

## General Asahel Gridley (1810-1881)

*A great deal of the information known about Asahel Gridley is based on reminiscences of his friends and family, enemies and rivals, hearsay, conjecture, and by his own account. While a good portion of the information about him has a strong factual base, some of it must be taken with a grain of salt. Asahel Gridley was a very powerful and driven individual who did a great many things for Bloomington, Normal, and McLean County. He knew what he wanted and when he wanted it and would do just about anything to get it (even if he ruffled a few feathers along the way). However, without Gridley our city and county would have a very different history.*

“To give the history of Gen. Gridley you would relate the history of Bloomington and to give the history of Bloomington you would relate the history of Gen. Gridley”- Judge John McClun  
January 25, 1881.

Asahel (pronounced Ash-el) Gridley was born on April 21, 1810 near Cazenovia, New York. He was the youngest of six children born to Asahel and Elizabeth (Percival) Gridley. Unfortunately, Gridley lost both his parents at a young age. He was four years old when his father died and ten years later, in 1824, his mother passed away.<sup>1</sup> Before his mother died, she sent Gridley to nearby Pompey Academy. It was her desire that Asahel become a teacher one day. However, Gridley focused less on schooling and concentrated his efforts on making money. After attending the school for only one year Asahel told his mother that he was going to be a store clerk.<sup>2</sup> At the age of ten, he packed his bags, walked five miles to Cazenovia, and secured a job at a general store. Gridley held this job for five years before the business shut down. When his father died, he had inherited a small sum of money which had been “put out on interest.” By the time he turned 21 and had come of age, “his little fortune had grown till it amounted to about \$1,500 (which would be about \$39,500<sup>3</sup> in 2012).”<sup>4</sup> Gridley took that money and headed West in search of wealth.

On October 8, 1831 Gridley arrived in Bloomington, Illinois. In an interview later in life, Gridley recalled that there was “not over ten or a dozen families in Bloomington...there were no Indians around when I came, except a few Potawatomes who had their home up in Indian Grove (located in present-day Livingston County).”<sup>5</sup> Gridley used the money he inherited to open a business. The lot on which his business stood was purchased for \$51 (which in 2012 would be worth around \$1,300.)<sup>6</sup> This lot was located on the north-west corner of Main and Front streets.<sup>7</sup> He began to sell goods of all kinds to meet the needs of settlers and Native Americans from surrounding groves. Gridley was interviewed later in life about his time as a merchant during those early days in Bloomington. Gridley stated that as a “vendor of goods,” he always had on hand “dry goods, groceries, hardware, queensware [a type of cream-colored pottery], drugs,

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<sup>1</sup> “His Work is Done,” *The Pantagraph*, January 25, 1881

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Inflation calculator <http://www.davemanuel.com/inflation-calculator.php>

<sup>4</sup> “His Work is Done”

<sup>5</sup> *The History of McLean County, Illinois*, (Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. & Co., 1879), 341-342

<sup>6</sup> Measuring Worth, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare>

<sup>7</sup> Bill Kemp. *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph.* (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 2012) 15

medicines, liquors, saddles, harnesses, leather, salt, iron nails, hollowware [metal dishware such as sugar bowls, creamers, coffeepots, soup toureens, etc...],” among other things.<sup>8</sup> He would ride on horseback to St. Louis to purchase goods for his store. Sometimes he “wagoned” them to Bloomington. Other times he shipped them via steamboat from St. Louis to Pekin, Illinois.<sup>9</sup> Gridley continued the business of merchandising from 1831 to 1838 with Ortogrul Covell<sup>10</sup> (also spelled Covell), who was the future husband of his wife’s sister, Juliette Enos.<sup>11</sup>

In January of 1832, the McLean County Commissioner’s Court adopted a plan for building a courthouse in the newly established county of McLean, the county seat of which was in Bloomington. The courthouse was to be built on land that had been donated by James Allin, an early settler who was instrumental in the founding of McLean County and establishing Bloomington as the county seat. The new courthouse was to be “one story high, eighteen feet by thirty feet and to be finished as a comfortable dwelling house.”<sup>12</sup> Gridley won the bid to construct the first courthouse with a bid of \$339.75 (which in 2013 would have been about \$9,540<sup>13</sup>). The building was constructed out of “whipsawn cherry and black walnut.”<sup>14</sup> This courthouse stood from December 1832 to 1836 and was situated on the current Courthouse Square.<sup>15</sup>

When the Black Hawk War began in 1832, Gridley closed his store and joined the McLean County Militia.<sup>16</sup> The war was a result of a series of broken treaties (Treaties of St. Louis 1804 through 1824) between the U.S. Government and various Native American tribes, in particular the Sauk and the Fox. Those treaties required the Native American groups living in western and northwestern Illinois to give up their lands to white settlers moving into the area. It also required those same Native American groups to move further west out of Illinois. Not only were the Native Americans forced to leave their homeland, but the federal government did not hold up their end of the treaty (an additional treaty signed in 1829) by providing them with enough corn to get them through the winter.<sup>17</sup> The winter of 1831-32 proved harsh and food became scarce for the Native Americans. The tribes appealed to their chief, Black Hawk, to return to their former homes. Angered, Black Hawk led a band of tribe members across the Mississippi River into Illinois only to be pushed back. He returned again “with a force of Indians, crossed over to Rock Island, and ordered the settlers to leave the country.”<sup>18</sup> As other

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County, Illinois*. (Second edition, McKnight and McKnight Publishing Company, 1968), 263

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 265

<sup>10</sup> Brothers Merritt, Ortogrul, and Eliphalet William Covell (also spelled Covell) moved from the state of New York to McLean County, Illinois between 1830-1831; Milo Custer, “Covell and Durley Families,” Milo Custer Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 263

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 41

<sup>13</sup> Measuring Worth, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare>

<sup>14</sup> Greg Koos. *The Old McLean County Courthouse*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1997) 6

<sup>15</sup> Duis, 41

<sup>16</sup> Alice McCarthy Schlenker. “The Resurrection of General Asahel Gridley,”(1980), 3, McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>17</sup> “The Black Hawk War.” Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-012/>. (Date accessed May 8, 2014)

<sup>18</sup> Duis, 98

engagements followed, militias were called from Wisconsin and Illinois, along with federal troops, to hunt down Black Hawk and his forces. War was officially declared.

McLean County “furnished three companies of mounted volunteers for the campaign of 1832.” The first two belonged to the Fifth Regiment of Mounted Volunteers. Gridley enrolled in the first company on April 23, 1832 and was immediately made First Lieutenant. His company was under the command of Captain Merritt L. Covel.<sup>19</sup> They were said to have led dangerous exploits with exceptional bravery at Rock River and Stillman’s Run, although they were “most beautifully whipped in the fight with the Indians.”<sup>20</sup> However this account comes directly from Gridley himself. An account that supports Gridley’s comes from a letter written by Andrew H. Maxfield (who reportedly fought at Rock River with Gridley), to the *Sangamo Journal* on June 10, 1832. In his letter he stated that Gridley warned him and other soldiers that the enemy was upon them. He stated that Gridley displayed a “brave and intrepid coolness” in the face of danger and deserved “high eulogy” on this occasion.<sup>21</sup>

Other versions of these accounts paint a different picture of Gridley’s behavior and role in the Black Hawk War. One Mclean County sergeant claimed that the events at Rock River resulted in a “wild retreat, a dastardly rout.”<sup>22</sup> The sergeant claimed that Gridley was less than heroic. Still yet another account claimed that Gridley was the first to return home from the battle, claiming to be the sole survivor after being surrounded by 1,000 Native Americans, a claim that proved false when the rest of the unit returned home.<sup>23</sup> These accounts helped fuel the notion that Gridley was a coward throughout his life.

Since there are no known official military records of the two battles, we may never know what Gridley’s role truly was in the defeat and the entirety of the war. Whatever his role may have been, he was elected Adjutant General of the McLean County Regiment of Militia soon after.<sup>24</sup>

When he returned from the Black Hawk War, Gridley jumped right back into his mercantile business. While he purchased many of his supplies from St. Louis, he also traveled back east to Philadelphia and New York City twice a year to buy his goods. He would buy things on credit for his store in Bloomington. In Gridley’s efforts to promote the new city of Bloomington, he sold \$20,000 to \$30,000 worth of lots of Bloomington land to Philadelphians.<sup>25</sup>

It was on one such purchasing trip out East that he met his future wife Mary Enos of Pittsburgh, PA. Their wedding was held in Pittsburgh on March 22, 1836. Soon after the wedding, Mr. and Mrs. Gridley traveled to Asahel’s home in Bloomington.<sup>26</sup>

In an 1899 interview with Madame Annette, a reporter with *The Daily Bulletin* newspaper, Mary revealed that Asahel had convinced her that Bloomington was practically a paradise, which made her happy to leave her beautiful home in Pittsburgh. However when they

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<sup>19</sup> John Burnham, George Davis, and Ezra Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I War Record of McLean County with other papers.* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1899), 13

<sup>20</sup> John H. Burnham. *History of Bloomington-Normal in McLean County, Illinois.* (Bloomington: J.H. Burnham, 1879) 42

<sup>21</sup> Ellen M. Whitney. *The Black Hawk War, 1831-1832, Vol. 2.* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1970-1978) 562-563

