

James Preston Butler (1838-1918)

At the passing of James Preston “Press” Butler in 1918, newspapers, both near and far, took the opportunity to present editorial obituaries. The *Pantagraph* said he “was one of the best known of the citizens of the older generation of this city [Bloomington]” and “he was useful to the public interest in a number of ways.”¹ Chicago’s *Daily National Hotel Reporter* called him a “public spirited citizen.”² “The passing of Press Butler,” said the *Weldon (Illinois) Record*, “takes away one of the few remaining picturesque characters of early Bloomington.”³ During his storied life he was a successful business owner and proprietor, a community leader, and a firefighter. But he was best known for his work in law enforcement, serving as constable, deputy sheriff, police captain, and, most prominently, detective. In an age when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes was capturing the imagination of the day’s readers, Press Butler was gaining celebrity as a real-life sleuth, both in the employ of the public and privately. It was in this role that he was etched into Bloomington’s colorful past. He was diminutive and feisty, but had a towering sense of justice, which he sought with wisdom and dogged valor.

Press Butler was born September 2, 1838, in Scott County, near Frankfort, Kentucky, the oldest of William H. and Hattie Jane (Spicer) Butler’s eight children. Press’s siblings were John (b.1840), Thomas (b.1843), Jane (b.1845), Eunice (b.1850), Anna (b.1858), Alice (b.1861), and Esther (b.1862).⁴

When Press was a child, his family moved to Covington, Kentucky and then in 1855, the Butler family departed Kentucky for Bloomington, Illinois.⁵ A carpenter by trade, William may have been lured by the Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops, located on Bloomington’s west side. However, he later engaged in the butcher business with Press before his death at age 45 in 1861, shortly before the birth of his youngest child, Esther.⁶

Press Butler was seventeen when he and his family arrived in Bloomington. His formal education was limited, split between Kentucky and Illinois. He engaged in a series of successful, yet not entirely satisfying enterprises. He apprenticed in tin smithing with master Dedrich Bradner, but quickly abandoned the trade and entered the butcher business, inviting in his father as partner. Upon his father’s death in 1861, Press sold his stock in the butchery and opened a grocery, bakery, and confectionary store on Front Street.⁷ The *Pantagraph* said it was “the largest bakery and confectionery store in town and did a thriving business for about ten years.”⁸ He then began a long and gratifying career as a public servant: firefighting, elected office, and law enforcement. While he and wife, Lizzie, were owners and proprietors of a hotel in downtown Bloomington, the Butler House, from 1885 to his death in 1918, Press’s first love was law enforcement, namely, detective work.

On February 4, 1862, as 23-year-old Press married 15-year-old Elizabeth A. “Lizzie” Kavanaugh.⁹ Lizzie was born in Ottawa, Illinois on February 24, 1846. She moved with her

¹ “The End,” *The Pantagraph*, January 29, 1918.

² “Butler,” *Daily National Hotel Reporter*, February 12, 1918.

³ “Passing of Press Butler,” *Weldon Record*, January 31, 1918.

⁴ “James Preston Butler,” Butler Family Tree, <https://Ancestry.com>; S.J. Clarke Publishing. “James P. Butler,” *Biographical Record of McLean County*, (Chicago, Illinois: S. J. Clark Publishing, 1899), 139-140.

⁵ S.J. Clarke Publishing, 139.

⁶ “James Preston Butler,” Butler Family Tree, <https://Ancestry.com>; S.J. Clarke Publishing, 139.

⁷ S.J. Clarke Publishing, 139-140.

⁸ “To Celebrate the Golden Cycle,” *The Pantagraph*, February 3, 1912.

⁹ “Aged Resident Gone,” *The Pantagraph*, February 9, 1920.

Irish-born parents to Bloomington at the age of six. The Butlers had two sons, William Preston (1863-1907) and Edward Charles (1867-1952); and an adopted daughter, Myrtle Elizabeth (1885-1962).¹⁰ From 1868 until 1885, the Butlers made their home at 522 W. Grove Street in Bloomington. After 1885, their residence was also their place of business, the Butler House, a hotel and boarding house located on the northwest corner of Madison and Front Streets, Bloomington.¹¹

Press was no stranger to hard work and the success of his retail food enterprise reflected it. However, longed for something that would not only cultivate his civic mindedness, but that was also decidedly more exciting. He became a “daring Bloomington fire-fighter in the era of volunteer companies.”¹² Considering the crude techniques and equipment the brigades had at their disposal in the mid-19th Century, firefighting was physically demanding and dangerous. The hose carts were horse-drawn, but maneuvered by men once they reached the site. With little protective gear the men were vulnerable, and fires, often, were fully developed before they arrived. For Press, “There was no feat too dangerous for him when duty seemed to call him.”¹³ On October 9, 1871, Press, along with 19 fellow fire-fighters from Prairie Bird Fire Company #1 of the Bloomington Fire Department, rode Engine No. 97 on the Chicago and Alton to Chicago to help fight a fire that threatened to engulf the entire city. The day prior, the fire department received a telegram from Chicago’s fire department stating: “Our Fire Department is entirely used up with a number of engines burnt and disabled.”¹⁴ Upon reaching Chicago, the detachment was assigned to the city’s north and west sides to help get the fire under control.¹⁵ The “Great Chicago Fire,” as it was later known, was finally extinguished on October 10, 1871, leaving 300 people dead, 100,000 homeless, and 17,500 buildings destroyed.¹⁶

His community-mindedness compelled him to enter local politics. He was elected a third ward alderman in 1870 and re-elected in 1872.¹⁷ Probably to his mild disappointment, much of the city council’s business during his term was routine. Since the city’s population in the decade of the 1860s had grown from 8,000 to 17,019—largely due to the rail industry—infrastructure was frequently on the agenda.¹⁸ The council installed and repaired sidewalks, paved streets, approved bridge projects, provided cisterns for Bloomington’s public school sites, authorized the creation of a waterworks, bought the city’s first steam fire engine, “The Prairie Bird,” and hired extra police officers to maintain order.¹⁹ A bit less routine was the council’s setting of fines for gambling and “keeping houses of ill fame.”²⁰ Far less routine were the early rumblings of the

¹⁰ “Elizabeth A. Kavanaugh,” “Butler Family Tree,” *Ancestry Family Trees*, <https://ancestry.com>.

