

## **John Howard Burnham (1834-1917)**

John Howard Burnham was born on October 31, 1834, in Essex, Massachusetts. His parents, John and Sarah Choate (Perkins) Burnham came from families that were among the first settlers in New England. One of his ancestors, also named John Burnham, came to America in 1634 and fought in the Pequot War in 1637.

In 1855, John moved to Barrington, Cook County, Illinois, where he taught school for two years. After saving enough money, he went to Bloomington, Illinois, to attend Illinois State Normal University (ISNU) in 1858. He became the first student from Cook County to graduate from the school.

When the U.S. Civil War began in 1861, many students at ISNU quickly volunteered to fight. Some joined Company K of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, including Joseph Howell, the principal of the Model School. Howell asked the faculty to make Burnham the principal of the school, and they agreed. Soon after, ISNU organized a military group of male students, and Burnham joined them. They trained in drills after school and on Saturdays. After graduating on July 2, 1861, Burnham and his classmates agreed to stay in touch and join the army if needed. That opportunity came later that year when Colonel Charles Hovey (president of ISNU) began organizing a new regiment. On August 20, 1861, Burnham and 45 other students formed Company A of the 33rd Regiment of the Illinois Volunteer Infantry, also known as the "Normal Rifles" or "Teacher's Regiment" because many of the soldiers were teachers and students. Burnham started as a first lieutenant and was promoted to captain in 1862. A total of 117 ISNU students and faculty joined the Union Army.

The regiment trained at Camp Butler in Springfield, Illinois, and then marched to Washington D.C. in 1861. Before reaching Washington, they were sent to Arcadia, Missouri, where they trained further and fought their first battle at Fredericktown, Missouri, in October 1861. After spending a hard winter in Arcadia, the regiment moved to Helena, Arkansas, where they fought in the Battle of Cache River in July 1862.

In 1863, Burnham had to resign due to health problems after battling typhoid fever and malaria. Shortly after leaving the army, he was elected Superintendent of Bloomington Public Schools. He held this job for a year before becoming the editor of *The Pantagraph* newspaper, a position in which he remained in for three years. In 1867, Burnham became a bridge contractor for the King Bridge Company, building iron bridges in Illinois and Wisconsin.

Burnham married Almira S. Ives on January 23, 1866. They had a happy marriage that lasted 51 years. Almira was a talented artist and active in the community. She helped raise funds for building the Episcopal Church and was involved in the Daughters of the American Revolution. Almira's brothers, Charles and Frank, became business partners with Burnham, and he later formed a company with Frank known as Burnham and Ives.

Burnham is also known for his interest in history and his work to preserve Illinois history. In 1879, he wrote *A History of Bloomington-Normal* and published historical articles in *The Pantagraph*. He became one of the founding members of the McLean County Historical Society in 1892, where he served as treasurer and editor of its journals. Burnham wrote and edited several important historical works, including the *War Records of the County*, which detailed local soldiers' involvement in the Civil War.

Burnham also worked on other community projects, such as designing Miller Park and serving on local boards. He was involved in many organizations, including the Masonic Lodge

and the Odd Fellow's Lodge. He even helped plant trees and build a dam at Miller Park, which created the park's lake.

On October 14, 1892, a fire destroyed Burnham's home, though neighbors helped save their belongings, including Almira's paintings. The cause of the fire was thought to have been arson.

Burnham passed away on January 20, 1917, after a major surgery. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. In 1917, the McLean County Historical Society honored him as a writer who worked hard to get the facts right and who cared deeply about the truth and history. He was remembered for his strong character, honesty, and contributions to both history and his community.