

Jesse Weldon Fell (1808-1887)

Jesse Weldon Fell was born on November 10, 1808 to Jesse Fell and Rebecca Roman Fell at his father's farm in New Garden Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania.¹ He was a fourth generation Pennsylvanian, his great-grandfather having arrived from England in 1705. He was the third of nine children in a Quaker family. His father farmed and was a hat maker and his mother was a Hicksite² preacher.³ The Fells moved to Downingtown, PA when Jesse was eight. The Fell children also attended a country subscription, or pay, school, which provided a basic education.

Quaker practices at that time required every male member to learn a mechanical skill in addition to formal education. Fell's parents thought it best for him to become a tailor since he was not physically strong. Having no interest in that path, Fell objected and his parents chose not to coerce him. Instead, he attended a boarding school in Downingtown, where he studied under Joshua Hoopes, a leading botanist. He worked in Hoopes's house and kitchen-garden to pay for tuition and board. There Fell developed a love for trees and flowers that continued his entire life. At Hoopes's school he also developed a desire to head west. In 1826, Fell became a teacher and earned a good salary at two dollars per student per quarter.⁴ At the same time he kept store for Issachar Price while Price traveled. In his free time Fell read diligently.⁵

In the fall of 1828 at the age of 20, Fell headed west with a small amount of money and what he could carry on his back. For a brief period of time he sold books in the Pittsburg area until he moved to Steubenville, Ohio in the spring of 1830. There he studied law in the noted Stokeley and Marsh law firm and paid for his studies by completing office work and odd jobs around town. At the same time, Fell made stump speeches for the Whig Party which opposed President Andrew Jackson. In 1832, he passed the bar exams. Impressed by his work, Stokeley offered Fell a partnership but he declined the offer and moved farther west two weeks later.⁶

Fell traveled on foot through Ohio and Indiana and reached Illinois in November 1832. In Jacksonville, IL he was admitted to the Illinois bar. From Jacksonville he traveled through Springfield where John Todd Stuart recommended settling in the new town of Bloomington. Fell passed through New Salem, Pekin, and Delevan on his way to Bloomington. In Delavan, he spent the winter with William Brown whom he knew from Pennsylvania. Brown had persuaded him to stay and teach his children.⁷ One of Brown's daughters, Hester, later became Fell's wife.

In the spring of 1833 Fell moved to Bloomington. Bloomington, with a population of 180 people, had no resident clergyman, newspaper, or lawyer.⁸ Fell boarded with James Allin on the corner of East and Grove Streets. He became

¹ "Jesse W. Fell."

² Member of the liberal body of Quakers in the United States, who asserted the sufficiency of the Inner Light in religious life. "Hicksite," *Random House Dictionary*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 2009).

³ Frances Milton I. Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1916), 9.

⁴ "Jesse W. Fell."

⁵ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 9-11.

⁶ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 12-15.

⁷ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 15 & 17.

⁸ LaBaron, *History of McLean County*, (1879), 351.

Bloomington's first and for a short time, only lawyer.⁹ Truthfully, however, Fell never fully embraced the law profession.

In 1834 Fell was appointed as Commissioner of Schools of McLean County. This position introduced him to the venture of buying and selling land which he enjoyed much more than being a teacher or a lawyer.¹⁰ Fell also spent the winter of 1834 and 1835 in Vandalia—then, Illinois's state capital—successfully fighting the annexation of McLean County territory by neighboring counties. In Vandalia he shared accommodations with John Todd Stuart and Abraham Lincoln, both Whig legislators from Sangamon County. It was here that Fell first met Lincoln who would become his close friend and political ally.¹¹ The next winter in Vandalia Fell and David Davis—an attorney from Pekin, IL—met for the first time to lobby for the construction of the Wabash Railroad through their respective towns.¹²

In 1835 Fell was made an agent of the newly-chartered State Bank of Illinois, where he learned the mortgage business.¹³ The next year, after practicing law for three years in Bloomington, Fell tired of the career altogether. He sold his law practice to David Davis who had recently settled in Bloomington and entered the land speculation business. Through this new career he participated in the development of the towns of Clinton, Pontiac, Lexington, Towanda, LeRoy, El Paso, Larchwood, Decatur, Joliet, and Dwight. Fell also made several additions to Bloomington and founded the Town of Normal which had originally been known as North Bloomington.¹⁴

The first few years Fell was in Bloomington were mostly prosperous ones for him. Fell and Allin helped produce Bloomington's first newspaper, *The Bloomington Observer and McLean County Advocate* in 1836. William Hill was its first printer and editor but Fell took over as the sole owner and editor the next year remaining until the paper's closure a year and a half later.¹⁵ At the same time, Fell and Lincoln campaigned for John T. Stuart's Congressional run against Democrat Stephen A. Douglas.¹⁶ Fell also prospered through land speculation but the Panic of 1837 devastated the western economy and bankrupted him by 1841.¹⁷ Looking for income, he returned to practicing law for a few more years until 1844 when he decided to try his hand at farming. He had always had an interest in horticulture since he was a young man in PA.