<sup>22</sup> Hiatt, 4

<sup>23</sup> Burnham, Davis, and Prince, 17

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 17

<sup>25</sup> Schlenker, 9

<sup>26</sup> “His Work is Done;” Schlenker, 9

arrived in Bloomington, Mary was less than impressed.<sup>27</sup> They first stayed at a local hotel, The Caravansary. Shortly thereafter, they boarded with James Allin where Gridley had previously lived. Gridley eventually bought the Allin home and renovated it completely around the time of the birth of their first daughter Juliette in 1837.<sup>28</sup>

Gridley was responsible for laying out several towns throughout McLean County. In November, 1835 Gridley, with the help Merritt Covel, laid out the town of LeRoy.<sup>29</sup> In January of 1836, the same year of his marriage, Gridley and J. Brown laid out the town of Lexington.<sup>30</sup> Not only did Gridley make a profit in doing so, he also bought farmland throughout Central Illinois to sell off.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to land speculation, Gridley was involved with the founding of the county's first newspaper, the *Bloomington Observer and McLean County Advocate*. In 1836 Jesse Fell and James Allin approached Gridley with the idea for establishing a newspaper. While it appears that Gridley did not financially invest in this business venture, Fell and Allin commissioned Gridley to "purchase a printing press and supplies to run it and make arrangements with one or two men to operate it."<sup>32</sup> Gridley agreed to do this and bought the printing equipment in Philadelphia in 1836 on one of his purchasing trips. He shipped the press back to Bloomington by way of New Orleans, up the Mississippi and Illinois rivers to Pekin, IL. However, the equipment was delayed and did not arrive until close to January 1, 1837. When the equipment arrived it was hauled by wagon to Bloomington. On January 14, the first issue was published. Gridley's interest in the newspaper seemed to end after his procuring the press and equipment in Philadelphia.<sup>33</sup>

Later that year Gridley's wealth turned sour because of the Panic of 1837. Most of the business in Gridley's store was done on credit. Customers would purchase their goods on the promise of paying at a later date. Because of the Panic, these customers were unable to pay their debts to the store. Wrought with frustration, Gridley placed an ad in the *Observer* offering a \$25 reward to any person who could bring the indebted customers to pay him as due.<sup>34</sup> Because of this action, he made a great many enemies.<sup>35</sup> By 1842 Gridley, like so many others in Bloomington, went bankrupt. His debts came up to an astounding \$52,599.44 (which would be over \$1 million in 2012).<sup>36</sup> His family was forced to survive on cornbread and the occasional strip of old bacon.<sup>37</sup>

Gridley became actively involved in politics and remained so throughout the rest of his life. He was a member of the Whig Party and later became a Republican after the Whigs dissolved. He served as McLean County Treasurer from 1839-41 and then was elected to the

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<sup>27</sup> Madame Annette. "A Queenly Woman, An Interview with the Venerable Mrs. A.M. Gridley," *The Daily Bulletin*, January 26, 1899

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Boslooper, "General Asahel Gridley of Bloomington, Illinois Compeer of Abraham Lincoln," (1994), 6, McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>29</sup> "His Work is Done;" Burnham, 43

<sup>30</sup> Duis, 13

<sup>31</sup> "His Work is Done"

<sup>32</sup> Harold Sinclair. *The Daily Pantagraph 1846-1946*. (Bloomington: Evergreen Comm. Inc., 1976) 19

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 20

<sup>34</sup> Boslooper, 8

<sup>35</sup> "His Work is Done"

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Schlenker, 10

12th General Assembly as state representative, serving from 1840-42.<sup>38</sup> In his bid for election Gridley worked the campaign route. In addition to campaigning for his own election to the General Assembly, Gridley was also campaigning for William Henry Harrison, the Whig candidate for the presidential election that year. Gridley recalled later in life that during the 1840 campaign, “we got a monster procession and went from here (Bloomington) to Peoria. We had a large canoe, hewn out of a tree, and put on wheels, and in it we had twelve of the soldiers of the War of 1812. The canoe was drawn by 12 horses.”<sup>39</sup>

Gridley served as a state representative at the same time as Abraham Lincoln who was elected to represent Sangamon County. An interesting incident during their time in the Legislature occurred on December 5, 1840. During that session, the Democrats, led by Speaker of the House William L.D. Ewing, locked the chamber doors of the First Methodist Church, (their temporary quarters) in order to keep a quorum and “compel a favorite vote.” In an attempt to halt the vote, Lincoln, Gridley, and Joseph Gillespie of Edwardsville, jumped out of a window. However, it was not enough to stop the vote as Ewing ruled there was still a quorum.<sup>40</sup>

After he returned from his term as a representative in 1842, Gridley was still suffering from his immense financial loss of the previous decade. According to his friend and associate Jesse Fell, Gridley was not sure what to do to “repair his shattered fortunes.” Fell recalled that with some convincing and encouragement from friends, including Fell (who was also a lawyer at the time), Gridley decided to study the law and become a lawyer.<sup>41</sup> Fell recalled that he was impressed by how Gridley had developed “quite a talent as a speaker” and this was one of the reasons he encouraged Gridley to become a lawyer.<sup>42</sup>

Gridley traveled with Abraham Lincoln and Judge David Davis throughout Illinois practicing law on the Eighth Judicial Circuit Court.<sup>43</sup> Gridley appeared in court in at least eight counties of the Circuit.<sup>44</sup> It is not clear exactly when Gridley became acquainted with Lincoln. Robert H. Browne,<sup>45</sup> who worked for Gridley in his law office as a young man, claimed that Lincoln and Gridley met in Vandalia, Illinois (then capitol of Illinois) during a session of the Illinois General Assembly in 1836-1837 (before Gridley served in the legislature).<sup>46</sup> What is more likely the case is that Lincoln and Gridley met during Lincoln’s early days as a Circuit rider starting in 1837. Lincoln would have passed through Bloomington as McLean County had always been part of the Eighth Judicial Circuit. Gridley liked telling stories about his travels with Lincoln on the Circuit.

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<sup>38</sup> *The History of McLean County, Illinois*, 198 and 201; “Statue in Tribute to Gridley Unveiled: City Pioneer Paid Honors,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 8, 1931

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 345

<sup>40</sup> Guy Fraker. *Lincoln’s Ladder to the Presidency: The Eighth Judicial Circuit. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012) 140*

<sup>41</sup> Schlenker, 11; “His Work is Done;” Duis, 271; Gene Smedley. “Gridley Man of Many Skills,” *The Pantagraph*, undated

<sup>42</sup> “His Work is Done”

<sup>43</sup> During most of Gridley’s legal career, there were 14-15 counties included on the Eighth Judicial Circuit; “Lincoln’s Eighth Judicial Circuit,” <http://www.lookingforlincoln.com/8thcircuit/history.html> (Date Accessed July 3, 2014)

<sup>44</sup> Fraker, 81

<sup>45</sup> Robert H. Browne, author of a two-volume biography *Abraham Lincoln and the Men of His Time*, does not offer much evidence to support his findings and claims about Lincoln and Gridley’s relationship.

<sup>46</sup> Boslooper, 45

Gridley said that he and Lincoln rode together in a two-horse buggy, “often fording streams and swapping stories, visiting the different county seats to try law cases.”<sup>47</sup> One particular incident Gridley recalled was how he and Lincoln stopped at a farm house and spent the night. The farmer’s wife “said she was so sorry they were all out of coffee and tea, but that she would make them some saxifax tea (meaning of course sassafras).” Gridley said Lincoln replied “Why madam, I was raised on saxifax tea,” which made her feel quite relieved.”<sup>48</sup>

Asahel’s wife Mary liked to tell the story of how one stormy night, Lincoln and Gridley were returning from court that was being held in Pontiac. In an interview for the *Daily Bulletin* later in her life, she stated that “Lincoln was soaked to the skin by the heavy rain. My husband brought him to our house, and had him change from his drenched clothing to some of his own.” Mary recalled how “abbreviated the trousers were for him, as were the sleeves of the coat.”<sup>49</sup> Since Lincoln was much taller than her husband (her husband was about 5 feet 8 inches and slender in build),<sup>50</sup> it must have been a humorous sight seeing Lincoln in Gridley’s clothes.

Gridley seemingly worked nonstop during his stint as a lawyer. One case of note that Gridley tried in Bloomington occurred in 1855. This was during the first incident of the prohibition of the sale of “spirits and malt liquor” in Bloomington. During this time, the sale of alcohol was banned by the “Jacksonville ordinance” (named after the Morgan County, Illinois community where this type of ordinance began). Many saloon owners in Bloomington disregarded the law and continued to sell alcohol.<sup>51</sup> According to Franklin Price, mayor of Bloomington at the time of the incident, the majority of the people of Bloomington supported the ordinance and his efforts to enforce it. In an interview later in his life, Price stated that “he raided every one of the illicit places I could find and was determined to down the liquor element of the city.”<sup>52</sup> This short-lived time period became known as the “Whiskey Insurrection.”<sup>53</sup>

One such establishment that was raided by Price and his cohorts was owned by William Reynolds and Asahel Fuller, partners in the firm “Reynolds & Fullers.” According to a newspaper account written almost twenty years after the June 25, 1855 incident, Thomas Vickroy, a resident of Bloomington, went to police magistrate Jesse Birch to lodge a complaint against Reynolds and Fuller because “he [Vickroy] had good reasons to believe that great quantities of liquors” were being sold at their establishment, which was against the law. Acting upon “the strength of this complaint,” Franklin Price, along with Alexander Steele, Ephraim Platt (city marshal), and Alfred B. Davidson, went to investigate the accusation on August 10, 1855. If any alcohol was found, they would take possession of it.<sup>54</sup>

Upon arriving at Reynolds and Fuller’s establishment, Price and his men found a very large amount of alcohol. They seized “fifty barrels of brandy, fifty barrels of gin, fifty barrels of vinegar, fifty barrels of cherry bounce, and fifty casks of highwines, and fifty casks of brandy,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid,13

<sup>48</sup> “More Reminiscences of Lincoln and Gridley,” *The Pantagraph*, May 21, 1918

<sup>49</sup> Madame Annette. “A Queenly Woman: An Interview with the Venerable Mrs. A. M. Gridley,” *The Daily Bulletin*, January 26, 1899

<sup>50</sup> Estimate of Asahel’s height based on the almost life-sized statue of him inside the current McLean County Museum of History.