¹¹ “James Preston Butler,” *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995*, <https://ancestry.com>.

¹² Bill Kemp. “Pre-Civil War Butler House Survived into 1920s,” *The Pantagraph*, February 24, 2019.

¹³ “Press Butler’s History,” *Weekly Leader*, October 25, 1883.

¹⁴ Bob Williams. “The Bloomington Fire Department Celebrates 125 Years of Service: 1868 – 1993,” 5. McLean County Museum of History Archives

¹⁵ “Fireman’s Record Run to Save City,” *The Pantagraph*, April 16, 1910.

¹⁶ Rayfield, Jo Ann, “Tragedy in the Chicago Fire and Triumph in the Architectural Response,” *Illinois History Teacher*, 1997, Accessed September 25, 2018 – via Illinois Periodicals Online.

¹⁷ “City Election,” *The Pantagraph*, April 19, 1870; “The City Election Yesterday,” *The Pantagraph*, April 16, 1872.

¹⁸ John Howard Burnham, *History of Bloomington-Normal in McLean County, Illinois*. (Bloomington: J.H. Burnham Publisher, 1879), 49.

¹⁹ “The City Council,” *The Pantagraph*, October 15, 1870; “Called Meeting of the City Council,” *The Pantagraph*, October 23, 1871; “City Council,” *The Pantagraph*, December 17, 1870; “City Council Proceedings,” *The Pantagraph*, October 14, 1871; “Council Proceedings,” *The Pantagraph*, November 11, 1871; “Passing of Press Butler,” *Weldon Record*, January 31, 1918; “City Council Proceedings,” *The Pantagraph*, October 14, 1871.

²⁰ “City Council Last Night,” *The Pantagraph*, February 10, 1872.

Women's Christian Temperance Union in Bloomington. As Press's term as alderman closed, the WCTU was beginning to lobby the council against issuing licenses for the selling of "intoxicating liquors." Eventually the movement would touch off one of the great debates in Bloomington's history, with temperance (and abstinence) on one side, and a contingent of German immigrants, from a long line of beer meisters and retailers, on the other.²¹ Concurrent with his seat on the city council was his service as a tax collector. He was also later twice elected as one of the city's five constables (police officers).²²

The true calling for Press, though, was law enforcement. And, it appears, he had a knack for it. He became a Bloomington police officer and quickly rose in the rank to captain of the night force.²³ Eventually, he gravitated to the role for which he is best remembered: detective.

Press investigated hundreds of cases, either in the employ of the police department or privately as a detective. He pursued suspects relentlessly, often sans tact and, on occasion, inviting threats to his own safety.²⁴ He collected both admirers and detractors over the 25 years of his career as an investigator. Highlighted here are the cases that best reflect his methods; his determination and courage; the dangers, both physical and reputational; and the human drama they created. The cases that follow are, in consideration of these criteria, discussed in ascending order. The Bloomington *Pantagraph*, not unlike the Hearst and Pulitzer papers of the time, was penned with a certain sensationalism, or with drama sufficient to turn the mundane into something more titillating . . . and sell-able. But, in all likelihood, Press's conquests needed little literary encouragement. In the parlance of our times, "you can't make this stuff up."

The Case of John McGrail, AKA Henry White (1882)

The McGrail (White) case is an example of Press's relentlessness in solving a case, no matter how small—he was probably convinced that "the devil" was truly "in the details." In April, 1882, he was asked by citizens of Minonk, in Woodford County, Illinois, to hunt down that city's marshal, who had jumped bail and fled for Montana in November 1881. His charge was not a terribly serious one—perjury for allegedly lying about his illegal sale of liquor in Woodford County on a Sunday. Several of his supporters pooled their resources and put up his bond. But McGrail then fled with a female companion (Fannie Buche) and an assumed name—Dr. Henry White—first to Omaha, Nebraska, where Press picked up his trail, then to Miles City, Montana, where the couple thought they were beyond the reach of even the "longest arm of the law." They were mistaken. Press visited the governors of both Illinois and Montana and asked for, and was granted, extradition papers for Mr. McGrail (Dr. White) and his companion, who aided and abetted his escape. Press captured the pair in Miles City on April 18 with, he wrote, "lots of trouble," and returned them to the Woodford County jail in Eureka.²⁵

The Case of a "Notorious Forger and Safe-blower" (A West Side Gun Battle) (1883)

And there was danger. In 1883, Press found himself on the trail of a "notorious forger and safe-blower." He responded to a tip that the suspect was headed for the Union Depot on

²¹ Burnham, 77.

²² S. J. Clark Publishing, 139-140.

²³ "Were Married Fifty-Five Years Ago Today," *The Pantagraph*, February 3, 1916.

²⁴ "Press Butler's History," *Weekly Leader*, October 25, 1883.

²⁵ "Butler Successful," *The Pantagraph*, April 20, 1882.