Fell married Hester Brown in Tazewell County, IL on January 26, 1838. When Hester and Jesse arrived back in Bloomington, they settled in a modest-sized farmhouse on 190 acres of land about one half mile east of the Bloomington courthouse. That spring, Fell's parents and the rest of his family from Pennsylvania moved to Bloomington.¹⁸ Fell and Hester had eight children: Henry Clay, William B., Eliza B.,

⁹ "Death of Mr. Jesse W. Fell," *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 26, 1887.

¹⁰ "Jesse W. Fell."

¹¹ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 19.

¹² Willard L. King, *Lincoln's Manager: David Davis*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 21.

¹³ "Jesse W. Fell."

¹⁴ "Jesse W. Fell, 1808-1887."

¹⁵ "Jesse W. Fell."

¹⁶ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 19-21.

¹⁷ "Jesse W. Fell," *The Index*, (1892).

¹⁸ "Noted Descendants," *Pennsylvania Heritage: The Fells of Longlands*, 83.

Clara V., Flora Marie, Alice C., Rachel M., and Fannie C. Sadly, two children, William B. and Flora Marie, died in childhood.¹⁹

Fell, still suffering from financial difficulties from the Panic of 1837, needed to settle part of a loan which he owed David Davis and Davis' law partner, Wells Colton. So in 1843 Davis acquired Fell's farm and 190 acres of land as part of the settlement of this loan. Davis would rename his new home "Clover Lawn." Fell and his family then moved north and east of Bloomington, (today the Town of Normal) where Fell built a log cabin and established a new farm.²⁰ They named their home "Fort Jesse," but many of their peers called it "Fell's Folly" because it was so far away and separated from Bloomington by a stream.²¹ This farm was located close to where Ft. Jesse Road runs today in Normal. In 1845 Fell and his family relocated to Payson, IL, (near Quincy, IL) where he bought and managed a fruit farm.²² At "Fruit Hill," he planned to develop a nursery. Although he sold few trees, he marketed and sold enough fruit to make the venture pay off.²³

By November 19, 1851 Fell had returned to Bloomington at the behest of several of his friends. He then served as co-editor and -owner of *The Bloomington Intelligencer*, which would eventually become *The Pantagraph*.²⁴ Fell continued an intermittent association with the paper until 1871, when his son-in-law, William O. Davis, became sole proprietor.²⁵ In Payson Fell had joined the Methodist Church but once in Bloomington, he helped organize the Free Congregational (or Unitarian) Church and became a faithful, life-long member.²⁶

Fell also aided in securing the Illinois Central and the Chicago and Alton Railroad lines that ran through Bloomington. In 1851 the Illinois Central line already connected Decatur, Clinton, and Bloomington. Fell helped to secure the right-of-way for the C & A which was completed in 1853. The next year, the Illinois Central and the Chicago and Alton Railroads intersected two miles north of town.

Fell wanted to build a town at the point of intersection and "intended to spare no effort to build here a town that should have for its characteristic sobriety, morality, and good society, and all elements for an educational center."²⁷ Fell platted the new town, called North Bloomington and, in June 1854, sold the first lots.²⁸ He also built a new home for his family here and moved in the summer of 1857-58.²⁹ They named their new home "Greenwood."

¹⁹ "Jesse Fell: Family Group Record," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,

http://www.familysearch.org/eng/search/frameset_search.asp?PAGE=/eng/search/ancestorsearchresults.asp.

²⁰ Helen E. Marshall, "Jesse W. Fell, Friend of Education," *Teacher Education*. (Illinois State Normal University, September 1957), 15

²¹ *Quaker Pioneers*, 27.

²² "Jesse W. Fell," *The Index*, (1892).

²³ Marshall, "Jesse W. Fell, Friend of Education," 15

²⁴ Edward J. Lewis, "A History of the Pantagraph," (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1901), 3.

²⁵ "Jesse W. Fell."

²⁶ "Jesse W. Fell," *The Index*, (1892).

²⁷ John W. Cook and James V. McHugh, *A History of the Illinois State Normal University*, (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Binding Establishment, 1882), 15.

²⁸ "Death of Mr. Jesse W. Fell."