<sup>51</sup> Bill Kemp. “Whiskey Insurrection of 1855 embroiled Bloomington mayor,” *The Pantagraph*, March 22, 2009

<sup>52</sup> “An Old-Time Mayor, He Tells an Interesting Story of the Fifties,” *The Daily Leader*, June 27, 1891

<sup>53</sup> Kemp, “Whiskey Insurrection of 1855 embroiled Bloomington mayor”

<sup>54</sup> “The Whiskyzootic of 55’,” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1874

fifty casks of gin, and fifty casks of whiskey, and one pipe of whiskey.”<sup>55</sup> Price recalled later that they “took all the barrels of whiskey and wine into wagons” outside the city limits. “On the way out men with hammers, axes, and other instruments smashed the barrels and let the liquor into the streets.” Price stated that after his incident, the people who pretended to support him and who urged him forward, deserted him.<sup>56</sup>

Reynolds and Fuller felt that “their rights had been violated” and sought legal advice from Asahel Gridley. Gridley took the case and sued the before mentioned men of trespassing and damaging and destroying \$2,000 worth of goods. The City of Bloomington retained Abraham Lincoln to present the defense that the men were simply upholding the law and that the seizure and destruction of said goods and property was within the description of the “Jacksonville ordinance.”<sup>57</sup> In the end, Gridley achieved a partial victory. While the jury found Price innocent, Platt and Davidson (two associates of Franklin Price involved in the raid) were found guilty and forced to pay Reynolds and Fuller \$600 in damages.<sup>58</sup> It was not long after this incident that Bloomingtonians voted to repeal the “Jacksonville ordinance” and legalize the sale of alcohol again.<sup>59</sup>

William Packard, who came to Bloomington around 1844 and studied law under Gridley, recalled that Gridley was “eminently a trial lawyer, and no man in his time, or that I have known since, was his superior as a tactician, strategist, or manager in a law suit before a petit jury.” Packard also stated that “He [Gridley] was eloquent, full of fire and force, and concentrated his whole power upon the strong points in his case. He never became tiresome, nor tedious.” After Packard passed the bar, he practiced law with Gridley. Later, Gridley also formed law partnerships with Allen and Prickett.<sup>60</sup> Gridley also had a partnership with Col. E. D. Baker, whom Gridley said “was the finest speaker there was at the bar” but the exact dates of their partnership are unknown.<sup>61</sup> Around 1853 Gridley formed a partnership with John H. Wickizer.<sup>62</sup> In October 1856, Gridley and Wickizer were joined by Gridley’s protégé Ruben Moore Benjamin, who had studied law and served as a clerk in Gridley’s office. By 1858-1859,<sup>63</sup> it appears that Gridley retired from the law firm and it became Wickizer and Benjamin.<sup>64</sup> Wickizer and Benjamin maintained their office above the McLean County Bank (Gridley’s bank) as they had done when Gridley was still part of the firm.<sup>65</sup>

With the outbreak of the War with Mexico (Mexican-American War)<sup>66</sup> in 1846, the United States House and Senate voted unanimously to give President James Polk the authority to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> “An Old-Time Mayor”

<sup>57</sup> “Recollections of Franklin Price,” 10. McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>58</sup> “The Whiskyzootic of 55”

<sup>59</sup> “Recollections of Franklin Price,” 11

<sup>60</sup> Boslooper, 9

<sup>61</sup> Burnham, 44

<sup>62</sup> “Gridley and Wickizer,” *Bloomington Intelligencer*, June 15, 1853; “Advertisement: Gridley and Wickizer Attorneys,” *Weekly Pantagraph*, December 12, 1855

<sup>63</sup> *Bloomington City Directory* 1859-1860, 20 and 60

<sup>64</sup> “Veteran Justice Called,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 6, 1917

<sup>65</sup> *Bloomington City Directory*, 1859-1860, 20

<sup>66</sup> The Mexican-American War, 1846-1848, was caused by a dispute over vast amounts of territory (in particular the state of Texas which the U.S. had annexed in 1845) between the United States and Mexico. In the end, Mexico lost what would amount to more than half of Mexico (the states of California, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado,



call for 50,000 volunteers to fight in the war. Four regiments were assigned to Illinois. One company, Company B of the 4th Regiment of Illinois Volunteers, was assigned to McLean County. Gridley, still in charge of the militia in McLean County at the time, had been made a Brigadier-General. He called a meeting to be held in Bloomington on June 13 of that year to raise a company of men from McLean County. People from all parts of the county showed up for the meeting that day which was held on a vacant lot on the southwest corner of Center and Market Streets (which today is the location of a parking garage). According to Ezra Prince, “General Gridley mounted a wagon and addressed the crowd in a very patriotic, vivid, and flowery speech in which he painted in glowing colors the glory the soldiers would achieve and the good times they would have in the Halls of Montezuma!” Gridley urged the young men to enlist and defend their country which had been “attacked by the ruthless Mexican barbarians.” He closed the speech in telling the men to “go and fight the battles of your country as I have done. Glory awaits you. Our hearts are with you.” After his and other men’s rousing speeches, 103 men enlisted for six months, though Gridley (who was 36 years old at the time) was not one of them.<sup>67</sup>

In 1851 Gridley was elected an Illinois State Senator and served two terms from 1851-1854.<sup>68</sup> He represented Tazewell, McLean, Logan, DeWitt, and Macon counties.<sup>69</sup> During his time as a state senator “he would ride horseback all night to Springfield, a distance of 60 miles, conduct his business during the day and ride back at night, ready to go to work in Bloomington the next morning.” He did this twice a week.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps Gridley’s most important accomplishment which the city of Bloomington benefitted from occurred during his tenure as an Illinois State Senator. Gridley was instrumental in securing not one, but two, major railroad lines (the Illinois Central and Chicago and Alton) directly through Bloomington. The location of both of these railroads through Bloomington “gave a boom to the little village,”<sup>71</sup> that would alter the course of its history dramatically.

The year before Gridley was elected to the Illinois State Senate, on September 20, 1850, the United States Congress “passed an act granting the right of way and making a grant of land to the states of Illinois, Mississippi, and Alabama in aid of construction of a railroad from Chicago to Mobile.”<sup>72</sup> This land grant gave 2.6 million acres of public lands to the State of Illinois (and then in turn to the railroad company) for the construction of the Illinois Central Railroad.<sup>73</sup> This act was made possible by Illinois’ U.S. Senators Sidney Breese and Stephen A. Douglas.<sup>74</sup> As soon as the act was passed “various New York and Boston capitalists were anxious to build the railroad.”<sup>75</sup>

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Utah, Nevada, and California (source PBS “The U.S. and Mexican War, 1846-1848”  
[http://www.pbs.org/kerawar/ushmexicanwar/war/borderlands\\_on\\_the\\_eve.html](http://www.pbs.org/kerawar/ushmexicanwar/war/borderlands_on_the_eve.html))

<sup>67</sup> Burnham, Davis, and Prince, 21

<sup>68</sup> *The History of McLean County*, 201

<sup>69</sup> Schlenker, 12

<sup>70</sup> Schlenker, 14; Boslooper, 18

<sup>71</sup> “His Work is Done”

<sup>72</sup> Duis, 90-91

<sup>73</sup> Mike Matejka, Greg Koos, Mark Wyman. *Bloomington’s C & A Shops, Our Lives Remembered*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1988) xviii

<sup>74</sup> Fraker, 153

<sup>75</sup> Duis, 91



During the legislative session in February of 1851, the three points along the railroad were fixed. The termini (beginning and ending) points of the railroad were LaSalle in the north and Cairo in the south.<sup>76</sup> Judge David Davis, Gridley, and Jesse Fell were ardent proponents of locating the railroad through Bloomington. Bloomington's top competitor was the town of Shelbyville (which is about 90 miles southeast of Bloomington). If Shelbyville would have won, the rail line would have run several miles east of Bloomington. Just before the vote commenced, Gridley "jumped up and moved to amend the bill by locating the road within five miles of the northeast corner of township 21 north, range 2 east of the 3d p.m. (the third point established along the railroad line)."<sup>77</sup> The bill passed as amended by a vote of 23 to 2 and as Bloomington was almost a direct line between LaSalle and Cairo, Illinois, the road was serviced through Bloomington.<sup>78</sup> According to the railroad charter, fifty miles of the railroad had to be built within two years from the time the charter was obtained (in 1851).<sup>79</sup>

Gridley wrote a letter to his constituents upon passage of the bill which was printed in the *Western Intelligencer* on February 6, 1851. His letter stated that the Central Railroad bill "secures the road to Bloomington, Clinton, and Decatur beyond all question, and secures the construction of the great central road through the three counties of McLean, DeWitt, and Macon...I think the citizens of said counties are fortunate that by the provisions of this bill this great road is secured to them."<sup>80</sup> In the same letter, Gridley also informed his constituents that he was fairly certain that "the bill extending the charter of the Alton & Sangamon Railway Company (later known as the Chicago and Alton Railroad) to Bloomington, will pass the House and become a law; in which event I am assured by the agent of the Company, that the road will be constructed and completed in two years."<sup>81</sup> This too would come to pass.