Bloomington's west side. Press intercepted him before he could embark, recognizing him by the valise (bag) the tipster had described, and moved in for the arrest. But, rather than go quietly into custody, the suspect drew a Colt revolver and fired at his pursuer. He missed, but Press drew his pistol and, as frightened rail customers took cover, the two men entered a blazing gun battle, with the suspect eventually fleeing, but shooting over his shoulder to cover his retreat. Eventually, both expended their ammunition and a footrace ensued. Press nabbed the bandit "in the middle of a creek . . . a mile from the starting point."²⁶

The Case of the Triple Murder at Mt. Pulaski (1882)

Arguably the most gruesome and complex crime Press investigated (although he was not the principal investigator) was the murder of three men on a Mt. Pulaski, Logan County, Illinois farm sometime between the August 18-20, 1882. The bodies of Charles McMahan (age 40), and his hired hands, Robert Matheny (age 20), and John Carlock (age 16), were discovered with their hands tied, mouths gagged, eyes blindfolded, and throats slit "from ear to ear." One account described the near severing of McMahan's head.²⁷ Robbery appeared to be the motive; it was thought that Mr. McMahan kept a substantial amount of money and bank certificates on the farm, along with an unsold corn crop. However, it appeared the men met their violent end over \$200 in cash (the equivalent of \$5,470 in 2022) and a pocket watch.²⁸

Since there were no eye-witnesses, the Decatur *Herald-Despatch* deemed the grisly event "an impenetrable mystery."²⁹ The *Pantagraph* leaped to the conclusion that the execution-style murders were done by no fewer than two, but possibly three, "tramping, migratory thugs."³⁰ Due to the horrific nature of the crime and the mystery surrounding it, the event drew widespread attention and was reported in newspapers throughout the United States. And, because Mr. McMahan was well-thought-of, a "quiet, peaceable, hardworking" man, the citizens of Logan County demanded justice and, if it could not be granted legally and swiftly, a "necktie party" (a mob lynching) could not be ruled out.³¹ Governor Shelby Moore Cullom offered a reward for information leading to the capture of the perpetrator(s).³² As speculation and rumors flew, fueled by nosey newspapers, Press Butler was called upon to consult. The Logan County Board of Supervisors considered hiring the famed Pinkerton Detective Agency to investigate but were quickly discouraged by the cost. So, the matter fell to Sheriff William Wendell, Logan County; Will McCoy, a detective from Lincoln; Sheriff S. B. Lyman, Ford County; and Press Butler.³³

Press immediately traveled to the crime scene and sought to make plaster of Paris casts of the footprints (a technique still employed by police investigators today), but a rain had flattened the tracks, making casting impracticable. He was also able to collect gag material which, as it turned out, led to the solution of the crime. The meticulous way the gags were prepared—with wooden dowels knotted in for the mouths of the victims—linked them to John H. Hall, who was allegedly

²⁶ "Press Butler's History," *Weekly Leader*, October 25, 1883.

²⁷ "Deeds of Demons," *The Pantagraph*, August 22, 1882.

²⁸ "The Mt. Pulaski Butchery," *Herald and Review*, February 21, 1884; <https://measuringworth.com>, Date Accessed September 19, 2022.

²⁹ "The McMahan Murder," *Herald-Despatch*, September 2, 1882.

³⁰ "Deeds of Demons," *The Pantagraph*, August 22, 1882.

³¹ "The Logan County Horror," *Decatur Daily Review*, 23 Aug 1882; "The Mt. Pulaski Butchery," *Herald and Review*, February 21, 1884.

³² "News in Brief," *Herald and Review*, August 24, 1882.

³³ "Logan County's Horror," *The Pantagraph*, August 25, 1882.

overheard by a witness talking about binding, gagging, and murdering his robbery victims in Texas (his apparent M.O.).³⁴ While it was thought that more than one person committed the murders, Hall was captured in St. Louis on his way to Texas, tried, and convicted (on entirely circumstantial evidence, hearsay from the victim's family, and a jailhouse "snitch," the credibility of whom was never established). He died in the prison hospital at Joliet State Prison of consumption (tuberculosis) on February 22, 1887, claiming his innocence to the end and pointing a finger at others.³⁵

The Zura Burns Murder Case (1883)

The story opened on October 14, 1883, with a horrific crime scene in Lincoln, Illinois in which Zura (alternatively spelled "Zora") Burns, a 22-year-old domestic worker, was found murdered in lane north of 17th Street in Lincoln. A post-mortem examination revealed that she had suffered a blow to the head and one to her cheek, and a deep, fatal two-stroke slash to her throat.³⁶ Medical examiners also reported that Miss Burns was four to five months pregnant at the time of her death.³⁷ There were no eye-witnesses; and, as was often the case, Press had very little to go on and had to pursue every clue, no matter how seemingly insignificant. His painstaking work led him to a suspect—a Lincoln man, Orrin A. Carpenter, who was believed to have been the last person to see her alive. But, proving Orrin Carpenter's guilt, or even accessing evidence, would not be easy. Violence of this nature appeared to be out of the ordinary for a man of Carpenter's status in Logan county. He was a highly regarded and well-to-do grain merchant in town, a man with influential friends and avid supporters, a devoted family man, and even-tempered. "His hitherto blameless life, his gentle nature, temperate, moral, singularly free from all excesses, affectionate in his family, esteemed by his associate for his manly traits, and popular with all for his uprightness and integrity," offered the *Pantagraph*, "would mark him as the last man to stain his name with blood."³⁸ Indeed, the avoidance of the "stain" may have been the motive for the crime alleged. Miss Burns had worked for the Carpenter family as a housekeeper and so was acquainted with Mr. Carpenter; but she had a lower socio-economic status than Carpenter, and, as newspapers reported in a clear attack on her character, was a woman who was often "out late at night in the company of young men."³⁹ The papers exploited their differences—extremes in character—and expressed incredulity that Mr. Carpenter would be capable of, or stoop to, such a heinous act.⁴⁰

During his investigation, Press found blood on the reins of Carpenter's buggy. While it was never determined to be Miss Burns's blood or even human blood (no DNA analysis or even blood typing had been developed at this time), it was a piece of Press's puzzle and something the accused would have to explain away. His investigation also led him to a Decatur woman who was a friend of Miss Burns and with whom Miss Burns had lived just prior to the murder. Interviews with the woman, Mrs. R. J. Carpenter (no relation to the defendant), revealed that

³⁴ "The Mt. Pulaski Butchery

³⁵ "Vindicated at Last," *Herald and Review*, February 23, 1887.

³⁶ "Murder," *The Pantagraph*, October 16, 1883; Beverly A. Smith, "The Murder of Zura Burns, 1883: A Case Study of a Homicide in Lincoln," *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (Winter, 1991), pp. 218-234.

³⁷ "The Lincoln Butchery," *The Pantagraph*, October 23, 1883.

