

# History and Self-growth: ISHS Founder John Francis Snyder

By John Hallwas

One very intelligent, committed, and fascinating figure in nineteenth-century Illinois was a country doctor, at the village of Virginia, named John Francis Snyder, who also did historical research and writing—and was instrumental in founding the Illinois State Historical Society. His life story also illustrates the experience of pro-slavery and pro-South residents in early Illinois.



Snyder was born on March 22, 1830, at a farm on Square Mound in St. Clair County, five miles south of Cahokia. His father, Adam Snyder, was a noted Illinois politician, who served in both the Illinois Senate and the U.S. Congress. His mother, Adelaide Perry Snyder, was the great-granddaughter of Jean Baptiste Saucier, a Frenchman who designed Fort de Chartres (near Cahokia) in 1752. Because of her, the family was very conscious of heritage and social class.

When John was three, the Snyders moved to nearby Belleville, where his father practiced law. They occupied a mansion that was probably the finest house in town—and also expressed their aristocratic pretensions. The family owned several slaves, who were kept as “servants.”

John and his two older brothers collected arrowheads, flints, beads, and other Indian relics from the countryside around their home. Among the many prehistoric earthworks in that area was Monk’s Mound, where a great native-American metropolis had once been located.

The spell of the past was also upon the nearby French villages, which the Snyders visited extensively in 1839. Many years later, John wrote a memoir of those places, which included his recollections of Kaskaskia, the first Illinois capital—where “almost every feature ... bore the aspect of age,” a huge “commons” of adjoining land



*Dr. John Francis Snyder*

(several thousand acres) was used for agricultural production, and the homes “were of the ancient French pattern.” He also wrote a fine biography of his great-great-grandfather, Jean Baptiste Saucier. So, he felt deeply rooted there.

When John was twelve, his father died, and after attending subscription schools in Belleville, the bright youth was sent to McKendree College (1844-1845). Then, after a few years as postmaster in Belleville, he entered McDowell Medical College at St. Louis in 1849. He quit when he developed tuberculosis, and apparently lacked financial support, but nevertheless he went with a Gold Rush caravan to

California, where he made enough money mining gold to continue his studies at McDowell. And fortunately, he recovered from his tuberculosis as well.

After receiving his M.D. in 1853, he spent eleven years in practice at Bolivar, Missouri—where he organized the Southeast Missouri Medical Society. He was also married in 1854.

Oddly enough, Dr. Snyder eventually became dissatisfied with medical practice and began to study law. In 1859 he passed the Missouri bar exam and hung out his shingle. So, he worked in two professional fields.

But like most others in Missouri, he was not opposed to slavery, so in



**The Snyder family plot in the Virginia, Illinois, cemetery.**

1856 he also joined a group of volunteers who fought against abolitionist John Brown at Ossawatimie, Kansas, and in 1857 he joined the Missouri militia, and was elected colonel. In 1858, when he ran for the state legislature, he declared, “I am totally opposed to the agitation of the slavery question.” Like many, he felt that the slavery conflict would destroy the Union as well as damage the South.

Snyder was so incensed by political developments that he wrote editorials for the staunchly Democratic (i.e., pro-slavery) *Bolivar Courier*—and even edited that paper during 1858 and 1859. So, he had yet another temporary career change.

When the Civil War broke out, he quickly joined the Confederate Army and was selected as major of Missouri’s Fourth Cavalry. During the next two years, he fought in the battles of Wilson’s Creek, Pea Ridge, Helena, and Corinth. However, by 1863 he decided that “the Confederacy had collapsed,” and he left the army.

As the war ended he moved to Virginia, Illinois, and his view of slavery was changing. He became more repulsed by the inhumanity of it, so he did not regret the defeat of the South—and indeed, he regretted his past support of that cause.

In Virginia, Snyder became a well-known local physician, who had a large practice. While he was very competent, he was also aggravated by patients when they failed to pay him. He treated them anyway, but when a lack of good character was the apparent reason for their non-payment, he often wrote colorful comments by their



**Dr. Snyder was a Civil War veteran who fought for the Confederacy. His grave includes both a Confederate gravemarker and a U.S. Flag.**

names in his surviving records—such as “Dead beat,” “Worthless trash,” and “Another dishonest scoundrel.” He also kept records about nearby people who died over the years, often showing compassion for their struggles.

Snyder also continued to write newspaper articles—about contemporary issues—and he became a local leader. In 1876 he was elected as a representative to the Illinois Legislature.

He became a local historian, too. Toward the end of the century, he wrote biographical sketches for the Virginia newspaper about more than sixty physicians who had practiced in that area. And he followed that with a series on “The Poets of Cass County.” He wrote on many other local history subjects as well.

But some of his most important writing was done in archaeology. Soon after coming to Virginia, he was at work opening nearby Indian mounds and graves, collecting specimens, and writing about prehistory. Among his historical articles of a professional kind are “Prehistoric Illinois: The Brown County Ossuary” and “The Great Cahokia Mound,” both of which were based on his personal investigations. He argued that the Mound Builders were not a different race but were the ancestors of historic Indians—which archaeology later confirmed.

By the end of the century, Snyder was an authority in that field, editing an archaeological journal called *The Antiquarian*. He also contributed many artifacts to the Smithsonian Institution and exhibited others at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. His private museum, in a small building near his home, became widely known in the state.

Snyder’s only book-length studies are biographies of his father, political leader Adam Snyder, and his great-great-grandfather, Jean Baptiste Saucier, the noted French leader of the 1700s. As those reveal, he was an advocate of genealogical research, urging others to take such an interest, regardless of the eminent or ordinary lives of their ancestors.

But he wrote other studies of Illinois history as well, including articles from his own era, like “Charles

Dickens in Illinois,” and ones from the distant past, like “Fort Kaskaskia.” He also wrote articles about “Forgotten Statesmen of Illinois,” such as James Harvey Ralston and Richard M. Young, thereby conveying his awareness that even people who make distinctive contributions in their own time will fall below the level of public awareness, unless someone gives them the historical attention they deserve.

But perhaps Snyder’s most significant contribution to the study of Illinois history came in 1899, when he was a leader in organizing the Illinois State Historical Society. The most active of our organization’s founders, he has in fact been called “The Father of the Illinois State Historical Society.” He served as the vice president and president between 1899 and 1905.

Of course, there is a certain irony

in his leadership role, for the ISHS has been one of the most important organizations for the promotion of Lincoln studies and appreciation, yet during the Civil War, Snyder had fought for the South. But while he represents the large segment of our state’s population in the southern half of Illinois that did indeed support slavery—and the entire culture of the American South—he is also a prime example of someone who extended himself into the lives of other ethnic groups (including the French and the native Americans) through historical investigation and who eventually changed inwardly, becoming more sensitive to the struggle of others. In that sense, John Francis Snyder is a good example of the positive impact that historical awareness can have on individuals.

It would also be hard to name

anyone in nineteenth-century Illinois who displayed more talent in a variety of fields: medicine, law, journalism, military leadership, politics, archaeology, and history. As a physician, he eventually saw his last patient on September 13, 1917—according to his account book—and four years later (almost a century ago), he died, at the age of ninety-one. Few individuals have striven so hard to understand their cultural environment and to share that awareness with others as prominent ISHS co-founder John Francis Snyder. 

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