²⁹ "Jesse W. Fell," *The Index*, (1892).

Perhaps one of Jesse Fell's greatest contributions to McLean County was his role in bringing the Normal School (later named Illinois State Normal University) to the area. On February 18, 1857 the State of Illinois passed a bill creating the State Board of Education and directing them to locate and establish a normal school for the training of teachers. Fell, a big believer in the worth of education, channeled his energy and money into the effort to get the new school located in Bloomington. Fell employed the help of his friend Abraham Lincoln, who was then a lawyer on the 8th Judicial Circuit, to draw up a form of bond or guaranty. This was to be signed by the "responsible citizens" of Bloomington who had donated land or money for the "Normal" school to be located in North Bloomington.³⁰ He involved almost every male citizen of note which included David Davis, Ashael Gridley, William McCullough, Mishak Pike, Edwin Bakewell, Leonard Swett, Asa Moore, William Ward Orme, and William Major. Fell was the largest contributor. He pledged \$9,000 worth of his own money and property with the promise of more in the future. In all, Fell was able to raise \$141,725 which was almost three times the amount that the town of Peoria's bid of \$50,032. Because of the amount of money and land Fell was able to raise and the fact that the location of the school in North Bloomington would be three-fourths of a mile from the Illinois Central and Chicago-Alton Railroad junction, the State Board of Education decided in the Summer of 1857 that Bloomington would be the location of the normal school.

Fell's role at ISNU would remain very active throughout the rest of his life. He was a member of ISNU's Board in 1866-1867 and again in 1871-1872. He also continued to petition funding from the Illinois State Board of Education.

One issue that would arise towards the end of Fell's life dealt with one of the original donors of land to ISU; the issue would not be resolved until after Fell's death. Edwin Bakewell, one of the eighty-five men who had donated land or money, requested that his subscription of 40 acres be given back to him. He claimed that he had stipulated that those 40 acres of land were to be used for the teaching of experimental agricultural chemistry. However the bond of deed Bakewell had signed never documented anything about this stipulation. The bond of deed only stated that the "institution should be located at or near its present site."³¹

Fell had made efforts to secure the State Industrial School which would have added the type of agricultural and industrial curriculum that both he and Bakewell had wanted. However, Bloomington's bid of \$470,000 was rejected and the location of the State Industrial School, (now known as the University of Illinois), was given to Champaign/Urbana in 1867 whose bid had only been \$285,000.

Because McLean County was platted at the edge of the "Grand Prairie," timber was valued very highly in the area. In the 1850s and 1860s Fell oversaw the planting of thousands of trees in Normal. He was also appointed to superintend the work of ornamenting the grounds with trees on what is now ISU's campus. The education he had received from Hoopes prepared Fell for this task. He hired William Saunders of Pennsylvania, the same man who had designed the landscape of Fell's estate several years earlier, to help him with this monumental task. Saunders was trained at Kew

³⁰ John A. Keith. *Semi-Centennial History of the Illinois State Normal University*. ISU Digital Collection: <http://tempest.lib.ilstu.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/isuhistory&CISOPTR=9479> 10

³¹ Board of Education Proceedings, December 20, 1893, pages 16-19. ISU Digital Collection <https://library.illinoisstate.edu/collections/board-reports/education/index.php>

Gardens. He became the U.S. Department of Agriculture's first botanist and landscape architect. Saunders also had completed the plantings of the District of Columbia Park System, designed Gettysburg Cemetery, and was one of the founders and first president of the National Grange.³²

Fell also employed the help of an African American man by the name of Milton Barton. Barton and his family lived in Alton, IL where Milton worked as a nurseryman. According to Barton family lore, it is believed that Fell came south to Alton to buy trees to bring back to Bloomington-Normal to “help domesticate this patch of prairie, protect it from the elements and make property more valuable.”³³ While in Alton, Fell met Barton and hired him to help him with his task. Barton and his family moved to Normal in 1862 where he worked for Fell planting thousands of trees throughout the town of Normal and on the ISNU campus³⁴.

These trees were often ones planted on Fell’s land first and then transplanted to their final position, or, Fell received donations of trees from local nurseries. Fell chose trees well-suited to Illinois’s climate and supposedly supervised all of the plantings. He was even granted a special act from the Illinois State Legislature to permit the fencing of young trees planted on open streets for their temporary protection. His love of plants and his efforts to beautify the area inspired his nickname, “The Tree Planter.”

