

Jesse W. Fell (1808-1887)

Probably the most important person to the early development of this part of Central Illinois was Jesse Fell. In 1834-35 he successfully fought off land raids by neighboring counties, insuring that McLean County remained whole. Today, it is geographically the largest county in the state of Illinois. He founded the towns of Normal, Clinton, Pontiac, Lexington, Towanda, LeRoy, El Paso and Larchwood, and helped develop Decatur, Joliet and Dwight. He also expanded the city of Bloomington.

Jesse Fell was the first lawyer in Bloomington. He founded the first newspaper, *The Bloomington Observer and McLean County Advocate* in 1836, and later co-owned and published the *Bloomington Intelligencer*, which would eventually become *The Pantagraph*. He also secured the Wabash, the Illinois Central and the Chicago and Alton railroad lines that ran through the city. He helped organize the Free Congregational Church, today the Unitarian Church. He fought successfully to bring Illinois' first public university to North Bloomington, now Normal, IL, and was responsible for the planting of hundreds of trees at his home, on the campus of Illinois State Normal University, (today known as Illinois State University) and the surrounding communities.

He was a founding member of the Illinois Republican Party, and a great friend of Abraham Lincoln. He is said to have been the first to suggest that Lincoln run for president. Finally, he was an early advocate for integrated education in McLean County after the Civil War.

Jesse Fell was born on November 10, 1808 in Pennsylvania to a Quaker family. His parents decided he should learn a trade as a tailor but he disagreed. So they sent him instead to study with a leading botanist. This is where he learned his great love of trees and plants. In 1826, he became a teacher, earning \$2.00 per student per quarter.

But after two years, at the age of 20, Fell headed west. In Ohio, he studied law, joined the Whig Party, and made speeches opposing Andrew Jackson. In 1832, he passed the bar exam and continued west. He arrived in Illinois that fall. He spent that winter in Delevan with a friend from Pennsylvania, William Brown. Here he found his future wife, Brown's daughter, Hester. They married in 1837 and would go on to have eight children.

When Fell arrived in Bloomington in the spring of 1833, the city had a population of 180. In 1834, he was appointed Commissioner of Schools for McLean County. This is how he came to be involved in the buying and selling of land, called land speculation. He enjoyed this far more than the practice of law and would eventually sell his law practice to David Davis to pursue this occupation further.

Fell met both Abraham Lincoln and David Davis in Vandalia during the winters of 1835 and 1836. The three were young lawyers working to bring railroads to their respective towns of Bloomington, Springfield and Pekin. In 1857, when Fell was working hard to bring the proposed state teacher training school here, he had Abraham Lincoln do the legal work.

The local Whig party twice tried to nominate Fell for Congress but he refused. He had little political ambition. But this changed with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. This act allowed new states formed in the west to choose for themselves whether to be slave or free. The act created controversy across the nation and incited such violence in the west that Kansas became known as Bleeding Kansas.

Being a Quaker, Fell quickly joined the newly-formed Republican Party which opposed the expansion of slavery. He was one of the major organizers of the Illinois Republican Party which held its first meeting at Major's Hall in Bloomington. At this meeting, Fell spoke and Lincoln gave his now-famous "Lost Speech." In this speech, Lincoln said it was slavery that was the root cause of the country's problems. The reason it is called the "Lost Speech" is that everyone listening to it was so enthralled, that no one thought to write it down.

In 1858, it was Fell who suggested the debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. Both men were candidates for Congress. During the debates, Fell was touring the Eastern states and found many people there were following the debates closely in the newspapers. Douglas won the election, but Lincoln had gained national fame. Also that year, Fell began urging Lincoln to run for president in the election of 1860. He sent Lincoln's autobiography to be published in Pennsylvania, gaining him many active supporters there.

At the Republican convention of 1860 in Chicago, Lincoln was fifth in a field of five candidates trying for the nomination to be president. Fell and Davis worked hard to turn Lincoln from a "dark horse" to the leading candidate. They printed thousands of extra tickets and packed the convention hall with loud, shouting Lincoln supporters. They worked to get the support of various state delegations to support Lincoln as a "second choice" if their first-choice candidate didn't win on the first ballot. Just as Davis and Fell had thought would happen, with so many candidates, no one won on the first ballot. Then Fell and Davis's negotiating skills paid off, Lincoln was nominated on the third ballot. Fell wired Lincoln who was in Springfield, "City (Chicago) wild with excitement. From my inmost heart, I congratulate you."

After Lincoln's inauguration, Fell wrote Lincoln urging him to appoint David Davis to his cabinet reminding Lincoln of the service which Davis had performed. Lincoln chose not to appoint Davis to his cabinet, but in 1862, appointed Davis as a Supreme Court Justice. Fell was appointed by Lincoln to be a paymaster for the Union Army. He resigned this position in 1863. Later, he was involved in locating the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors' Orphans' Home in Normal and the State Reform School in Pontiac.

Jesse Fell remained active through his later years. He died at his home in Normal on February 25, 1887 at the age of 78. His funeral was held in the great hall of Illinois State Normal University.

Discussion Question: Perhaps Jesse Fell was able to accomplish all he did because Illinois was just developing as a state. What in his background, education or personality enabled his success?