³⁸ "The Lincoln Horror," *The Pantagraph*, October 22, 1883.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Miss Burns had exchanged letters with her fiancé, a Thomas Dukes of Indiana, and with Orrin Carpenter in Lincoln. Mrs. Carpenter claimed to have read the letters, both incoming and outgoing, and believed that the nature of the correspondence between Miss Burns and Mr. Carpenter pointed to a financial arrangement of some kind and a relationship between them. The victim's letters to Dukes suggested cold feet regarding future nuptials, while her letters to Carpenter hinted at her need for money and that they were more than passing acquaintances. In one, she invited Mr. Carpenter to Decatur to "see me and we'll have some fun."⁴¹ Mrs. Carpenter added that Miss Burns acted agitated and depressed while they roomed together and asked about surgeons in town. She assumed her friend was pregnant and, considering their letters and references to money, concluded that Mr. Carpenter was responsible.

Other witnesses put Carpenter and Burns together on several occasions, one of them in Peoria, suggesting romantic involvement. Shortly before the estimated time of death, the couple was seen in Carpenter's buggy. Thus, the blood found on the buggy was of interest. Mrs. Carpenter's observations provided motive. At Press's encouragement, Orrin Carpenter was arrested and charged with the murder of Zura Burns.⁴² Press's courage was displayed here: there were those who would not have even ventured to accuse such a prominent citizen. He pursued justice without the influence of class.

The venue for the trial was changed to Petersburg, Illinois. Prosecutors made Mr. Carpenter the central figure in a sordid tale of sex, extortion, and murder. They theorized that Mr. Carpenter and Miss Burns had a sexual affair which resulted in Miss Burns' pregnancy (termed a "delicate condition" and "an interesting condition" by newspapers).⁴³ Mr. Carpenter, wanting to avoid a scandal that could potentially ruin him, both personally and financially, agreed to pay Miss Burns a sum of money, perhaps to terminate the pregnancy and/or to buy her silence. The prosecution's theory was that Miss Burns informed Mr. Carpenter that she wanted to keep the child and continue their relationship in legitimate fashion (assuming Carpenter would divorce his wife and marry her), or that her monetary demands, to either abort or raise the out-of-wedlock child, would increase. Perhaps Miss Burns offered to exchange damning letters for pay. Soon thereafter, at any rate, Miss Burns was found brutally murdered. The other suspect, fiancé Thomas Dukes, thought by some to have killed Miss Burns in a jealous rage, had a watertight alibi that put him elsewhere at the time of the murder.⁴⁴

But, in spite of Press's and the prosecution's best efforts, the case—entirely circumstantial—collapsed. The "dream team" of defense attorneys for Carpenter not only beat back the evidence but cast further doubt on Mr. Carpenter's involvement by producing alternative suspects they believed had been overlooked in the investigation. The defense impeached Mrs. Carpenter's credibility; reminded the jury that no trace of the letters, which Miss Burns was thought to carry in a valise, or Mr. Carpenter's bloody clothes (given the gash administered to Miss Burns' throat) were ever found; provided several plausible explanations for the blood found on the buggy; and coaxed uncertainty from witnesses who had claimed to see the couple together several times before, and immediately prior to, the murder. The result? Reasonable doubt and acquittal. But, the "trial" continued.⁴⁵

⁴¹ "The Lincoln Butchery."

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "The Lincoln Horror."

⁴⁴ "The Lincoln Butchery."

⁴⁵ "Out on Bail," *The Pantagraph*, November 12, 1883; *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 1883; "Not Guilty," *Herald-Dispatch*, March 29, 1884.

The court of public opinion (fueled by the press), which in the beginning had lionized Mr. Carpenter and demonized Miss Burns, made an about-face. A sizeable group of Logan County citizens even contemplated lynching Carpenter; but, instead, drafted a resolution demanding that he leave the county at once.⁴⁶ W. H. H. Burns, father of the victim, tried to shoot Carpenter after the verdict was announced.⁴⁷ A key witness for the defense, a freelance detective named William Esmond (AKA Mark Felton), was found guilty of receiving money while sitting as a witness for the defense. He revealed that he had committed perjury on the stand to help exonerate Carpenter and that Carpenter was actually guilty of the murder. In response, the district attorney, knowing the defendant could not be tried a second time, lamented that, without this false testimony, Carpenter would have been convicted. There were also accusations that the defense had suppressed damning evidence. Nevertheless, the *Herald-Dispatch* (Decatur) probably said it best: “Whether Carpenter is guilty or not, the state failed to prove him guilty.”⁴⁸

Goodfellow Murder Case (1879): “Masterstroke”

The Goodfellow murder case was one of the most well known investigations in 19th century Bloomington, and a topic of conversation many years after its resolution. At the time of Press’s death, some 40 years later, the *Pantagraph* termed his handling of the case a “masterstroke.”⁴⁹ Most agree the case was Press’s crowning achievement as a detective. That, in itself, is saying something. Aaron Goodfellow was, indeed, thought to be a “good fellow” by his family, friends, and colleagues. He was a retired farmer and a bailiff for the McLean County Circuit Court.⁵⁰ He was also a prominent mason in Bloomington, holding the post of junior warden (third in command) of the Wade Barney Lodge. His brothers in masonry described him, by resolution, as “so good a citizen and so true a man.”⁵¹ “Gentle-minded and innocent without an enemy in the world” was another description applied to him by the *Pantagraph*.⁵²

Goodfellow had been playing a game of croquet with friends on North McLean Street near Franklin Park and started for his home, located at 511 E. Chestnut Street, by way of an alley at about 9 o’clock in the evening of August 4, 1879.⁵³ Mr. Goodfellow was confronted by two armed men demanding money, possibly mistaking him for someone else. Goodfellow thought the stickup was a hoax and that the two men, whose faces he could not make out in the darkness, had been put up to it by his mischievous friends. So, when he was ordered to raise his hands and surrender his money, he waved the confronters off and continued his journey home.⁵⁴ Some believed he tried to playfully wrestle the guns from the assailants thinking, again, that the matter was staged for amusement. At any rate, both men—believed to have been drinking and screwing up their courage earlier at a nearby pub—shot, striking Goodfellow in the chin and the abdomen.⁵⁵ The shooters took his wallet and vanished into the night. Goodfellow then staggered and, at one point, ran (which probably did nothing to slow the bleeding), toward his home some

⁴⁶ “Denouncing Carpenter,” *The Pantagraph*, March 27, 1884.

