

Hester Vernon Fell (1819-1906)

Hester Vernon Fell was born on March 2, 1819, in Little Brittain, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. She was the sixth child of William and Rachel (Milner) Brown. Her family were Quakers, members of the Society of Friends. Her father was descended from James Brown, who came to the United States from England in the late 1600s and settled in what became Pennsylvania. Family stories say that James' brother, William, came to the U.S. with William Penn in 1682, who founded Pennsylvania as a safe place for Quakers.

In October 1828, Hester's family moved to Illinois. They settled along the Mackinaw River in Tazewell County on land her father purchased from the government. Hester remembered the long, bumpy trip, traveling by two-horse carriage with four horses pulling all their belongings. They traveled for almost four weeks, staying at farms along the way. Once they arrived, the family lived in two log cabins, and later her father built a new house. He even traveled to St. Louis to buy glass windows, which was unusual at the time, since most homes had open window frames or covered them with oiled paper during the winter.

Many of Hester's memories of her early life on the prairie in Illinois were recorded by her descendants. One such memory was in 1833 when the corn crop failed. Her father had plenty of corn, and other farmers came to buy some. Even though others raised prices, Hester's father kept the price fair, charging only \$1 per bushel.

Education was important to Hester's father. Since there was no school nearby, he hired a private teacher, Jesse Fell, to teach his children in 1832. Jesse had recently moved to the area and was planning to practice law in Bloomington. Hester, who was 13 at the time, met Jesse through this arrangement. A few years later, Hester and her sister Rachel went to Springfield to attend a school for girls, where they learned things like French and fine embroidery.

Hester and Jesse Fell got married on January 26, 1838, in a simple ceremony. Jesse had once been engaged to Hester's older sister, Eliza, but she passed away before the marriage took place. Hester and Jesse were both from Quaker families, but soon began following a more liberal church called Universalism. Their wedding didn't include gifts or a honeymoon, but Jesse's family and friends, including Abraham Lincoln's future law partner, David Davis, attended. After their wedding, the couple moved to Bloomington, where Jesse had a modest sized farm.

Their married life started off rough. Soon after their wedding, Jesse lost most of his land, including property in what is now downtown Chicago, and went bankrupt in 1841 because of the Land Panic of 1837. Because of this, he was forced to return to practicing law, though he didn't enjoy it. This also required him to travel sixty miles to and from Springfield several times a month for his work. While in Springfield, Jesse worked in the law offices of Abraham Lincoln, whom he had met years earlier. They became close friends, and Jesse even worked out of Lincoln's law office.

Jesse and Hester's families both opposed slavery. Hester's father, William Brown, helped enslaved people escape through the Underground Railroad, and their home was said to be a safe place for those in need.

In 1843, Jesse sold the farm they had in Bloomington and bought land in north eastern Bloomington (today the Town of Normal), building a cabin and naming the place "Fort Jesse." It was far from town, and Hester was often uneasy when Jesse was away, especially when she heard wolves and foxes at night.

The Fells had seven children: two sons (one of whom died as a baby) and five daughters: Eliza, Clara, Rachel, Fannie, and Alice. They also raised a girl named Ellen McGinnis, the daughter of a servant. Ellen later became a teacher, and several of the Fells' daughters did too.

In 1845, the Fells moved to Payson, Illinois, where Jesse ran a nursery. But this business failed, so the family moved back to Bloomington in 1851. In 1857, Jesse built a new house in Bloomington, near the newly founded Illinois State Normal University (ISNU), where Jesse had helped start the school. Their home was one of the first in the area, and it even served as a church and a place for social events like dances. The Fells' home was also the first school in Normal until the first building on campus at ISNU was ready.

After living in their home for 25 years, they moved to a new house in 1882. After Jesse passed away in 1887, Hester continued to manage the home until she died in 1906 at the age of 87. She and Jesse were married for nearly 50 years. They are buried side by side in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.