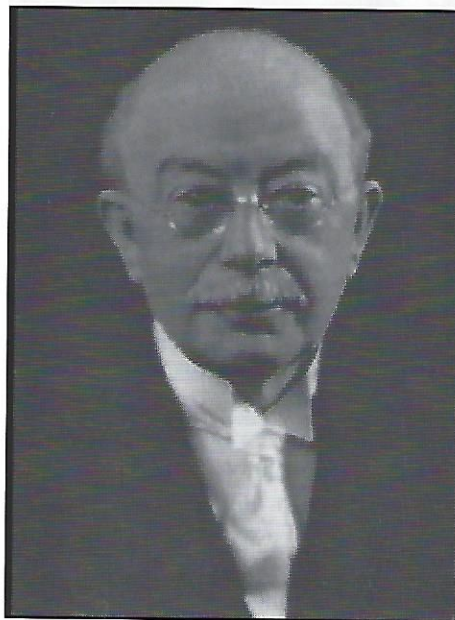


From coal miner to college president: The making of Joseph Harker

By Allen W. Croessmann

During the first quarter of the last century the name of Joseph R. Harker (1853-1938) was one of the most prominent among Illinois educators. By the time of his retirement in 1925, he had served Illinois Woman's College in Jacksonville as its president for 32 years. During his tenure he transformed a sleepy preparatory school for young girls into an accredited four-year college with a fine reputation both in the state and nationally. His presidency was a success, but what was remarkable was that he reached that position at all. The son of a poor English coal miner, and a coal miner himself whose formal education ended at the age of ten, Harker's is one of those "against all odds" stories. It began in Durham, England, a coal mining district just a few miles from the North Sea, brought him across the ocean to Du Quoin in southern Illinois and then north to Jacksonville.



Dr. Joseph R. Harker

lage, all within twenty miles of Durham, seeking betterment. They lived in hovels. Ralph was a hard-drinking, stern miner who could not read, but his marriage to Mary Young softened him. He awakened to his family responsibilities and, taking his wife's lead, embraced religion. They were attracted to a Methodist sect, the Ranters, that stressed sobriety and law and order. Mary Young Harker was an uneducated, quiet, devout, supportive woman who was the most important influence in Joe's life. His schooling began at the age of six in a single,

noisy, undivided Episcopal church school room that served 200 boys, with beginners at one end and 10- and 11-year-olds at the other. Mathematics was his forte. Natural history, geography, and the catechism were sprinkled in. A kindly headmaster exposed him to *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. At the public reading room in the colliery village, young Joe was enthralled by the pictures and stories in the *Illustrated London News*, including tales of the American Civil War.



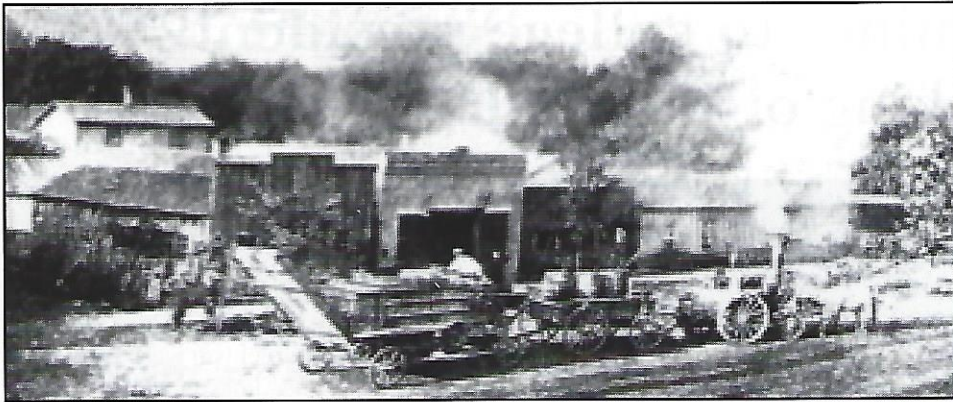
Harker at age 18 before he left England.

Joseph Harker was born in a dilapidated row house on Milk and Water Row in Durham in June 1853. He was the third oldest of eight children born to Ralph and Mary Harker. This family of ten eked out a living in the mines, and they moved over the years from coal mining village to coal mining vil-



Harker was born in one of these Durham row houses in 1853.