⁴⁷ “All for Zura,” *The Pantagraph*, December 3, 1884.

⁴⁸ “Not Guilty,” *Herald-Dispatch*, March 29, 1884.

⁴⁹ “The End,” *The Pantagraph*, January 29, 1918.

⁵⁰ Mark Dunn. “The Patsey Devine Affair,” (undated), McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives, 7.

⁵¹ “In Memory of the Late Aaron Goodfellow,” *The Pantagraph*, August 27, 1879.

⁵² “Clinton Correspondence,” *The Pantagraph*, December 25, 1880.

⁵³ Dunn, 7-8.

⁵⁴ “Deed of a Dastard,” *The Pantagraph*, August 6, 1879.

⁵⁵ “McLean County Records Show One Case of Legal Hanging,” *The Pantagraph*, January 7, 1945.

115 paces away, shouting for help along the way. He collapsed at his front gate. Help came, but nothing could be done; Goodfellow died the next morning. The *Pantagraph* dubbed the shooting the “Deed of a Dastard” and immediately began to speculate about suspects, referring to them with descriptors like “crooks,” “thugs,” and “desperados” and recommending a punishment to fit the crime.⁵⁶ However this case was to be concluded, due to the high esteem in which Mr. Goodfellow was held, the perpetrator(s) could expect no quarter and, as it turned out, got none.

Press was on the case immediately, inspecting the scene and interviewing witnesses. But, since the assailants had hurriedly left the scene, hopped a freight train in Normal, and enjoyed a considerable head start, they wouldn’t be easy to track down. Goodfellow’s neighbor and friend, Joseph Fifer (then McLean County state’s attorney and later an Illinois state senator and governor of Illinois), heard the victim yell and rushed to help him to his house. He then retraced what he thought were Goodfellow’s steps and found a bloody handkerchief in the alleyway, which he promptly turned over to Press. The investigation led Press to the shanties on East Street, where he interviewed a woman named Nellie Brown, an “inmate” (prostitute) of the shanties.⁵⁷ When he showed her the handkerchief, she identified it as belonging to one Patsey Devine (AKA Pat Kelly and Thomas Coyne), who was also holed up there, lying in wait, it appeared, for a robbery opportunity.⁵⁸

Then came the real detective work. Press learned that Devine was from Alton, Illinois, and that his mother still lived there. He contacted the postmaster there to watch for any letters arriving from Devine to his mother. Sure enough, a few months later, the postmaster wired Press that a letter had arrived from Devine to his mother, prompting Press to travel immediately to Alton and search the house for the letter (assuming Devine’s mom would refuse to cooperate). He found the letter, and in it, Devine stated he was staying with a relative in the mountains of Sullivan County, New York, to where the persistent Press journeyed nearly 900 miles and arrested him. After two trials (one in Bloomington and one in Clinton), and a narrow escape from a lynch mob in Bloomington, Patsey Devine—denying to the very end the shooting of Goodfellow—was hanged in Clinton, DeWitt County, Illinois on May 12, 1882.⁵⁹ Devine was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in Clinton.⁶⁰

Press eventually located his alleged accomplice, Harry Williams, serving a prison term in Ft. Scott, Iowa, on another charge. Shortly before William’s death, he confessed to a Catholic clergyman at the prison that it was he who murdered Goodfellow and not Devine. The clergyman sent a letter to Devine’s mother in Alton to inform her of this confession. Williams was in the final stages of consumption (tuberculosis) when Press visited him in the Iowa jail in 1883. Press declined to pursue him further, believing it highly unlikely that he would survive his sentence.⁶¹

Not all of Press’s cases were limelight worthy. He spent some time chasing down “scalawags,” “reprobates,” and “swindlers” who got into “malicious mischief;” rescuing young damsels “from shame;” and hunting criminals at night when it was “as dark as a stack of black cats.”⁶² He tracked down stolen money, regardless of the amount; pocket watches; jewels;

⁵⁶ “Deed of a Dastard,” *The Pantagraph*, August 6, 1879.

⁵⁷ “Another Sensation Spoiled,” *The Clinton Register*, February 13, 1891.

⁵⁸ “The End,” *The Pantagraph*, January 29, 1918; “On Yesterday, the last day,” *The Clinton Register*, May 12, 1882.

⁵⁹ “Last Day on Earth,” *The Pantagraph*, May 12, 1882.

⁶⁰ “Patsey Devine,” <https://findagrave.com>, Date Accessed June 23, 2022.

⁶¹ “Harry Williams,” *The Pantagraph*, July 23, 1883; “Harry Williams,” *The Clinton Register*, July 16, 1886; “McLean County Records Show One Case of Legal Hanging,” *The Pantagraph*, January 7, 1945.

⁶² “Believes it is Hunter,” *The Pantagraph*, August 3, 1894; “Rescued from Shame,” *The Pantagraph*, February 17, 1885; “A Close Call,” *The Pantagraph*, November 26, 1884.

horses; dogs; and even false teeth.⁶³ He solved a case of “bastardy” by reuniting a pregnant woman and her reluctant lover, even serving as a witness for their wedding before the justice of the peace.⁶⁴

Pursuer Becomes the Pursued

His actions weren't always popular. More than once, Press was threatened with mob action when investigating—normally when he brought in someone whose reputation was hardly that of the usual suspects. He was articulate in explaining how he arrived at his conclusions, and this often quelled the furor. Also, on several occasions, Press fell under suspicion for ethical indiscretions in his role as a police officer and detective. It remains unclear whether he really (or knowingly) violated standards or that he invited the vindictive “tit for tat” of a person in his position. Sometimes, his suspects, or their friends, were influential people. It is possible that there were those who would, as the *Pantagraph* put it, “be revenged for fancied wrongs” by besmirching Press's reputation.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Press Butler was, in January 1881, accused of seeking or accepting rewards in his position as a police officer in violation of the city's ordinance on ethics. Technically, police officers, being on the payroll, were not allowed to accept rewards.⁶⁶ Oftentimes, monetary rewards were offered for providing information about, or bringing in, suspects. Rewards were usually put up by the families of the victims. If the case was high profile and organizations, even governments, took an interest, the reward could be as much as \$1,300 (or the equivalent to \$37,000 in 2022).⁶⁷ Certainly, substantial and enticing for an underpaid peace officer.