As soon as the State of Illinois granted the railroad company a charter, the company was able to sell the land to raise capital to fund the construction of the railroad.<sup>82</sup> The land was divided and agents were appointed to the districts<sup>83</sup> to sell it. The most successful of these agents was Gridley. The land he was appointed to sell was "between LaSalle on the Illinois River to the north and the southern edge of McLean County to the south."<sup>84</sup> The land was sold for between eight to sixteen dollars an acre (which would be about \$550 in 2013). Gridley received fifty cents an acre for the land he sold (which was about \$13 in 2012) and reportedly made \$80,000 in one year<sup>85</sup> (which would be about \$2.5 million in 2013).<sup>86</sup> Because of this, Gridley quickly made back his fortune.

Construction began in LaSalle from the north and the railroad reached Bloomington on May 23, 1853. When the first train of the Illinois Central reached Bloomington, "the momentous occasion was marked by a public jubilee and the entire population went to the depot to welcome

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<sup>76</sup> *The History of McLean County*, 363

<sup>77</sup> "His Work is Done"

<sup>78</sup> *The History of McLean County*, 363

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 345

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>81</sup> *The History of McLean County*, 363

<sup>82</sup> Duis, 91

<sup>83</sup> Area of land on the proposed route of the railroad line that was to be sold to raise money to fund the construction of the railroad.

<sup>84</sup> Fraker, 158

<sup>85</sup> Schlenker, 13-14

<sup>86</sup> Measuring worth, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare>

the first locomotive...as it came from LaSalle.”<sup>87</sup> “The throbbings of the great hearts of the commercial world will henceforth send their pulsations into our midst! None of us are prepared for the changes which are soon to be affected by this great triumph.”<sup>88</sup> People from all over Bloomington and the surrounding “country turned out en masse, waiting at the depot for the new-fangled machine that dispensed with the aid of horses.” Most of those in attendance had never seen a locomotive before.<sup>89</sup> Jesse Fell later recalled, “if General Gridley had rendered no other service to this community, this alone is of sufficient importance to entitle him, in all coming time, our grateful remembrance.”<sup>90</sup>

Gridley was also instrumental in securing the Chicago and Alton Railroad and the shops that accompanied it. Prior to Gridley’s time in the Illinois Senate, the Legislature had passed “a charter for the construction of a railroad from Alton to Springfield” on February 17, 1847. After the road was constructed, on February 11, 1851, “an act was passed authorizing the railroad company to extend the road to Bloomington.”<sup>91</sup> The railroad reached Bloomington in October of 1853 and again, the burgeoning town was electrified once the first train from the new railroad arrived. By the time the railroad reached Bloomington, the name had changed again to the Chicago and Mississippi Railroad after the line had been extended to Chicago. On October 5, 1853 the *Bloomington Intelligencer* proclaimed that “before the issue of another number, we expect to be cheered with the joyous scream of the whistle of the Chicago and Mississippi Railroad. The arrival of the cars on this road will be greeted with a hearty welcome by the whole people of this city and of the vicinity.”<sup>92</sup> By October 19, 1853 the railroad extended into Bloomington and tracks were to be laid “as soon as possible to the crossing of the Illinois Central” railroad, which at that time was two miles north of the center of town. Another article in the *Bloomington Intelligencer* proclaimed that “such an arrangement will greatly facilitate the rapid and easy transit of the traveling public through the State...”<sup>93</sup> The first train arrived in Bloomington from Alton, which at that time was the southern terminus. A few years later, trains were arriving from Joliet in the north.<sup>94</sup> By 1861 the railroad continued to expand (as the country expanded as well) and was finally called the Chicago and Alton Railroad Company and extended from Chicago to St. Louis.

The same year that the Chicago and Alton railroad reached Bloomington (1853), the shops for the railroad opened as well. Gridley, Fell, and others realized they had missed the opportunity to have the railroad shops for the Illinois Central Railroad located in Bloomington (which were instead built in Wapella).<sup>95</sup> They were determined to not miss another opportunity such as this. “The donations of land and money obtained the location [of the C & A Shops] for Bloomington.”<sup>96</sup> It was only logical to locate the shops in Bloomington because Bloomington was half way between Chicago and St. Louis. The shops were located on Bloomington’s west

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<sup>87</sup> “Many Roads Enter County,” *The Pantagraph*, August 26, 1930

<sup>88</sup> Kemp, 22

<sup>89</sup> *The History of McLean County*, 364

<sup>90</sup> “His Work is Done”

<sup>91</sup> Duis, 83

<sup>92</sup> “Cheering,” *Bloomington Intelligencer*, October 5, 1853

<sup>93</sup> “Here they Come!” *Bloomington Intelligencer*, October 19, 1853

<sup>94</sup> “Many Roads Enter County,” *The Pantagraph*, August 26, 1930

<sup>95</sup> J.R. Freese, M.D. *Bloomington City Directory* for the years 1855-6 (Bloomington: J. Wesley Wolfe, 1855) History,

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*

side and “employed most of the west side of town.”<sup>97</sup> The Chicago and Alton Shops were responsible for manufacturing needed items and for repairing others such as locomotive engines and railroad cars for the line. The Bloomington shops included everything necessary to build new and repair existing locomotives and rail cars including: a locomotive shop, boiler shop, foundry, upholstery shop, wheel and axel shop, paint shop, carpentry shop, and store department.<sup>98</sup> In 1856, just three years after “the shops” opened, 150 people were employed. At various times throughout its history (1853 through 1972), the shops employed between 500 and 3,000 people.<sup>99</sup>

Because the C & A shops “were the cornerstone of Bloomington’s economy,” when they caught fire and burned to the ground on Halloween night in 1867, many of the leading citizens were quick to act to make sure the shops stayed in Bloomington and were not rebuilt elsewhere.<sup>100</sup> It was said that Gridley took the lead<sup>101</sup> and helped raise \$55,000 and acquire more land to rebuild the shops and keep the jobs in McLean County.<sup>102</sup> By 1870 the rebuilt shops were spread out over 40 acres roughly between Chestnut Street and Seminary Avenue.<sup>103</sup>

Additionally, Gridley (like many of the prominent male citizens of Bloomington at the time) was also involved with the founding and organization of the Lafayette, Bloomington, and Mississippi Railway Company. It was chartered in February, 1867 and was built between 1869 and 1872. It ran directly east from Bloomington, Illinois to Lafayette, Indiana.<sup>104</sup> Gridley was elected president of the company and served until January 31, 1872 when the management of the company was sold to the New York-based Toledo, Wabash, and Western Railway.<sup>105</sup>

Bloomington grew rapidly because of the railroads and the Chicago and Alton Shops. Jesse Fell remarked later in life that he had “no hesitation in saying a solution of the matter found largely in the legislation...had we not had General Gridley, or some other man of much more than ordinary ability to then represent us, Bloomington’s population would now probably be numbered by the hundreds instead of thousands.”<sup>106</sup> As additional railroad lines came to Bloomington and the C & A shops continued to expand, Bloomington continued to grow exponentially. In 1850 there were only a little over 1,600 people in Bloomington. Just five years later, there were over 5,000. By 1870 there were almost 15,000 people living in Bloomington.<sup>107</sup>

Also during Gridley’s time in the Illinois Senate, the size of the Eighth Judicial Circuit was decreased. At the time, the Eighth contained 14 counties. In a letter from David Davis to his wife Sarah, he stated that “this Circuit must be lessened or I will resign.”<sup>108</sup> As a judge on the Eighth, Davis was required to travel to all fourteen counties twice a year, which was a long

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<sup>97</sup> Schlenker, 14

<sup>98</sup> “Chicago and Alton Railroad Miscellaneous Collection,” McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>99</sup> “Many Roads Enter County,” Matejka, Koos, and Wyman, 99 and 149

<sup>100</sup> Don Munson, Martin Wyckoff and Greg Koos. *The Illustrated History of McLean County*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1982) 114

<sup>101</sup> “His Work is Done.”