Joe Harker's formal education ended at the age of ten when he was forced to drop out of school and help support the family, first in a grocery store and then in the mines. It was not the parents' choice for their sons to go to work at such an early age, but Harker's father earned at most \$5 a week (about \$118 today), not enough to sustain the large brood. As the family moved from colliery to colliery in the Durham area, young Joe took on different jobs in the mines. He was a pick carrier, carrying picks on his shoulders, usually eight to ten, the three hundred yards from the top of the mine shaft to the blacksmith shop



Downtown Du Quoin in the 1870s

for resharpener. It was hard work for a young boy, particularly one of such small physical stature. At age 18, he still weighed only 120 pounds. He was a telegraph operator, receiving orders from all of the local mines and wiring reports on the number of full and empty cars at each mine and what the needs would be for the following day. Next young Joe for the first time descended into the mine to work. His job was to tend a switch and trap door to ensure that air in the mine was circulating properly. At the next colliery Joe was a helper to onsetters, miners who were responsible for exchanging full and empty tubs of coal up and down the shaft. Harker in later years described this as the most physically challenging job he ever had. In 1867 when the family moved again, young Joe was put in charge of the train of tubs drawn by cable from the shaft to a landing area about a mile away. The days were long. Joe had to arrive at the mines by 6 a.m. and he did not leave before 6 p.m. During his years in the coal mines around Durham he read whenever he could and attended Methodist Sunday schools. A zealous quest to improve himself through self-study and a keen interest in church and Sunday School were constants throughout his life.

Although by nature an optimist, Harker had resigned himself to his likely fate. "The last years in England my ambition had largely died out. I had ceased to dream of a future as I used to do when a boy at school and had settled down to be content as I was," he wrote in his autobiography, *Eventide Memories*. But improved fortunes were at hand. Some members

of his mother's family had emigrated from England to America several years earlier, hoping to improve their lot. They settled in Du Quoin, a small mining town of fewer than 3000 people on the Illinois Central railroad line in southern Illinois. They sent back reports of a wonderful place that offered great opportunity. Ralph and Mary Harker longed to go to this promised land across the ocean, but it seemed out of reach financially. Joe, the mathematician in the family, calculated that it would cost \$400-\$500 to transport the family by train from Durham to Liverpool, by ship to either New York or Boston, and then by rail through Chicago down to Du Quoin. It was decided that the eldest son, Thomas, would go over first, along with one of Mary's brothers. In two

years, Thomas saved \$200 from his work in the mines to help fund the 4000-mile journey for the rest of the family. That money, coupled with the \$200 that Mary Harker had stashed away over the years, was enough to pay for passage and food, and in September 1871 the Harker family, with trepidation but great hope, left England for America.

Accommodations on the ship for steerage passengers were primitive, and the long rail trip from Boston to Chicago to Du Quoin did not include sleeping berths. The family arrived in Du Quoin on October 6, 1871. They missed the Great Chicago Fire by just two days.

The relatives who were already in Du Quoin found them a house and also work. They arrived on a Saturday and father and son began digging coal on Monday at Sunfield Mine No. 2, four miles north of Du Quoin on the Illinois Central line. It was dangerous labor. Many years later Joe's brother Tom died from injuries he sustained in a mining accident. The workday was 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and wages were double what they had been in Durham, but in the spring, there was a change in Joe Harker's circumstances that altered the course of his life. A seasonal cutback was

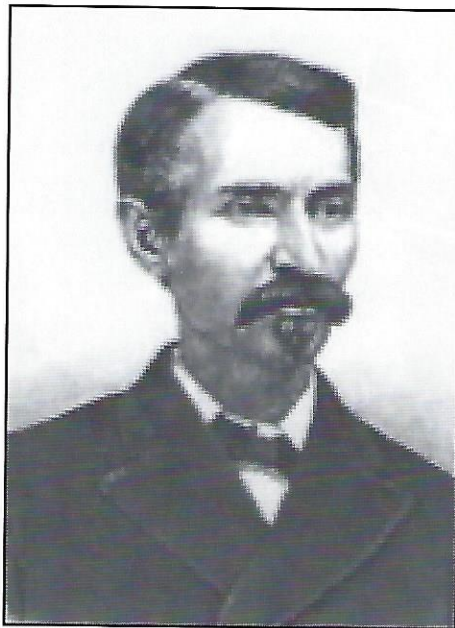


A Du Quoin coal mine c. 1880s

announced for the spring and summer. The mines would only be open two or three days a week. Harker decided to use his enforced idle time to pursue his studies. One day he walked the four miles from Sunfield to Du Quoin and inquired about textbooks used in the schools. He purchased Ray's *Third Part Arithmetic* and Warren's *Physical Geography*, which he studied devotedly. The desire to improve himself (and his prospects) had been rekindled. He read about Grant and Greeley, the contenders for the presidency in the election of 1872. They had been poor boys, too. Inspired, he hoped to emulate their success. Adding to his knowledge, he believed, was his ticket out of the mines. While in Sunfield, Harker organized a Methodist Sunday school attended mostly by miner families, served as its superintendent, and got his first experience in public speaking. Throughout his active life, wherever he went, Harker taught Sunday school and served as a lay preacher.