Accusations were made by Jack Kemp of Lexington, Mrs. J. S. Young of Bloomington, and Alderman Frank White. At Alderman White's insistence, the Bloomington City Council itself considered the charges against Press. The Kemp charge was that Press recovered his valuable pocket watch, as requested, and collected from him a \$20 reward (\$547 in 2022).⁶⁸ Kemp believed that Press had not only sought the reward against ethical rules, but had actually recovered the watch from a prisoner at the county jail, planted it under the bed of the hotel room where Mr. Kemp had stayed, and then conveniently recovered it for the reward.⁶⁹ Mrs. J. S. Young thought that “something was crooked” about the manner in which Press collected her \$25 (\$684.00 in 2022) reward for recovering her stolen jewelry.⁷⁰

Finally, Alderman White accused Press of strategically delaying the arrest of Patsey Devine, the chief suspect in the Goodfellow murder case, so that he could secure a reward for capturing his accomplice, Harry Williams. However, the witnesses for the council's prosecution were no-shows, reducing the case to hearsay. Press, with influential friends of his own, was represented by Isaac N. Phillips (law partner of former state's attorney and currently serving Illinois state senator, Joseph Fifer). With nothing material to challenge, Phillips conducted a defense of—more than anything—Press's honor. City Marshal James Stone testified, “I don't know of any

⁶³ “Mysterious Burglary,” *The Pantagraph*, July 13, 1881.

⁶⁴ “Married,” *The Pantagraph*, December 10, 1884.

⁶⁵ “Press's Predicament,” *The Pantagraph*, January 24, 1881.

⁶⁶ “The Police Investigation,” *The Pantagraph*, January 31, 1881.

⁶⁷ <https://measuringworth.com>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “Press's Predicament,” *The Pantagraph*, January 24, 1881.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

time when Officer Butler has neglected his duty in attending to any outside matters. He is a faithful, efficient, and energetic officer. He is an obedient officer and always obeys cheerfully.”⁷¹ John Steere (who was mayor of Bloomington at the time of the above mentioned incidents occurred) added that it was customary for officers, on occasion, to receive rewards for hauling in criminals. The codicil regarding ethics was obscure and rarely enforced. The absence of witnesses against him, coupled with the testimony of two respected city officials, left the council—and Mr. White—no other option than to exonerate Press.⁷²

Two years earlier, on December 2, 1879, Fanny Davenport, the renown London-born stage actress, was performing excerpts from *London Assurance*, a comedy by Dion Boucicault, and Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* at Durley Hall.⁷³ Evidently, some “bums and rowdies” entered the Hall and noisily interrupted Miss Davenport’s performance. In the words of her manager, Marcus Mayer, they “disgraced themselves and tormented the audience.”⁷⁴ Mayer accused Press, then night captain of the police force, and his officers of not only allowing the miscreants to continue their rampage but *encouraging* the disruptive behavior. Mayer claimed that he summoned the police, but they failed to do their duty. Press’s position was that there were no officers present at the Hall that evening, either to discourage or encourage the disruptors. Press claimed that Mayer did not want police present. As a matter of course, police officers were not assigned to security detail for such events; theatre managers were to arrange for their own security.⁷⁵ After several exchanges of opinions in the *Pantagraph*, the matter fizzled, and no investigation made the record.

Press was also the defendant in both civil and criminal action regarding the concealment of a valued horse in July 1880. Evidently, Press found Anderson Scott’s stray mare, named “Shoo Fly,” wandering the streets of Bloomington. Unbeknownst to him, a teenager had stolen the horse from Mr. Scott’s farm in rural Colfax, ridden her into Bloomington, and turned her loose.⁷⁶ Press captured the animal, took it home, and fed and cared for it, while advertising it as a stray. Scott claimed the horse, but Press refused to turn it over without \$40 in compensation for expenses incurred while providing for the animal.⁷⁷ Scott sued and was awarded a settlement of \$100 for the horse’s value, and, although they were dropped, charges were filed against Press for concealing an animal. Press counter-sued, unsuccessfully, for the compensation he had originally demanded.⁷⁸ This was perhaps one of those times his temper and stubbornness got the better of him. Rather than just being out the expenses of caring for the horse, the matter cost him an additional \$100 and, it is assumed, court costs.

The Butler House

Around 1884, Press reinvented himself yet again when he and Lizzie became the owners and proprietors of the Butler House, a three-story, wood frame hotel on the northwest corner of

⁷¹ “The Police Investigation,” *The Pantagraph*, January 31, 1881.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Miss Fanny Davenport at Durley Hall,” *The Pantagraph*, December 2, 1879.

⁷⁴ “A Police Racket,” *The Pantagraph*, December 3, 1879; “London Assurance at Durley Hall,” *The Pantagraph*, December 3, 1879.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “McLean County Court, The ‘Shoo Fly Mare,’” *The Pantagraph*, March 16, 1882.

⁷⁷ “McLean County Court,” *The Pantagraph*, December 14, 1881.

⁷⁸ “McLean County Court,” *The Pantagraph*, December 15, 1881; “The City: Newsy Items,” *The Pantagraph*, March 17, 1882.