<sup>102</sup> Munson, Wyckoff, and Koos, 114

<sup>103</sup> Matejka, Koos, and Wyman, ix-x; Duis, 84; Munson, Wyckoff, and Koos, 115

<sup>104</sup> Duis, 95; *The History of McLean County*, 365-366

<sup>105</sup> Duis, 95-96

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 269

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 15-16; “Population Figures,” *The Illinois Fact Book and Historical Almanac 1673-1968* (SIU Press, 1970); various editions of *Blue Book of the State of Illinois*

<sup>108</sup> Willard King. *Lincoln’s Manager, David Davis*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) 88

and grueling journey. Davis petitioned the Legislature to reduce the number of counties on the Eighth stating “that no other judge had to cover so vast a tract.” Soon after, Davis received a report from Gridley that “The Circuit Court bill has this moment passed both Houses... We have got rid of Edgar, Shelby, Moultrie, Christian, Macon, & Piatt—leaving you a pretty Circuit.”<sup>109</sup>

In addition to his time spent serving as a state representative and senator, Gridley was involved in the formation of the Illinois Republican Party. On May 29, 1856 the “State Convention of the Anti-Nebraska Party of Illinois” was held in Bloomington at Major’s Hall, located on the corner of Front and East Streets (today the location of the Lincoln Parking Deck). The reason for this gathering of men from around the State of Illinois (who held a variety of political allegiances) centered on the issue of halting the expansion of slavery further west.<sup>110</sup> Those delegates who participated passed a series of resolutions that shaped what would become the platform for the Republican Party. After the formal business meeting ended, the delegates came back for an evening filled with speechmaking which included Lincoln’s famous “Lost Speech.” While there is no full account of this speech (which is why it has been dubbed “lost”), his speech called out those (in particular members of the now defunct Whig party) that placated the South and would stand aside while slavery continued to expand westward. Lincoln expounded on how incompatible slavery was (especially if it was allowed unlimited expansion) with preserving the Union.<sup>111</sup>

Due to the existence of several divergent accounts regarding Gridley’s involvement in anti-abolitionist activities, Gridley’s attitudes on slavery and abolition are not easily defined. One account accuses Gridley of inciting a mob against abolitionists in Bloomington. In 1846, the pastor of the Congregational Church, Reverend Levi Spencer<sup>112</sup>, accused Gridley of inciting a mob and attacking his house. Spencer was a minister and abolitionist who was “an avowed opponent of slavery.”<sup>113</sup> In his diary, he wrote a great deal about his feelings towards slavery. He felt deeply for his “brethren in bonds” and would endeavor to “defend the cause of the oppressed.” He felt that the United States could not be the nation that it professed itself to be because of slavery and that “our nation” was oppressed because of slavery.<sup>114</sup> Spencer helped found a Congregationalist church in Bloomington in September, 1843 and divided his time between preaching there and at a church in Mt. Hope. In addition to the church in Bloomington, he traveled between Congregationalist churches he helped to found in Canton, Vermont, Virgil, and Bernadotte.<sup>115</sup> Spencer moved to Bloomington from Canton, Illinois in April 1844. He then actively engaged in preaching against slavery, later founding an antislavery society in Pleasant Hill (near the town of Lexington).<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid; Letter from Asahel Gridley to David Davis, January 31, 1853 (Illinois Historic Preservation Agency)

<sup>110</sup> Bill Kemp. “Bloomington was the scene for Lincoln’s famous ‘Lost Speech’.” *The Pantagraph*, February 14, 2009

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Rev. Spencer was born January 30, 1812 in Otsego County, New York. He and his family moved to Illinois in the fall of 1839. He officially began preaching in 1841 as a Methodist minister. He founded the Congregationalist Church on October 3, 1842 and began preaching in towns in the area such as Canton, Farmington and Bloomington; J. Blanchard. *Memoir of Rev. Levi Spencer Successively Pastor of the Congregational Church at Canton, Bloomington, and Peoria, Illinois*. (Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1856) 55, 73, 84, 94

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 76

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 24-27

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 95

<sup>116</sup> Burnham, Davis, and Prince, 400

Two years after Spencer moved to Bloomington, his house and the house of George Dietrich, another abolitionist, were attacked by “a lawless mob of men.”<sup>117</sup> Spencer’s diary noted that prior to the event “a reward of \$100 has for weeks been offered by a lawyer in town to any one who would tar and feather me.” Spencer recorded that on the night in question, the mob came to the house about eleven o’clock at night. The mob tried to coax Spencer outside, but when he refused, eggs were thrown through the windows before the mob ran off. An hour later, the mob (much larger this time) returned and “poured a volley of brickbats through the windows, above and below, demolishing both glass and sash.” Spencer said that he and his family “narrowly escaped” injury by hiding in the corners of the rooms where the bricks being thrown could not reach them. Spencer said that as soon as he felt safe, he ran to a neighbor’s for help. Spencer reported that a group of concerned citizens appeared on scene to aid him and his family and helped fend off the mob.

The author of the book which contains Spencer’s memoir claims that the man who incited this mob was none other than “a ruffian named Gridley.”<sup>118</sup> This is plausible as Gridley was practicing law in Bloomington at the time this incident happened, and Gridley had been known on occasion to use the pages of the local newspaper to offer “rewards” to get people to help him get what he wanted. Gridley was also still the head of the McLean County Militia at this time (holding the rank of Brigadier General). A separate account of the same incident, written by Ezra Prince, however, reported that the crime was committed by a small group of men who had recently mustered into Company B of the Fourth Illinois Volunteer Regiment.

The night before the men of Company B were due to report to Springfield for service during the Mexican-American War, a group of about ten to twelve of them “got full of whisky” and went to “pay their respects to the Abolitionists of Bloomington who had excited their anger by their denunciations of the war.” The group of drunken men went to the homes of Rev. Spencer and George Dietrich and broke in the doors and windows of the residences with clubs and brick bats, and “defiled” the homes with rotten eggs. In response to the attack, William Duncan, a lieutenant in the company, said that “the outrageous attack on the homes of Rev. Spencer and Mr. Dietrich was the act of a few drunken men, the vagabond element of our town. The McLean County Company should not be mixed up with this matter at all as a company, and but few as individuals. We condemned and deplored the outrage.”<sup>119</sup>

Taking these differing accounts into consideration, Gridley’s views on the institution of slavery remain unclear. While he was a state senator in 1853 “he opposed laws to oppress African Americans as a back-door attempt to bring slavery into Illinois.”<sup>120</sup> In addition, he was quoted as saying, “Blacks were good citizens...[They] were industrious, performed many services that whites were unwilling to perform, were moral...and enjoyed comforts which belonged to humanity.”<sup>121</sup> Another account stated that Gridley absolutely hated slavery. Gridley biographer Robert H. Browne reported that Gridley felt that “slavery was a foul smelling carcass” and that he looked to Lincoln “as the one who could rid the South of its horrid, dragging-down, slavery system.”<sup>122</sup> It could be deduced from this information that, while

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<sup>117</sup> Blanchard, 96-97; Burnham, Davis, and Prince 21-22

<sup>118</sup> Blanchard, 116

<sup>119</sup> Burnham, Davis, and Prince 21-22

<sup>120</sup> Greg Koos. “Asahel Gridley’s Bank,” Looking for Lincoln Wayside Exhibit, 2009

<sup>121</sup> *Bloomington Intelligencer*, March 9, 1853

<sup>122</sup> Boslooper, 49

Gridley may have been against abolition and abolitionists, he was also not necessarily a supporter of slavery or its expansion. Until additional information is found, it may never be clear exactly what stance Gridley took on slavery and abolition.

Gridley also played a part in helping to secure the nomination of Abraham Lincoln as the Republican candidate for the 1860 election. While it is not known exactly how large that role was, Gridley was a staunch supporter of Abraham Lincoln. Gridley actively fought for the Republican nomination of Lincoln for the presidency. Gridley stated, "I want you to understand that I am in this undertaking, to advance Lincoln and nominate him if we can, with all my might, and I don't want any blundering accidents or mishaps."<sup>123</sup> One story published in *The Pantagraph* many years after Gridley's death stated that it was Gridley who told Lincoln he would be president. "Sitting in his law office with Lincoln one day, Gen. Gridley suddenly spoke up and said 'Lincoln you will be president of the United States someday.'" Lincoln looked at Gridley and asked him what made him think so. Gridley replied, "You just wait and see."<sup>124</sup> Gridley's biographer Robert Browne also claimed that Gridley advanced over \$100,000 for Lincoln's campaign. While there is no evidence to support this claim, it is plausible based on Gridley's vast financial resources and the close relationship he had with Lincoln.<sup>125</sup>

According to Gridley family lore, after Lincoln was elected President of the United States, he summoned Gridley to Washington, D.C. to offer him a political appointment; probably as a way to thank Gridley for all that he had done for Lincoln in the presidential campaign. Gridley's daughter Mary Gridley Bell recalled later in life that Lincoln offered her father "the first ministership to the court of St. James, London," which Gridley turned down. Lincoln then offered to send Gridley to Russia as a minister and again, Gridley said no, stating that he preferred to remain a private citizen.<sup>126</sup> It makes sense that Gridley chose to turn Lincoln's offers down because as a private citizen, he would probably make more money from his business ventures than he would holding a political position.

Gridley was involved in a variety of careers and owned many different businesses throughout his lifetime. In addition to the before mentioned, in 1853 Gridley founded Bloomington's first bank, the McLean County Bank. The bank was located on the corner of Front and Main Streets, the site of Gridley's original store.<sup>127</sup> It is a three-story, Italianate-style building constructed of Milwaukee brick.<sup>128</sup> The top floor of this building was used as the Masonic Hall from 1854 to about 1867.<sup>129</sup> The building has been restored and the current address is 102 North Main Street.

