in this business, he also established the law firm of Blake and Woodward in 1859, and started a small, private bank in a large safe in the back room of his store.

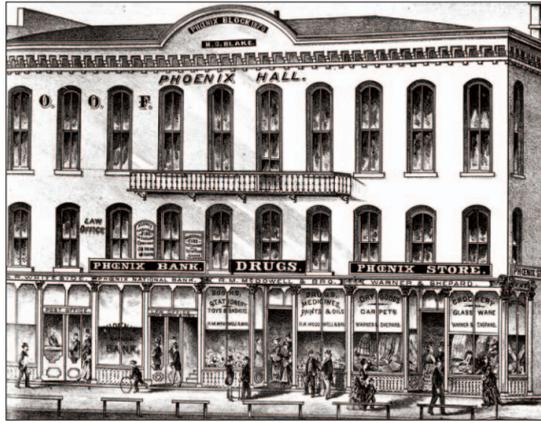
Blake's personal life was also successful. On January 1, 1840, he married Elizabeth Bell of Seville and eventually purchased a large Greek Revival home at 315 East

Washington Street.

Of the six children born to the Blakes, only two survived to adulthood – Elizabeth, whose many descendants still live in the area, and Helen. The older daughter, Elizabeth Blake McDowell recalled in a 1932 Plain Dealer interview shortly before her death at the age of 89, that her childhood had been "exceptionally happy and fortunate" and that her father's fondness and love for children and home were one of his most marked characteristics.

She also recalled that the mid-1800's were filled with conflict and controversy over the issue of slavery. "You have no idea of the bitterness of political feeling in those times," said Elizabeth Blake McDowell in her interview.

Blake took a very principled stand on this issue. In 1848 he was elected president pro tem of the Ohio Senate by



COURTESY OF MEDINA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Phoenix Block.

one vote and helped to repeal the Black Laws of Ohio – legislation which limited the rights of free African Americans in Ohio. He had been a member of the Whig party, but when they refused to disavow slavery, Blake wrote, "I had been a devoted Whig in principle and sustained that party until it made slavery its God. I then with thousands of other Whigs assisted in forming the Republican Party."

Furthermore, his East Washington Street home became a station on the Underground Railroad. This loosely knit network of individuals who stood ready to aid fugitive slaves with shelter and food, flourished throughout the country, but was especially active in Ohio.

Blake House

Blake's great-great granddaughter, the late Betsy Whitmore of Akron related the stories her great grandmother, Elizabeth Blake McDowell told her:

"My great grandmother remembered how she began to notice the large amount of bread that her mother baked and what large pieces of meat she cooked. She couldn't understand where it all went as there were only four in the family. She began to ask questions and finally her parents explained it all to her – how important a mission her father had taken upon himself. If it ever became known that they were protecting slaves, every owner hunting his runaways would come to their home making it unpleasant

After that, when she saw a large ham disappear or heard strange noises in the attic over the kitchen, she was no longer surprised. The two girls were usually kept out of school when slaves were there, just to be on the safe side."

It was no exaggeration that had Blake been caught sheltering runaway slaves, things would have gotten "unpleasant." In 1850 Congress had passed the Fugitive Slave Law

making it a federal offense to interfere with the capture and return of runaway slaves. The criminal fines leveled against those caught harboring slaves were considerable: six months in prison and a fine of \$1,000.

In 1859 Harrison Gray Blake was elected to the United States Congress where he served two terms – 1859-63. His lasting contribution from that time is the post office money order system.

In the mid-nineteenth century there were few banks and only wealthy people had bank accounts anyway. If the average person wanted to send money to distant relatives, they had to send it by mail. All too frequently these funds would be stolen by dishonest postal clerks. Blake had the idea of creating a money order which a person could purchase from the post office and then safely mail. The recipient of this money order could then cash it like a check. It was a unique idea at the time, but was met with immediate success and is still in use today.

After his Congressional terms ended, Blake held the rank of Colonel of the One Hundred and Sixty Sixth Regiment of the Union Army serving in the defense of Washington in 1864.

President Lincoln offered him the governorship of one of the Western Territories, but Blake declined. He wanted to return to Medina.

The early 1870's were a period of both trial and triumph for Blake.

The trial came first, in the form of the great fire of 1870. His store and bank burned down. Twelve years previously, in 1848, his dry goods store had gone up in flames. He rebuilt it in brick and named it the Phoenix Building (after the mythological bird that rises out of its ashes). In 1870, this new building was destroyed along with most of the business district of Public Square. Undeterred, Blake, who was then Mayor of Medina, rallied the

Medina Bicentennial Buzz!

March 2018

March 3rd and 4th: Medina County Home and Garden Show, Medina County Fairgrounds Community Building. The event will feature displays about the Medina City and County Bicentennials.

Saturday, March 10, 11:00 a.m. at the Medina Library, There will be a presentation on the vital role of women in Medina's history. Living history characters portrayed by actors will also tell the stories of Wilda Bell, Letha E. House and Freda Snyder.

April 2018

Saturday, April 7th, 1:00 p.m. at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 317 E. Liberty. The Medina County Historical Society will present: Medina in the Civil War: Citizens and Soldiers in their Own Words.

Sunday, April 8th at the Smart House, 206 North Elmwood, 1:00 to 4:00 PM. The Historical Society's Open House will recall Medina's role in the Civil War with guided tours and art/fact displays.

businessmen and immediately made plans to rebuild. The 1881 History of Medina County and Ohio says of Blake, "To his counsels, encouragement and example...Medina is today a pleasant, substantial town instead of a mass of ruins and rookeries."

Phoenix Block

Blake's new building, called the Phoenix Block, was one of the first to rise from the ashes, and it was easily the largest and grandest structure on Public Square. The first floor consisted of his bank (called the Phoenix, again) as well as several stores. The second story consisted of offices and the third story provided the community with a large hall for gatherings, and a theater called Phoenix Hall with a stage and a capacity of 500 persons. This quickly became the center of social activity in

been much talk and various efforts made to bring a railroad through Medina since 1852, this had not happened. Work had begun on constructing roadbeds, but financial misadventures and failure in refinancing the railroad halted the work, leaving investors with large liabilities. Finally in 1870, Blake purchased some of the abandoned roadbed and a year later made an agreement with the Lake Shore and Tuscarawas Valley Company to complete a railroad through Medina.

On the 10th of November, 1871 the first locomotive whistle heralded its arrival in Medina. Five days later a gigantic civic celebration was held with band music, a one-hundred gun salute and a dinner for 1200 people.

In 1872, after a period of severe illness, Blake was offered the position of Consul General at Palermo, Sicily, a



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The Peoples' Friend sign on The Phoenix Bank.

the village.

In 1873, in order to insure public confidence and increase financial strength, Blake's Phoenix Bank joined the national banking system. It was granted a twenty year charter and became known as the Phoenix National Bank.

Blake was also instrumental in bringing the railroad to Medina. Although there had

place with a warm climate which his friends in Congress thought might speed his recovery. He declined. In the fall of 1875, his name was mentioned as a potential candidate for the Republican nomination for Governor of Ohio. By then his health was too fragile for the rigors of a statewide campaign.

On April 8, 1876, Harrison Gray Blake developed congestion of the lungs which swiftly turned to pneumonia. He died on April 16, a few days short of his 57th birthday. The entire village went into mourning. Buildings were draped in black, and a banner with the words "The People's Friend" was draped across his Phoenix Block.

Gloria Brown is the author of *Images of America: Medina and The Story of Medina's Schools 1817-2017*

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