‘FULLY CAPABLE’

Pasfield family instrumental in development of Springfield

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If you’ve lived in Springfield any length of time at all, chances are you’ve played golf at — or at least driven by — Pasfield Park, steered your car down Pasfield Street and maybe even attended a social event at The Pasfield House.

And if you have, you also might have wondered, just for a second or two, what is a Pasfield and how come all this stuff is named after it?

Well, the answer is that Pasfield is not a “what,” it’s a “who,” several “whos,” in fact, who made important contributions to Springfield’s history.

In fact, when one of the clan, Dr. George Pasfield, passed away in 1916, he was remembered by local newspapers not only as “Springfield’s wealthiest citizen,” but as one of the few people alive at the time who had known Abraham Lincoln personally.

Dr. Pasfield’s father, also named George, was the first Pasfield to call Springfield home, according to a study of the family prepared by University of Illinois at Springfield student Patrick Pospisiek. The elder Pasfield, Pospisiek wrote, was born in London about 1790 and came to America with his family a few years later.

After trying his hand at several trades, he eventually settled in the still-young village of Springfield with his wife in 1831. He worked as a merchant, but also invested his money in land from the very beginning. One of the first pieces of land he bought was on the south side of what is now the Old Capitol Plaza.

As the city grew, Pasfield made shrewd decisions about what lots to buy and which to sell, usually at a profit, and he grew rich in the process. He also improved his properties along the way. For example, the north side of Washington Street along the Old Capitol Plaza was known as “Chicken Row” for the ramshackle collection of run-down shops and shanties that had grown up along it.

But when the block burned in a fire in 1856, Pasfield replaced them with two three-story buildings with an upper story furnished as a hall for concerts and dances, and “Chicken Row” soon became a row of respectable businesses. At the same time he was buying property in the city, Pasfield also was purchasing farmland in the country, acquiring prime land for $10 an acre. He also bought land in Rochester Township.

The elder Pasfield also was a prominent member of the community, serving a term as the equivalent of an alderman, during which time he was active in the purchase of firefighting equipment for the city, among other contributions.

The elder Pasfield also was active in early efforts to bring the railroad to the city and helped provide bond money to the state for relocating the capital from Vandalia to Springfield. He also helped bring the first institution of higher education to Springfield, working to relocate Hillsboro College as the renamed Illinois State University. Unfortunately, the college folded in 1887, although its buildings were later put to use by Concordia Theological Seminary.

After that, the elder Pasfield seems to have mostly retired from business and public life, and his son, who had been born just a few months after his parents settled in Springfield and later would become Dr. Pasfield, gradually assumed his place.

The son took a four-month course at St. Louis Medical College, earning the right to call himself “doctor,” and practiced briefly as a contract surgeon for the Army at Camp Butler during the Civil War.

As a young man, Dr. Pasfield was acquainted with Lincoln, who knew his father well as a fellow leader of the community, businessman and even law client. The younger Pasfield, however, always played down his acquaintance with Lincoln, saying they were “speaking acquaintances” only.

After the Civil War, Dr. Pasfield’s father died and he took over the family business interests. At about the same time, he and his wife, Hathaway, became important supporters of the Springfield Home for the Friendless, which had been started to provide support for the widows and orphans of Civil War veterans.

Dr. Pasfield served in a number of offices in the city’s leadership over the ensuing years. Pospisiek wrote, including serving as president for at least 10 years.

Dr. Pasfield was an often a major financial supporter of the home, predecessor to the current Family Service Center, but he would have done so without calling much attention to his efforts.

At the time of his death, The Illinois State Register noted both his generosity and his desire for that generosity not to be publicly known.

“Tenants of the Pasfield property and innumerable other families of Springfield bear witness to the largeness of the heart of Dr. Pasfield, and the stories of his aid and help, financially and otherwise, to needy persons are many,” the paper wrote.

“Dr. Pasfield was very sensitive about his benevolence and was deeply offended if any of those benefiting by it attempted to speak of their gratitude, or if the matter was alluded to by anyone who knew. For this reason, the many deeds of charity by Dr. Pasfield were not generally known.”

In the late 1800s, Dr. Pasfield also became active in Springfield’s banking community. He was involved with several banks locally, all of which seemed to prosper because of the relationship. Of course, he continued the family’s interest in owning and managing properties.

The Pasfield Block, on the east side of Sixth Street just north of Monroe Street, and The Pasfield House, just off the intersection of Jackson and Pasfield streets, built in 1886, are two elements of the family’s holdings that are still standing.

And, just as his father had contributed to the construction of the city’s first Capitol, Dr. Pasfield did his part to support the construction of the Centennial Building, donating $10,000 to a project he would not see completed. The Centennial Building was begun in 1918 and finished in 1923.

Dr. Pasfield lived long enough to see one of his sons, also named George, continue the family’s tradition of service to the community, including serving 10 years as president of the park board. The young Pasfield was a reform candidate at a time when the park board was notoriously corrupt, and the Illinois State Journal, for one, gave his candidacy its hearty endorsement.

“George Pasfield is not only fully capable but entirely trustworthy,” the paper wrote.

Pasfield was elected by a margin of 2-to-1 over his opposition, and went on to oversee a major growth in the park system, accompanied by an equally sizeable decrease in the tax burden that the system imposed on the citizens of Springfield.

So the next time you notice the family name on a street, a park or a building, you could do worse than to take a minute to remember the many contributions made by the Pasfields to make Springfield what it is today, and to remember the Pasfields themselves — “fully capable; entirely trustworthy.”

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