Madison and Front Streets, Bloomington. The building had been in existence since the mid-1850s and had seen several owners. It had been the Bronson House, the Denman House, the St. Nicholas Hotel, and the New Waits Hotel before Press and Lizzie gave it their family name.⁷⁹ They, and often their adult children and their families, managed and lived in the hotel for the next 35 years. Until their acquisition, the Butlers resided at 522 W. Grove Street, Bloomington.⁸⁰

In a 2019 article for the *Pantagraph*, Bill Kemp, librarian and archivist for the McLean County Museum of History, and local historian, described the Butler House as “an old friend to the weary traveler and local residents alike . . . its ambiance was always more welcoming, working class, and west side than its more stylish downtown competitors.”⁸¹ The “House” was a typical hotel in that patrons could stay a night or two; but, those planning longer stays in the city could use it as a boarding house. Either way, guests could rest, dine, lounge, play billiards, indulge in cigars and spirits, and, if need be, get a shave and a haircut.

Only three years after assuming ownership of the hotel, the Butlers decided to build a brick-and-mortar addition to the wood frame original building. For the plans they turned to local architect George Miller, who played a prominent role in rebuilding the downtown Bloomington square after the “Fire of 1900.” The result of Miller’s work was a four-story, 24-room addition, which brought the unit total to 64 rooms. While the patchwork appearance wasn’t a match for the class and elegance of the Ashley House or Phoenix Hotel downtown, the Butler House was the whole package—a functional building, with an ample number of rooms for virtually any length of stay, a dining facility, a billiards room, a bar, and a barber shop. The hotel became a popular spot for reunions of the Grand Army of the Republic, which the patriotic Press undoubtedly embraced. But, the hotel was also the site of “some wild scenes,” with more than a few “involving fisticuffs, knives, firearms, or, on at least one occasion, a hefty chunk of lumber.”⁸²

The deaths of Press and Lizzie in 1918 and 1920, respectively, marked the beginning of the end for the Butler House. After Press’s death, Lizzie, then 71 years old, and son Edward and his family, moved to an apartment on North Main Street and leased the business. In its final years, it was known as the Butler Hotel.⁸³ Two years after Lizzie’s death, the original wood frame building was put up for auction but was taken off the market when the bids came in too low.⁸⁴ By summer of 1922, the family razed the original structure and sold the lot. Eventually, it became a filling station, joining a number of other automobile-related businesses downtown.⁸⁵ The brick building endured for another 40 years, serving briefly as a homeless shelter during the Great Depression. It was finally brought down in the late 1950s with a number of other structures on the block. A city-owned parking lot (named after the Butler family) is all that presently remains of the Butler House and the three and a half decades it thrived under the diligence of Press, Lizzie, and family.⁸⁶

Description and Disposition of J. Preston Butler

⁷⁹ Bill Kemp. “Pre-Civil War Butler House Survived into 1920s,” *The Pantagraph*, February 24, 2019.

⁸⁰ “James Preston Butler,” *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995*, <https://ancestry.com>.

⁸¹ Kemp, “Pre-Civil War Butler House Survived into 1920s.”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ “Butler House’ Auction Called Off Yesterday,” *The Pantagraph*, March 1, 1922.

¹⁰⁰ “The Strong Man Dead,” *Indiana State Sentinel* (Indianapolis, Indiana), December 27, 1893, pg. 8.

⁸⁵ Kemp, “Pre-Civil War Butler House Survived into 1920s.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Press was not easy for contemporaries to describe. Since his detective role was his most public, from it came the most frequent characterizations of him. Most accounts agreed that he was a smallish man, intelligent, articulate, slow to anger, yet feisty when pushed and fervent when inspired. The *Weekly Leader* described him this way: “He weighs not over 130 pounds, is short of stature, and of slender build, with black hair and eyes, and a swarthy mustache and goatee. He is the impersonation of self-reliance, grit, and cool courage. His nerve and pluck have been tested time and again, and have never failed . . . He is, to Bloomingtonians ‘one of the blue hen’s chickens’”⁸⁷ (a colloquial expression meaning of high quality, but “aggressive and combative”).⁸⁸ The *Pantagraph*’s account of him was that of “a small man, but gritty, active,” and one who “would not hesitate to tackle a man twice his size if he wanted to thrash him.”⁸⁹

Press possessed a logical mind, looking at events, as he was heard to say, “from the standpoint of probability,” and yet a creative one in inventing ways to track suspects. He also displayed great meticulousness and patience in the hunt. Sometimes, his cases took months, even years to reach a filing of charges. His aggressive and combative side can be affirmed by his willingness to shoot it out with the fugitive safeblower and then wade into a creek to nab him. The *Biographical Record of McLean County* called him “a man endowed with the strongest individuality, intrepid bravery when in the face of most desperate situations, and a phenomenal coolness and presence of mind under all circumstances.”⁹⁰ The *Weldon Record*’s view was, simply, that Bloomington was better for Press having been “on the job whenever rogues were busy.”⁹¹

Press was also known for his unabashed patriotism, heightened, undoubtedly, by the fact that his sons, William and Edward, served with distinction as cavalry officers in the Spanish-American War. Press owned a cannon and, when the 4th of July came around each year, he would discharge the weapon repeatedly to celebrate the nation’s independence. His purpose in so doing, he told the *Weldon Record*, was to “call the attention of the apathetic and slothful to Americanism.”⁹² In September, 1881, Bloomington was the host of the Fourth Annual Reunion of (Civil War) Veteran Soldiers and Sailors of Illinois.⁹³ The event, held at Camp McCullough on the old fair grounds, “between Market and Washington Streets on the western limits of the city,” drew nearly 6,000 veterans and some prominent figures, among whom were Illinois Governor Shelby M. Cullom and former President (and former General) Ulysses S. Grant, the leader of the Union’s victorious Army of the Potomac.⁹⁴ Press Butler showed his support by erecting two dining halls and hiring teams of servers for the week-long event, making it possible to feed 450 attendees at a time.⁹⁵

Press had a passion for other things as well. As his work in firefighting, law enforcement, and as an elected official could attest, Bloomington had no stronger advocate than he. He was an outspoken promoter of a park district plan that would have helped renovate and sustain Miller

⁸⁷ “Press Butler’s History.”