The family moved to Du Quoin proper and Harker began work at the Star mine about a mile south of town while continuing to study at night. The residents of the town were friendly, and, unlike in Durham, they did not treat miners as inferiors. He made friends with people from all classes. One who had a profound influence on his life was John B. Ward, the county superintendent of schools and principal of the high school. Ward found him to be both inquisitive and ambitious and encouraged him to consider a career in teaching. In the summer of 1873, the mines again were on a reduced schedule. But even after full-time work resumed in the fall, Harker stayed with his studies, memorizing Latin and Greek declensions and conjugations. Ward persuaded him to visit Du Quoin schools when he had a chance, and Harker served as an occasional substitute teacher.

A decisive moment in the evolution of young Harker's career took place in late 1873. Illinois' new constitution mandated that educational opportunities be provided for all children, Black as well as White. Ward, the county super-



John B. Ward

intendent, desperate to find a teacher for the new Black school in Du Quoin, offered the position to Harker. Despite his protestations that he was unqualified—no formal schooling in the last ten years, no knowledge of U.S. history or geography—Ward insisted and gave Harker a provisional certificate that allowed him to teach in the school for one term. The 20-year-old Harker removed his picks from the mine on a Saturday and was teaching on Monday. The president of the school board, a local physician, told Harker that he shouldn't worry about teaching the "n—"; he should just try to maintain order. No, Harker would do much more than that. Over the course of the twelve-week term he was able to establish strong bonds with the students and their families. This first teaching job was a success, and he believed he had found his calling although initially his salary was less than he earned in the mines.

With the end of the term at the school in Du Quoin, Harker embarked on a concentrated program of self-study to prepare himself in earnest for a career in teaching. Several regular certificates were attained in short order even as he returned to the mines during the summer two- and three-day schedules. By 1876 the self-educated Harker achieved a state teaching certificate that was good for life, five short years after he left the Durham mines. He taught in De Soto, Beardstown,

Meredosia, and Waverly between 1874 and 1884 and supplemented his income by instructing at various teacher institutes during the summer months. In all of these communities Harker taught classes, established the curriculum and in some instances set up the high school. During his first year at De Soto, through his regular teaching and his institute instruction, he earned \$800. As his career advanced, Harker faithfully sent back money to his parents. While at De Soto he purchased a home in Du Quoin for them with a personal note. He paid interest regularly and principal whenever he could and eventually the note was retired. Educational standards were higher in central and northern Illinois than in the southern part of the state, as were salaries. Greater pay was needed because in the fall of 1876, Harker married an English woman from Suffolk who herself had emigrated several years before. She died in 1880 during childbirth and two years later, while teaching and serving as an administrator in Waverly, he married a young woman, Fannie E. Wackerle, who had been a member of Harker's first high school graduating class at Meredosia.

Harker's fine record attracted the attention of President E.A. Tanner of Illinois College in Jacksonville, who was looking for a principal for Whipple Academy, the college's floundering preparatory school. Harker was surprised by the overture; he had never attended college, had no degree and was without even a formal grade school education. Tanner was not dissuaded and Harker, at the age of 31, joined the faculty in the fall of 1884. One of his objectives was to increase enrollment. Throughout his teaching and administrative career, going back to his term at the Black school in Du Quoin, his approach was to involve the communities and families in the educational experience. He visited homes, explained to parents what he was trying to do, and usually was able to gain their cooperation. Before he accepted the position at Whipple, he brashly told the trustees that they had done a poor job of engaging with the community and that they



Whipple Academy at Illinois College.

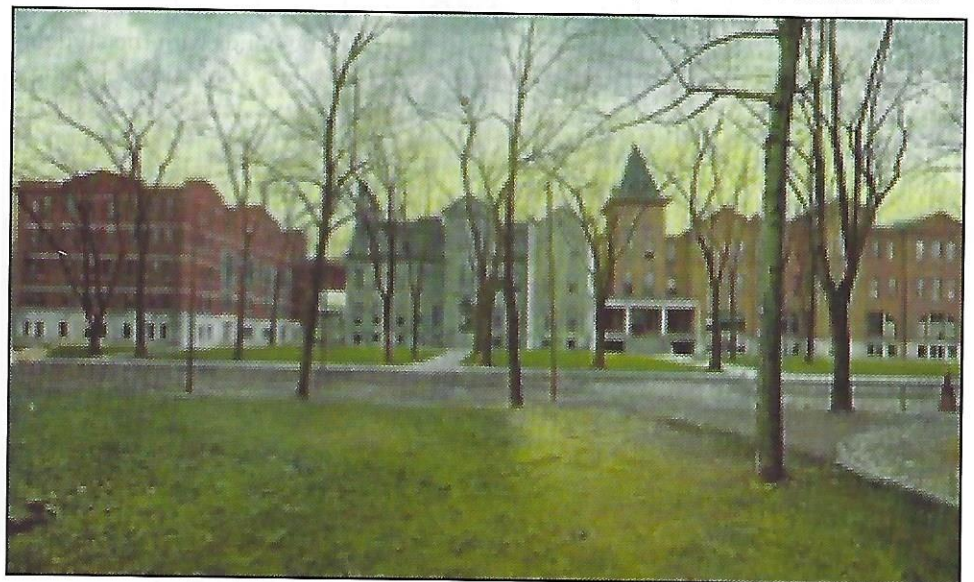
had failed to cultivate the public schools as a student sourcing pipeline. Harker became a visible presence in the community and his hard work paid off. Enrollment increased as did tuition income. A self-confident Harker had proposed a bold revenue arrangement to the trustees that would finance his salary. By the time he left Whipple he was earning \$2000 a year (about \$60,000 today).