Gridley, along with Thereon Pardee and two Chicago capitalists (Jonathan Y. Scammon and J.H. Burch) organized the new bank with bonds secured by the State of Illinois.<sup>130</sup> In order for a person to open up a bank, the individual (or in this case individuals) had to apply for a bank

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<sup>123</sup> Robert H. Browne, *Abraham Lincoln and the Men of His Time*, (Chicago:1907)p.268-269

<sup>124</sup> "More Reminiscences of Lincoln and Gridley"

<sup>125</sup> Fraker, 235

<sup>126</sup> "Statue in Tribute to Gridley Unveiled," *The Pantagraph*, October 8, 1931

<sup>127</sup> *Bloomington City Directories, 1859-1860*

<sup>128</sup> "McLean County Bank building," McLean County Museum of History; an Architectural Glimpse into Historic Downtown Bloomington, <http://mcmhqr-arch.weebly.com/mclean-county-bank-building.html> (Date Accessed, May 12, 2014)

<sup>129</sup> Michael Freimann. *Standing on the Corner: A tour of the architecture of downtown Bloomington*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1999) 8

<sup>130</sup> Ezra Prince. "An Incident in Bloomington Banking." McLean County Historical Society Archives, 1; Burnham, 45

charter. It was then up to the state government to decide whether or not to grant the charter. The criteria each potential bank was supposed to meet differed from state to state but in general consisted of an initial capital level and constraints on how that money could be allocated.<sup>131</sup> The McLean County Bank was granted a charter until 1880 with an authorized capital of \$150,000. According to an 1870 advertisement in the *Bloomington City Directory*, the “bank pays interest on deposits as expressed in certificates therefor; deals in Exchange, Government Stocks, and Coin.”<sup>132</sup> Gridley was appointed the president and financial manager, positions which he held the rest of his life. Within two years of the bank’s opening, Gridley bought up the stock of his business partners and became the sole proprietor.<sup>133</sup> The establishment of the bank aided industrial growth throughout McLean County. It provided loans to a number of stockholders and businessmen as well as a safe depository for the community’s money.<sup>134</sup>

Several interesting incidents have been recorded while Gridley owned and operated the McLean County Bank. One such incident involved Gridley being bilked out of the sum of ten dollars. On February 24, 1857 a young man by the name of Pearson came into the bank and asked for a loan of ten dollars which was the “sum needed to close a very desirable horse trade.” Gridley asked the young man his name, to which he replied David Stubblefield. When Gridley did not recognize him, Pearson acted surprised (especially since it was reported that the imposter bore a striking resemblance to Stubblefield). Gridley asked the man why he did not ask for a loan from Mr. Temple, whose store it was known that Mr. Stubblefield generally dealt with. Pearson claimed that Temple was out and that because he was in urgent need of the loan, Gridley was his only option. Pearson was successful in convincing Gridley that he was David Stubblefield and secured a check from Gridley (which Pearson signed his mark to) and dashed off to complete the horse trade. Gridley soon discovered that he had been deceived and reported the theft to Marshal Briscoe.<sup>135</sup> Just a few days after the theft, Gridley and Briscoe encountered Pearson in the street as Pearson and a female companion were on their way to a concert. Gridley recognized the thief and Pearson was immediately taken to the sheriff’s office where he surrendered the check and confessed to the crime.<sup>136</sup>

Another incident involved local dry goods merchant R.R. Landon. In 1856, Landon had fallen on hard times after his store failed and most of his assets were “swallowed up” by creditors. Following the failure of his store, Landon “drifted to Chicago and engaged” in the brokerage business.<sup>137</sup> As a broker, Landon was in the business of buying bank notes from individuals or other brokers at a discount and then returning them to the issuing bank for payment in coin (known as specie). Typically, brokers bought up large amounts of notes from a single issuing bank and then “returned them en masse” to the issuing bank. Since there was no national currency at the time, each bank had its own unique currency (bank notes). This meant

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<sup>131</sup> Phillip Ager and Fabrizio Spargoli, “Financial Liberalization and Bank Failures: The United States Free Banking Experience,” (October 2012), [http://www.econ.upf.edu/gpefm/jm/pdf/paper/free%20banking%20and%20instability%20%28AGER\\_SPARGOLI%29.pdf](http://www.econ.upf.edu/gpefm/jm/pdf/paper/free%20banking%20and%20instability%20%28AGER_SPARGOLI%29.pdf), (Date accessed May 21, 2014), 5-6

<sup>132</sup> Western Publishing Company. *Holland’s Bloomington City Directory, 1870-71*, (Chicago: Western Publishing Co., 1868) 51

<sup>133</sup> “His Work is Done.”

<sup>134</sup> Duis, 272

<sup>135</sup> “Sold Cheap for Cash,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 26, 1857

<sup>136</sup> “The Horse Trade, Chapter 2<sup>nd</sup>,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 2, 1857

<sup>137</sup> Ezra M. Prince, “An Incident in Bloomington Banking,” McLean County Museum of History Archives.



there were thousands of “different looking pieces of paper, each with the name of a bank on it and number of dollars which the issuing bank promised to pay in coin if the note were presented to it.”<sup>138</sup> According to Ezra Prince, a local lawyer and friend of Gridley, Landon came back to Bloomington with approximately one thousand dollars worth of bills, or bank notes, from Gridley’s bank wanting to exchange them for coins.

Prince reported that Gridley typically exchanged his bank notes with those of a bank “in some inaccessible village in Northern Michigan.” By doing this, it would take several months “in the due course of business,” for Gridley’s money to return to him for redemption and would not require him to keep large amounts of coinage on hand for those who wished to exchange their bills.<sup>139</sup> People could also take their bank notes to any bank and turn them in for coins. However, it was costly to return bank notes to the issuing banks in other parts of the country. The further away the bank, and the relative stability of the bank, the deeper the discount of the note (meaning the bearer of the bank note received a portion of the face value of the note and the bank kept a portion as a fee for the transaction).<sup>140</sup> Most bank bills were not worth their face value at this time. On the day in question, however, Landon came to Gridley’s bank and demanded to exchange his bills for coins immediately. Gridley refused to give him coin (most likely because he did not have enough in his bank to pay Landon for all of the bills he wished to exchange). He instead offered payment to him in Landon’s “own notes, of which he had an ample supply.” Landon refused the exchange because he needed the coins to pay bills that were not his own. Still, Gridley refused.

Landon went to the law firm of Swett and Orme for advice. Swett and Orme told Landon to turn over the bills to Ezra Prince, who was a Notary Public at the time. Prince then went to Gridley and demanded the redemption of the bills. Of course, Gridley refused and “poured out the vials of his wrath” upon Prince. Prince went back to Swett and Orme for additional advice on what to do to get the payment out of Gridley. Prince was told to go back to Gridley and demand payment again. If Gridley refused, Prince was supposed to protest each bill. His fee for protesting each bill was \$2.50 and the notary fees on the whole amount would be several hundred dollars. Additionally, if Gridley continued to refuse, “one of the penalties for non-redemption was the forfeiture of the bank’s charter.” With this new threat, Gridley begrudgingly paid Prince for Landon’s bills rather than have his bank’s charter revoked.<sup>141</sup>

Sometime around 1860<sup>142</sup> Gridley bought the floundering Bloomington Gas, Light, and Coke Company. The Gas Company was organized on February 28, 1856 and Alexander B. Shaffer was president of the company.<sup>143</sup> The Gas Company supplied flammable gas to light streetlamps for the City of Bloomington and to light homes of people who subscribed to its service in Bloomington. Franklin Price, mayor of Bloomington at the time the company was organized, was one of the principal owners of the Gas Company when it began supplying

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<sup>138</sup> Richard Sylla. “The U.S. Banking System: Origin, Development, and Regulation,” The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/economics/essays/us-banking-system-origin-development-and-regulation> (Date Accessed July 21, 2014) 3.

<sup>139</sup> Banks at this time would arrange to exchange the bank notes they would issue with banks in other states. This practice was done to “prevent their currency from being returned too quickly for redemption” for hard currency such as coins; Prince, “An Incident in Bloomington Banking”.

<sup>140</sup> Sylla, 3.

<sup>141</sup> Prince, “An Incident in Bloomington Banking.”

<sup>142</sup> Tom Gumbrell. “Flicker of Flame,” *The Pantagraph*, January 10, 1957

<sup>143</sup> “The Bloomington Gas Works,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, January 21, 1857

flammable gas to residents of Bloomington on January 10, 1857.<sup>144</sup> Price served as mayor in 1855 and 1856. According to a reminiscence written by Price himself, he recalled that during his two terms as mayor, “the question of light was a source of constant discussion and many of the leading citizens voiced their sentiment on behalf of establishing a Gas Company.” He said “at a meeting of a dozen or so prominent businessmen it was agreed to form a company under the Act [a law that had previously been passed giving the company, when formed, the right to supply the city with light].” On January 10, 1857 “gas light chased the darkness away” from the streets of Bloomington. According to an article written to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gas Company, it was reported that “the illumination from 535 lamp posts would dispel the ‘hidjus<sup>145</sup> glume’ from Bloomington Streets and that ‘merchant shops could display their wares in an aura of light never before possible’” and that with the flick of a flame, “candles would be made obsolete in every” home in Bloomington.<sup>146</sup>

A short time later, after a few of the investors decided to withdraw from the company, Price and Shaffer purchased all of the stock and together were the sole owners. Shaffer then became interested in other business ventures so Price bought out his stock in the Gas Company. Finally, after Price had made some bad business ventures and the state banks began to fail, he sold all of his bonds and stock in the company to Asahel Gridley.<sup>147</sup>

The Gas Company was built at a cost of \$52,500 (which would be about \$1.4 million in 2012<sup>148</sup>) and was erected by contractor Herrick. The principle building was “L” shaped. There were several structures that comprised the company: the main building, the retort house (where coal was heated to generate gas), and the purifying house (which removes the hydrogen sulfide from the gas). The whole company was situated on a lot of about 177 by 198 feet at the intersection of Market and Oak streets in the northwest part of Bloomington. Initially, three miles of pipe were laid down through the principle streets and seventeen feet of service pipe leading from the street to the buildings. It was up to the consumers to furnish the rest of the service pipe and the fixtures inside of the buildings at their own expense. The price of the gas per customer was \$4 per 1,000 cubic feet, which at the time was thought to have been a cheaper alternative than using “burning fluid or candles.”<sup>149</sup>

Gridley greatly improved the company and expanded the quality and amount of gas service to residents of Bloomington. In the spring of 1867, Gridley completely rebuilt the Gas Company and moved the facility west of the Chicago and Alton Railroad tracks between Market and Washington Streets.<sup>150</sup> Not only was the original facility old and decaying, but the neighbors who lived near the gas plant complained of a disagreeable smell that emanated from the deteriorating gas works.<sup>151</sup> Gridley spent about \$100,000 to relocate and refit the gas works

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<sup>144</sup> Gumbrell, “Flicker of Flame;” “Gas,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, January 14, 1857

<sup>145</sup> Old spelling of the word “hideous”

<sup>146</sup> Gumbrell, “Flicker of Flame”

<sup>147</sup> “Recollections of Franklin Price,” McLean County Museum of History Archives; *The History of McLean County*, 397-398; *Holland’s Bloomington City Directory 1870-71*, 51; “Flicker of Flame.”

