

Milton J. Payne

Mayor
1829-1900

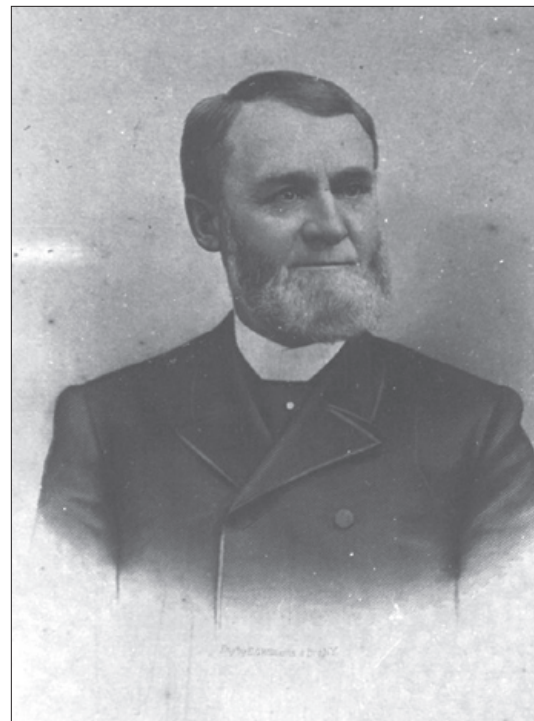
by Daniel Coleman

Milton J. Payne, a six-term mayor commonly known as Kansas City's "Father of Public Improvements," cut an unusual figure for a nineteenth-century politician. He was only 26 when he took office and a diminutive 5' 3" frame (one gentle historian has described his 120 pounds as having been "somewhat under the medium size") belied his stature as a giant among Kansas City's early civic leaders.

Milton Jamison Payne, born October 29, 1829, in Christian County, Kentucky, was the second of Edward and Mary Ann Calloway Payne's seven children. After the death of their father, 11-year old Milton and his older brother toiled for several seasons to sustain their family's modest farm. Milton eventually found the means to survive financially in the nearby county seat town of Hopkinsville, where he was hired as an apprentice typesetter.

At 19, Payne caught the fever afflicting so many young men in 1849 and journeyed west to prospect for gold in California. He reached St. Louis, where an acquaintance persuaded him to take up the somewhat less hazardous occupation of dry goods merchant. The next year, he followed a business opportunity to the newly incorporated settlement then known as the Town of Kansas, located on the far side of the state. It was a muddy riverbank village, and Payne carried a sidearm for protection from rough characters outfitting themselves for an even rougher wilderness in the Rocky Mountains or along the Santa Fe Trail.

Payne's way with words and personal warmth usually sufficed for security and won him a lucrative position in 1852 as a salesman for Walker, Boyd & Chick, the town's leading traders. He was married the same year to Miss Adeline Mary Prudhomme. This young woman, who became a six-term "First Lady of Kansas City," was the posthumous daughter of one of the city's most mysterious and mythical founding fathers. Gabriel Prudhomme was a French fur trapper who owned the first title to the tract of land on which the original Town of Kansas site was platted. In 1831 he was killed



in a violent brawl, leaving behind six children and a young wife pregnant with his seventh, whom she would name Adeline Mary.

Milton Payne's political career began with his election to the city council in 1853. When the sitting mayor retired in 1855, only two months into his twelve-month term, the council appointed Payne to complete it; he ran for re-election and won in 1856, 1857, 1858, 1859, and 1862. He presided during a period of explosive growth: when he took office, Kansas City's population stood at 478; by 1860 it had increased nearly 1000 per cent to 4,418, while the assessed value of taxable property had grown from \$54,000 to \$3,311,700 in the same period.

Payne saw the passage of Kansas City's first two bond issues, which allowed him to pursue crucial improvements. The city's early streets and all-important riverfront wharf were paved with gravel during his tenure, and crews graded many steep inclines. Plank sidewalks replaced mud footpaths, and Payne spearheaded the building of Kansas City's first civic meeting place and police headquarters at 4th and Main. He set the city on a path toward the development of sewers, water works, and a railroad connection with the East. Kansas City received and sent its first telegraph transmissions under his rule, and as a private investor he supported its first newspaper, the *Enterprise*. During the Civil War, Payne resisted the secessionist impulses within his Democratic Party and was elected twice to the Missouri House of Representatives, where he led the legislative push to bring the Missouri Pacific Railroad to Kansas City.

Payne raised four children with Adeline, who died November 10, 1867. He remarried twice before his own death at age 71 on July 17, 1900, during the first year of a century in which Kansas City became the modern metropolis Payne had envisioned.

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