Fell became very active in politics during the mid to late 1850s. During his time in Payson, local Whigs had tried unsuccessfully to nominate Fell for Congress. His candidacy was again demanded in 1854 in Bloomington but again, Fell refused. He had little political ambition following the death of his hero, Senator Henry Clay, two years earlier. That opinion changed in 1854 however with the passage of Senator Stephen A. Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act. This act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by allowing a territory’s population to determine whether it would be slave or free. The Act created controversy across the nation and incited violence in the West in what became known as “Bleeding Kansas.” Being anti-slavery, Fell quickly allied himself with the newly-formed Republican Party which opposed the expansion of slavery. Fell was one of the major organizers of the Illinois Republican Party which grew out of the Anti-Nebraska Convention held on May 29, 1856 in Major’s Hall in Bloomington.³⁵ Fell spoke at this convention and Lincoln gave his now-famous “Lost Speech.”³⁶

The next year the Illinois Republican State Central Committee commissioned Fell as its corresponding secretary. In this capacity he traveled to various parts of Illinois for conferences with different party leaders.³⁷ Fell used these opportunities to promote Lincoln. At the McLean County Republican Convention in 1858, Fell’s resolution endorsing Lincoln for U.S. Senate led to Lincoln’s unanimous nomination at this meeting and at the State Convention in Springfield where Lincoln delivered his now-famous “House Divided” speech.³⁸

³² William Saunders, *Wikipedia*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Saunders_\(botanist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Saunders_(botanist)), 2009

³³ Elaine Graybill. “Discrimination uprooted Wilbur Barton,” *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1987

³⁴ John Muirhead. “A History of the Barton Family,” *The William Carey Barton Family: A Study in Historical Archaeology*, by Edward B. Jelks. (1996: McLean County Historical Society) 3-4

³⁵ Fraker, “Lincoln’s Bloomington.”

³⁶ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 53-54. The speech supposedly condemned slavery, but it is lost because no one recorded it at the convention.

³⁷ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 57.

³⁸ Fraker, “Lincoln’s Bloomington.”

The Lincoln-Douglas debates which Fell had suggested as early as 1854, were held in the fall of 1858. During the debates, Fell toured the Eastern states and was encouraged to learn that individuals everywhere followed the speeches and desired to learn more about Lincoln. However when Fell returned from his tour, Lincoln had been defeated by Douglas. Undeterred by this situation he proposed that his friend run for President in 1860 and asked Lincoln to produce an autobiography to share with curious easterners: "I have a decided impression that if your popular history and efforts on the slavery question can be sufficiently brought before the people, you can be made a formidable, if not a successful, candidate for the Presidency."³⁹ Lincoln disapproved as he felt wholly inadequate for the position. By the next year however he had come around to Fell's position and provided a letter of introduction on December 20, 1859. Fell immediately sent the autobiography to his friend Joseph J. Lewis in Westchester, Pennsylvania for distribution; it appeared in the *Chester County Times* on February 11, 1860.⁴⁰ Pennsylvania was a bastion of the Republican Party and would be a valuable ally for Lincoln at the Republican National Convention in Chicago. Fell, along with David Davis and Leonard Swett, were among the most active Lincoln supporters in Illinois. Their work at the Convention in May, 1860 was invaluable to Lincoln's nomination.⁴¹

At the Convention, Davis transformed Lincoln from a dark horse candidate into a true contender for the nomination. Lincoln closely trailed New York Senator William Seward in popularity. Fell worked closely with the Pennsylvania delegation; his contact in that group, Joseph Lewis, pushed Pennsylvania to abandon Simon Cameron for Lincoln.⁴² Seward's forces at the convention far outnumbered Lincoln's. To counter this strength, Davis and Fell arranged for Lincoln supporters to arrive early and enter the convention hall before any "Sewardites" could. Fell suggested to the Illinois Republican State Central Committee that thousands of extra tickets be printed and distributed to Illinoisans arriving on the low-fare trains.⁴³ Some of the loudest voices in the state made an appearance to out shout Seward's crowd and Norman B. Judd placed a sea of Lincoln supporters between Seward's team and the undecided delegates.⁴⁴ Seward's forces could not reach the undecided delegates in the rear of the hall. The plan worked marvelously and by the third ballot, Abraham Lincoln became the Republican Party's Presidential nominee for the general election.⁴⁵ Fell telegraphed Lincoln: "City wild with excitement. From my inmost heart I congratulate you."⁴⁶ Indeed, in the span of a year and a half, Fell had helped to turn a twice-failed Senate candidate into the Republican nominee for President of the United States.

After the election Fell wrote to Lincoln in 1861 and advised him to appoint Judge David Davis to his Cabinet even though Fell and Davis had grown apart.⁴⁷ Fell reminded

³⁹ Gary Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback: How Abraham Lincoln Beat the Odds to Win the 1860 Republican Nomination*, (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008), 3.