<sup>148</sup> Measuringworth.com; <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php> (Date Accessed May 19, 2014)

<sup>149</sup> “The Bloomington Gas Works.”

<sup>150</sup> Gumbrell, “Flicker of Flame.”

<sup>151</sup> Bob Grubb, “Manufactured Gas,” 1936, McLean County Museum of History Archives

(which would be \$1.6 million in 2012<sup>152</sup>). It produced 1,200,000 cubic feet of gas per year and earned about \$25,000 per year for Gridley.<sup>153</sup> The new plant was made of brick with a stone foundation and a slate roof. It was reported that new methods of generating gases and the improved construction greatly decreased the amount of “disagreeable gases” escaping from the gas works. The *Weekly Pantagraph* also reported that the new gas works would be “quite an ornament to the city, and will be built in the most thorough and workmanlike manner.”<sup>154</sup> Gridley was said to have boasted that Bloomington was “the best lighted town in the state.”<sup>155</sup>

Just ten years into this business venture, Gridley began to feel the pressure from the growth of modern technology. The new invention of electricity (which was invented in the early 1800s) would come to threaten all that he had built with the Gas Company. When electricity was first invented, it was very expensive to produce and did not produce much light. As scientists continued to refine and invent new methods of producing electricity, the prohibitive cost began to dwindle making it a cheaper, more appealing source of light to those who may have felt that the cost for flammable gas was too high. There is evidence that Gridley felt threatened by this new invention. In 1872 Gridley and the City of Bloomington signed a five-year contract at the reduced price \$3 per 1,000 cubic feet of gas (down one dollar from the previous agreements).<sup>156</sup> In 1877 Gridley and the City of Bloomington entered into a new ten-year contract in which again, Gridley reduced the price of flammable gas by another dollar (now \$2 per 1,000 cubic feet).<sup>157</sup> In a series of articles and advertisements Gridley published during the month of July that year, he stated this reduction was to make the price of “Gas Light as cheap as any other light for the same amount of illumination” for all families within his Gas District.<sup>158</sup>

Some members of the community continued to complain about the high cost for flammable gas lighting considering recent discoveries and improvements in electricity. A special correspondence printed in *The Daily Pantagraph* stated that the author felt the present City Council was tying their hands with such a lengthy contract “for use of inferior light” that was costly.<sup>159</sup> But for the time being this lower contracted price seemed to keep Gridley’s business booming as usual. The *Daily Pantagraph* reported that the consumers of Gridley’s gas were satisfied with the lower price and the excellent service Gridley’s Gas Works has always provided.<sup>160</sup>

Like Gridley’s other business ventures, his tenure as the president and owner of the Gas Company was not without conflict. According to an article commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gas Company, in September, 1877 a gas fight broke out between Gridley and the City of Bloomington. Gridley and the City Council of Bloomington became embroiled in a dispute over the extension of street lighting contracts. Members of the city council were “taking note” of views in favor of the developing alternative sources for lighting, such as the newly discovered electricity. One such view was promoted by William O. Davis, owner and editor of

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<sup>152</sup> Measuringworth.com; <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php>, (Date accessed June 2, 2014)

<sup>153</sup> “His Work is Done”

<sup>154</sup> “Our New Gas Works,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, November 21, 1866

<sup>155</sup> Grubb, “Manufactured Gas.”

<sup>156</sup> “The Gas Contract,” Special Correspondence, *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 24, 1877

<sup>157</sup> “Gas: The Conditions of the Contract Between General Gridley and the City,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 2, 1877

<sup>158</sup> “Cheap Gas Light,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 7, 1877

<sup>159</sup> “The Gas Contract”

<sup>160</sup> “Will reduce price of gas to all consumers,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 7, 1877

one of the local newspapers, the *Daily Pantagraph*. In his editorials, Davis “urged against contracts beyond the appropriations period of one year.” He said that “electric lights have been discovered. Why tie our hands for years and years to come?”<sup>161</sup>

It was reported that Gridley, who wanted security for his company and to also show the City of Bloomington who controlled the lights of the streets of Bloomington, took matters into his own hands. Gridley “instructed his employees to go remove the burners and seal the orifices of all city lamp posts to prevent their being lighted. Acting for the city, a police officer promptly arrested four of Gridley’s men for tampering with city property.” Gridley then went to the police station and ordered his men back to work, it was reported that the lone police officer on duty could do nothing to stop him. The men went back to work, sealing off the lamp posts. Again, the men were arrested but this time the police officer took them to the Justice of the Peace, Goodman Ferre, before Gridley could arrive. Each man was fined \$50. When Gridley arrived, he signed bonds for each of them. As stubborn as always, Gridley again ordered his men back to work on sealing the lamp posts. Again, Gridley’s men were arrested (ten total this time) and fined \$50 each. This time, the city attorney (a man by the name of Bloomfield) tried to get an injunction against Gridley, stating that Gridley was tampering with city property. Gridley defended his position stating that “the lamp post burners and orifices” were the Gas Company’s (his) property, not the city’s, and he was simply protecting his property. It is not clear how the issue was resolved (or how much truth there is in yet another chapter of local lore about Gridley) but according to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary history of the Gas Company, the streets of Bloomington remained lit by gas for another eight years after the incident.<sup>162</sup>

Gridley was also involved in helping to bring the first telegraph lines to Bloomington in 1853.<sup>163</sup> In August, 1853 the president of the Illinois and Mississippi Telegraph Company, John D. Caton, came to Bloomington to promote the fairly new invention of the telegraph. Caton “called on city leaders to pony up \$1,000 in stock to make certain Bloomington would be a point on the telegraph line between Springfield and Chicago.”<sup>164</sup> A “who’s who of city fathers,” including Gridley, picked up one share each at \$50 apiece. On January 24, 1854 Bloomington’s first telegraph office was opened. It was located in Major’s Hall on Front Street (which today is the current location of the Lincoln Parking Deck). The first message, sent by the S. Francis publisher of the *Illinois Journal* in Springfield, was received by Charles Merriman, the publisher of *The Bloomington Intelligencer* (predecessor of *The Pantagraph*). The message was short and simple, stating that Francis hoped that “the new communication by telegraph, so auspiciously opened, continue for ages.”<sup>165</sup> The telegraph had a huge impact on everyday life in Bloomington, including lawyers of the Eighth Judicial Circuit like Abraham Lincoln, and businessmen like Gridley. It made communication with clients and family almost instantaneous in comparison to writing letters, which would take days for the letters to reach their intended recipient.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Gumbrell, “The Flicker of Flame”

<sup>162</sup> Ibid

<sup>163</sup> Burnham, 65

<sup>164</sup> Bill Kemp. “Telegraph’s Arrival in 1854 Wrought Profound Changes,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*. (Bloomington; McLean County Historical Society, 2012) 24-25

<sup>165</sup> Burnham, 65

<sup>166</sup> Kemp, 24-25

By 1859, Gridley was recognized as McLean County's first millionaire. A substantial part of his wealth was the land and property he owned. By the time of his death in 1881, in addition to his mansion on Grove Street and eight business and storehouses, he also owned twenty-six farms. These farms comprised "over 6,000 acres of the best land in Central Illinois." According to his obituary, instead of making loans, he invested his money in farms. About 4,000 acres were in McLean County, lying in Dry Grove, Dale, Gridley, and Martin townships. He also had a farm of about 1,100 acres of land on the Mackinaw River in Woodford County and one of equal size in Iroquois County.<sup>167</sup>

In 1860, as a reflection of his wealth (and possibly to make it up to his wife for disillusioning her about what life would be like in Bloomington when he brought her west<sup>168</sup>), Gridley constructed a huge mansion, known as "The Oaks," at 301 East Grove Street. Designed in the Italianate style,<sup>169</sup> the mansion was "constructed of cream colored bricks imported from Milwaukee with French windows along the front of the residence that opened out onto a stone patio roofed over with lacy ironwork. Each window and door was surmounted by a graceful arched stone header."<sup>170</sup> When the Gridley's traveled overseas they would bring back grandiose tapestries, statues, and paintings said to have been painted by Michelangelo and Le Brun. A large Italian fountain stood on the front lawn and was surrounded by broad drives.<sup>171</sup> The house was built at a cost of \$40,000, which in 2012 would be about \$1,100,000.00.<sup>172</sup> It was said that Gridley once invited Abraham Lincoln, who was in town for a political rally for the upcoming presidential election of 1860, to see "The Oaks." Gridley proudly gave Lincoln a tour of the mansion's marvelously decorated interior. After the tour, Lincoln stated: "Gridley, do you want everyone to hate you?"<sup>173</sup>

Although Gridley held a reputation of being boisterous, opportunistic, and ill-mannered, he maintained a friendship with Lincoln. As noted by Lincoln's law partner from 1852-1857, Ward Hill Lamon,<sup>174</sup> he said both men were learned, but enjoyed a good brawl, and with a strong assured voice, were able to work through tough situations.<sup>175</sup> The familiarity between Gridley and Lincoln is cataloged in the Library of Congress, contained in a series of telegrams and letters sent between 1859 and 1860.<sup>176</sup>

Often times, Lincoln was compelled to defend Gridley, whether it was on a proposal brought forth by Gridley or Gridley's own public foul mouth brought on by his drinking, which often got him into trouble. According to one story, it was said that Gridley occupied street corners yelling profanities at "every prominent man in town."<sup>177</sup> He was also very quick to defend himself should anyone lash out against him. He wrote a heated letter to the editor of *The*

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<sup>167</sup> "His Work is Done."