Although President Tanner had ignored Harker's lack of a degree when hiring him, the former coal miner realized that this deficiency must be remedied. He set to work to review the materials he had studied to prepare for his certifications, and he took lessons from instructors at the college. A Bachelor's degree was bestowed in May 1888. Harker continued his studies and he was awarded a Master's in 1890 and an honorary Ph.D. in 1893. In addition to increasing enrollment at Whipple, he reorganized the academy while continuing to teach classical languages, mathematics, history, and English.

The final step in Harker's journey from coal miner to college president came in 1893 when he was offered the presidency of Illinois Female College across town in Jacksonville. Harker


was ready to move on. He had been at Whipple for nine years; the Illinois College president and his good friend Tanner had died, and the new president was a weak leader and a stifling administrator, in Harker's estimation. Illinois Female College, like Whipple before it, had little in the way of assets. And, as at Whipple, he determined to put the institution on a different and more secure financial footing. To do that he needed to jettison the old economic model and create a new one. He assumed personal financial risk for the

day-to-day operation of the college, including borrowing \$5000 to purchase furniture and to commence campus improvements, but if his plan for running the school succeeded, there would be more donors, higher enrollment, an enhanced physical plant, greater involvement in the affairs of the college by the trustees, and better prospects for his own remuneration. One of his friends said that he was a fool for accepting the position under these circumstances. Harker replied, "Maybe you are right; the line between a fool and a prophet is frequently a narrow line, and there is sometimes much doubt for years as to the side of the line on which a man will fall. But I believe I see a great opportunity, and that I am a prophet." Joseph Harker was a fascinating juxtaposition of the self-made, self-reliant man who trusted his own abilities to succeed and one who believed that he was God's instrument. The historian of the college that he came to serve, Mary Watters, wrote that he was "a combination of Poor Richard and a religious mystic." History proved Harker right. He assumed the presidency of Illinois Female College (which became Illinois Woman's College in 1899) at the age of 40, thirty years after the end of his formal education and 22 years after he and his family got off the train in Du Quoin after their journey from England. Harker took over a school with 128 students and with property valued at \$75,000. As a result of his



Illinois Woman's College during the Harker years.

inspirational leadership, business acumen and fundraising skills, when he retired in 1925, the school enrolled 540 young women and had assets valued at \$1,250,000. It was fully recognized and accredited; the campus was expanded and new buildings added; and the college had attracted many new friends and donors, including the Chicago businessman and industrialist James E. MacMurray who was instrumental in the growth of the

college during the twenties, thirties, and forties. 

Allen Croessmann has connections to both Du Quoin and Jacksonville. He grew up in Du Quoin and graduated from MacMurray College (the successor to Illinois Woman's College) in Jacksonville. He earned his Ph.D. in History from Harvard University and served as a senior executive in the financial services industry in New York and Boston for

many years. He was chairman of MacMurray's Board of Trustees for nine years before retiring a decade ago.

The best sources for Harker are his autobiography published in 1931 and the histories of MacMurray College by Mary Watters and Walter B. Hendrickson. Special thanks to Judy Smid of the Du Quoin Historic Preservation Commission and Tiffany Warmowski of the MacMurray Foundation & Alumni Association for their assistance.

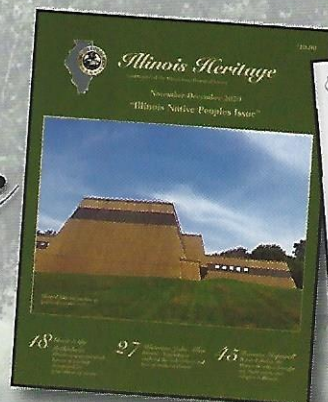
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