⁴⁰ Harold K. Sage, "Jesse W. Fell and the Lincoln Autobiography," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1981).

⁴¹ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 57-59 & 61.

⁴² Fraker, "Lincoln's Bloomington."

⁴³ Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback*, 219.

⁴⁴ King, *Lincoln's Manager*, 138-139.

⁴⁵ Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback*, 228.

⁴⁶ Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback*, 219.

⁴⁷ Fraker, "Lincoln's Bloomington."

the President-Elect of the service Davis had performed: "I think I can safely say that of all *living men* you have no truer more devoted friend and admirer than in the person of Judge Davis. And if I were going to select that man of all others whom we are under the greatest obligations for your nomination at Chicago I unhesitatingly say it was him"⁴⁸ For Fell, Lincoln owed a great debt to Davis, a debt which could be repaid in the form of a Cabinet position. Ultimately, Lincoln chose not to appoint Davis to his Cabinet. Surprisingly, Fell received an appointment before Davis. In 1862 Fell became a paymaster for the Union army. By the end of 1863 he resigned.⁴⁹ Two years later Fell located the Soldiers' Orphans' Home in Normal (formerly North Bloomington) and the State Reform School in Pontiac.⁵⁰

Fell bitterly opposed slavery and supported integration after the Civil War. On April 24, 1867 a citizens' meeting in Normal discussed the topic. Fell was outraged that "colored children were excluded from the public schools and [was] mortified that" children were excluded from "public education because of the color of their skin" in the town of Normal. Other residents of Normal who did not see eye to eye with Fell, like Edwin Bakewell, stated while the "function of all public schools is to educate all," that because the law dictates that African American children cannot attend their schools, he must abide and uphold that law. Fell argued for the democracy of education, a belief stemming from his Quaker roots.

In developing the Town of Normal, Fell clearly intended to create an integrated community. He helped many African Americans secure work often hiring many himself. He also showed them how to better their lives, save and invest money to purchase their own homes, and encouraged them to educate themselves and their children."⁵¹ One such family Fell helped was the Duff family. Peter Duff came from Kentucky to Normal, IL after the Civil War. When he came to Normal, Fell hired him to work for him. With the assistance of Fell, Duff was able to attend ISNU where he received his education while working for Fell before and after school. Duff also learned the carpenter's trade in the 1880s.⁵² Duff purchased two lots of land from Fell in 1880 and proceeded to build a house for his family in 1883.⁵³ The house he built was located at 107 W. Poplar Street in Normal. Duff stayed in this area because of the opportunities he made with Fell.⁵⁴

Fell always had a great amount of energy and remained active even in his final years.⁵⁵ In December, 1886 he contracted pneumonia and never fully recovered. After visiting friends in Chicago in early February, Fell returned to Normal and suffered a relapse. At 78 years of age, Jesse Fell died on February 25, 1887 surrounded by family at his home. His funeral took place on February 28, at Illinois State Normal University's great hall and was led by Fell's friend, Reverend Richard Edwards of Springfield and

⁴⁸ King, *Lincoln's Manager*, 170-171.

⁴⁹ "Death of Jesse W. Fell," *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 26, 1887; "Illinois Patronage," The Lincoln Institute, <http://www.mrlincolnandfriends.org/inside.asp?pageID=30&subjectID=1>.

⁵⁰ "Jesse W. Fell," *The Index*, (1892); "Death of Mr. Jesse W. Fell."

⁵¹ John Muirhead. *A History of African Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*. (Bloomington, IL: Starnet, 1998) 24

⁵² Mildred Pratt. *We The People Tell Our Story*. (Bloomington, IL: Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, 1987) 33

⁵³ Peter Duff vertical file, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁵⁴ Peter Duff vertical file, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁵⁵ Fraker, "Lincoln's Bloomington."

Fell's pastor, Reverend H.A. Westall.⁵⁶ The Normal Town Council and the students of ISNU noted their sorrow at his passing,⁵⁷ the Unitarian Church held a memorial,⁵⁸ and the Bloomington Bar dedicated a meeting to discussing his memory.⁵⁹ *The Daily Pantagraph*, which had followed his illness from the beginning, printed a series of articles after his death about his many contributions to the communities of Bloomington and Normal, the State of Illinois, and the country as a whole. He was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Anthony Bowman, 2009

Revisions and additions: Candace Summers, 2010

⁵⁶ "Death of Mr. Jesse W. Fell."

⁵⁷ "In Memoriam," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 4, 1887.

⁵⁸ "Memorial Services," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 7, 1887.

⁵⁹ "Words Spoken of the Dead," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 15, 1887.