⁸⁸ Carol Ekarius, *Storey’s Illustrated Guide to Poultry Breeds*, (North Adams, Massachusetts: Storey Publishing, 2007), 76.

⁸⁹ “Facing a Mob,” *The Pantagraph*, August 17, 1885.

⁹⁰ “Maud Jordine is Arrested,” *The Decatur Herald*, July 14, 1903; S.J. Clarke Publishing, 139-140.

⁹¹ “Passing of Press Butler.”

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ “Illinois Soldiers and Sailors,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1881.

⁹⁴ “When Gen. Grant Visited Here Half Century Ago, Huge Reunion Was Held,” *The Pantagraph*, December 13, 1931.

⁹⁵ “Final Preparations,” *The Pantagraph*, September 3, 1881.

and O'Neil Parks. He wrote a strongly-worded letter to the editor about the proposal.⁹⁶ He said, "No taxpayer in Bloomington Township should vote against the organization of Bloomington and Normal into a public park district." Forming a park district would have established a taxing body to support such ventures. He believed that the people of the township had the chance to "start something really worthwhile in the reclamation and beautification of the historic Sugar Creek valley." He added, philosophically, "No man takes a real interest in anything until he invests something in it."⁹⁷ He joined a number of prominent citizens, elected officials, and businessmen of the Twin Cities in supporting the measure. Chicago attorney noted orator, Clarence Darrow, spoke in favor of the park referendum during a rally he spoke at held at the Bloomington Coliseum.⁹⁸ Sadly, despite spirited efforts, the park district was "buried by the voters," scaring up less than 27% of the votes cast.⁹⁹ Press and friends were visionaries on parks and recreation; but, it took awhile for the rest of the voting public to catch up. It was not until 1968 when the Bloomington City Council finally passed an ordinance to create a park district.¹⁰⁰

Press's life was not all work and no play. He traveled to New Orleans to witness one of the most famous heavyweight boxing matches in history.¹⁰¹ The fight, at the New Orleans Olympic Club, featured defending champion John L. Sullivan, a mauler from the bareknuckle days, against the challenger, ring tactician and fancy dresser James J. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett in the first title match under.¹⁰² In round 21 of a predictably grueling, nip and tuck battle, the 26-year-old Corbett finally struck the exhausted, 33-year-old Sullivan "alongside the jaw," sending him to the canvas . . . and retirement from the ring.¹⁰³ There is no evidence that Press put a bet down on Corbett, but for all it, no doubt, took to get to New Orleans and back, he had to think he got his money's worth.

Later Life and Death

On December 8, 1911, Press experienced a fainting spell, which "caused a severe fall."¹⁰⁴ In 1914, at the age of 75, he suffered a pair of mildly debilitating strokes, but it appears he recovered sufficiently to assume at least limited responsibilities at the Butler House.¹⁰⁵ In fact, he and Lizzie were described as being in "the best of health" as they celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary in 1916.¹⁰⁶ However, just two years later, Press died on January 28, 1918, at the age of 79. The day before his death, the *Pantagraph* reported he was "seriously ill" and "sinking fast."¹⁰⁷ Press was initially buried in the vaults at Bloomington (later Evergreen Memorial)

⁹⁶ "Favors Park Plan," *The Pantagraph*, February 21, 1911.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ "Noted Orator Favors Park Plan," *The Pantagraph*, May 12, 1911.

⁹⁹ "Park District is Buried by Voters," *The Pantagraph*, May 15, 1911.

¹⁰⁰ "Bloomington Parks and Recreation," accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.bloomingtonparks.org>.

¹⁰¹ "Short Paragraphs," *The Pantagraph*, September 12, 1892.

¹⁰² "Rules," *Breathing Boxing*, accessed June 23, 2022, www.breathingboxing.com/2019/02/22/the-marquess-of-queensberry-rules/.

¹⁰³ "'Gentleman Jim' Corbett Knocks Out John L. Sullivan," 1892," accessed June 23, 2022, *EyeWitness to History*, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com, 2004.

¹⁰⁴ "With the Sick," *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 1911.

¹⁰⁵ "J. P. Butler III," *The Pantagraph*, June 16, 1914.

¹⁰⁶ "Were Married Fifty-Five Years Ago Today," *The Pantagraph*, February 3, 1916.

¹⁰⁷ "The End," "Press Butler Dying," *The Pantagraph*, January 28, 1918.

Cemetery beside his son, William, who had died in 1907; and grandson, Preston, who had died in 1912.¹⁰⁸

In September 1919, Lizzie and son, Edward, and his family moved to 911 Main Street, Bloomington, and leased their hostelry to army veteran J. E. Blanchard.¹⁰⁹ Lizzie contracted pneumonia and died February 8, 1920, at the age of 73. Said her obituary, "Mrs. Butler's friends were numbered by her acquaintances. Her life was characterized by kindness. Few women have been so universally loved, and her death has thrown a pall of sadness over the wide circle of friendship which had spread around her during her long residence in the heart of the city."¹¹⁰ She was perhaps the perfect complement, and foil, for the singular Press.

On February 11, 1920, Lizzie was interred with Press, William, and Preston in the vaults at Bloomington Cemetery. However, on July 8 of that year, all four were permanently transferred to Park Hill Cemetery and Mausoleum for unknown reasons.¹¹¹

By: John Capasso, 2022

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¹⁰⁸ "Major Butler Dead," *The Pantagraph*, June 13, 1907; "On the South Side: Death of Preston Butler, Jr.," *The Pantagraph*, June 21, 1912.

¹⁰⁹ "Major Butler Gives Up Home in the Butler House," *The Pantagraph*, December 26, 1919.

¹¹⁰ "Aged Resident Gone," *The Pantagraph*, February 9, 1920.

¹¹¹ "Commit to Earth Four of Family," *The Pantagraph*, July 9, 1920.