<sup>168</sup> Boslooper, 34

<sup>169</sup> The Italianate style of architecture featured a low pitched roof, bracketed cornices, round and segmented arched windows with decorative headers, and recessed entrances. It was a very popular architectural style for homes in the 1840s to 1880s in the United States; Freimann, 22

<sup>170</sup> Boslooper, 14

<sup>171</sup> Ibid

<sup>172</sup> Measuring Worth, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare>

<sup>173</sup> Schlenker, 14

<sup>174</sup> Boslooper, 18

<sup>175</sup> Ibid

<sup>176</sup> Ibid

<sup>177</sup> Boslooper, 9



*Pantagraph* in response to an anonymous letter written about him in which it appears that his character was attacked. In his letter, Gridley lashed out at the anonymous author inviting that person to rewrite the letter with their name attached so that Gridley could know who was writing “malicious” lies and personally attacking him.<sup>178</sup> It appeared that Gridley was getting a dose of his own medicine in this instance. It is not known if he ever found out who the letter writer was.

At one point Gridley’s mouth caused a lawsuit. His close friend, William Flagg, sued him for slander sometime in the spring of 1859.<sup>179</sup> On this occasion Gridley “became imperiously irritated” one day and “on the impulse of the moment, very bitterly abused his old and respected friend William Flagg.” He poured “slanderous accusations” upon him, the result of which was Flagg sued Gridley for damages. As soon as Gridley cooled down he realized what he had done and regretted it very much. But what’s done is done and Gridley had to defend his actions as best he could.<sup>180</sup> Gridley tried to settle the issue with Flagg on his own but to no avail. Future president Abraham Lincoln agreed to defend his friend Asahel after a series of letters and telegrams from Gridley imploring him to come to his defense. In one letter, Gridley stated that “I have tried my best to settle the slander suit of Flagg by myself and nothing can be done. He [Flagg] has been made to believe that because I have the reputation of having more of this world’s goods that falls into the lot of a majority of the inhabitants of this earth he is entitled not only to keep and cheat me out of the eleven thousand dollars lent money he owes me but also a great deal more.” Gridley tells Lincoln that he is depending on him to help him win his case.<sup>181</sup> Sometime in early 1860 Lincoln finally came to Gridley’s defense. Lincoln came to Gridley’s bank one day and told him that his defense, simply put, would be that “your tongue is no slanderer; that the people generally know you to be impulsive and say things you do not mean, and they do not consider what you say as slander.” Gridley appeared to be satisfied with Lincoln’s line of defense and Lincoln then went to see Flagg, affected a compromise, and the case was settled.<sup>182</sup> Lincoln’s defense and reasoning was true and logical.

Several of Gridley’s friends and associates made similar statements about Gridley’s personality during his life time and after he had passed away. Jesse Fell stated that “he was an irritable and impulsive man and at times on the impulse of the hour he would utter things, which he did not mean, to his best friends that would be offensive, and would even abuse them and then the next hour, in his cooler moments, he would be sorry and deeply regret what he had said and done. While these were his faults, still he was not a bad man. We all have our faults.”<sup>183</sup> Gridley’s friend and one time law partner, William Packard, stated that Gridley “was not a man without faults, and his temperament was so ardent, and his disposition so intense and full of fire, that the faults he had were very apparent. But, while he was a hot and fierce antagonist, he was at the same time a generous opponent, and never sacrificed a personal friendship upon the altar of professional disagreement...and never bore malice.”<sup>184</sup> Ezra Prince, another prominent Bloomington lawyer and friend of Gridley, recalled that when he approached Gridley in 1856 to redeem bank bills from Gridley’s bank for local dry goods merchant, R.R. Landon, Gridley

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<sup>178</sup> “Gen. Gridley Says a Word,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 13, 1874

<sup>179</sup> Boslooper, 115-119

<sup>180</sup> “His Work is Done.”

<sup>181</sup> Boslooper, 119; Letter from Asahel Gridley to Abraham Lincoln November 28, 1859 (Library of Congress).

<sup>182</sup> “His Work is Done”

<sup>183</sup> “His Work is Done.”

<sup>184</sup> Burnham, Davis, and Prince, 381

refused in his “most emphatic style.” In the end, after Prince reminded Gridley that one of the penalties of “non redemption” was that he would forfeit the charter of his bank,<sup>185</sup> Gridley begrudgingly exchanged Prince’s bank bills for gold coins. Prince stated that for several months after the incident, “Gridley would pass me by as if I was an utter stranger, but one morning I met him and he held out his hand, saying ‘Mr. Prince, you must excuse me for what I said around at the bank, it didn’t mean anything.’” They shook hands and were friends from that point on.<sup>186</sup>

Flagg was not the only person whom Gridley rubbed the wrong way. The Gridleys found themselves more and more alienated by other society members in Bloomington. This was partially because of Asahel’s temper and partly because of Mary’s conspicuous shows of wealth which may have erected barriers between her and other slightly less wealthy society members.

The Davis family (David and Sarah) were the most notable members of Bloomington society who did not get along well with Asahel and Mary. They were bitter political and social rivals of the Gridleys. In fact, David Davis hated Gridley with a passion. He was known to say on occasion that “Gridley could not have gotten so rich honestly.” According to local lore, Gridley and Davis got into a fight in Davis’ law office which ended by Davis pinning Gridley to the floor. Gridley then bit Davis’s finger until he let him up.<sup>187</sup> Another example of their rivalry dealt with the purchase of what became the Davis family home. In October, 1843 the Davis family moved to a farm which David had acquired from its owner, Jesse Fell. This was part of a settlement of a loan of \$1,250 Fell owed Davis and Davis’ law partner, Wells Colton. In a letter Davis wrote to Colton, he stated that he swapped his house with Fell—“giving him the loan to boot—for his farm. The hurry in the decision was that Gridley wanted to buy of Fell. I could not bear to see Gridley get that place.”<sup>188</sup> The farm was made up of 190 acres of land located on the eastern edge of town on the prairie. It also had several gardens, livestock, a farmhouse, and other structures on it. The new owners named the estate “Clover Lawn.” Later in her life Mary recounted to Madame Annette that Judge David Davis and his wife Sarah had borrowed her cut-glass high stemmed champagne glasses—“not to use as receptacles for the effervescent beverage...but for vases of flowers to decorate their home in honor of guests.”<sup>189</sup> This may have been a jab at the Davis’ in that she felt they were not as high class as the Gridleys.

However big of a rivalry the Gridleys and Davis’ had, Gridley did respect David. Gridley’s friend Jesse Fell recalled that Gridley had admitted to him that he and Davis were completely different men and “his relations with the Judge were not as pleasant as” Fell’s were. But, despite their disagreements, he thought Davis was a pure and able man and was “for him against the world.” Fell said for Gridley to have said that “he was for any man, it meant something.”<sup>190</sup>

Although Gridley was successful in business and had extensive wealth, his marriage to Mary Gridley was not as fortuitous. Asahel’s temper was not limited to those in society. Mary

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<sup>185</sup> Based on the free banking system (when there was no federal bank, individual banks were chartered and governed by states), in effect from 1837 to 1863, banknotes were not issued by one central bank, they were issued by each individual bank. The bearer of the note was entitled to redemption in specie (like gold coins) at any time. Should a bank refuse to redeem the notes, the charter of the bank could be revoked; Ager and Spargoli, 1-3

<sup>186</sup> Prince, 3

<sup>187</sup> Fraker, 80-81

<sup>188</sup> King, 52-53; Letter from David Davis to Wells Colton, March 20, 1844 (Illinois Historic Preservation Agency)

<sup>189</sup> Annette, “A Queenly Woman.”

<sup>190</sup> Duis, 275



was often the focus of that temper as well. It is said by their neighbor Jonathan Cheney that Asahel once chased Mary out of “The Oaks” on a snowy winter evening in only a nightgown after one of their arguments and shut the door.<sup>191</sup>

The Gridley’s were parents to ten children. Unfortunately only four (Juliette, Albert, Mary, and Edward) survived to adulthood. Five of their children died in infancy. Another son Charlie lived to the age of ten but accidentally shot himself with a toy gun Asahel had given him. While Charlie was playing with the pistol, it accidentally discharged in his hand and “made a serious wound.”<sup>192</sup> Charlie later died of a lockjaw infection from the wound. Lockjaw (today known as tetanus), is a serious bacterial infection that affects the muscles and nerves. The infection begins with muscle stiffness, usually in the neck and jaw area, and progresses to other areas of the body. Death was often the result due to severe breathing difficulties or heart problems.<sup>193</sup> Asahel was so affected by the tragedy that he accused Mary of smothering their five infant children that had preceded Charlie in death, among other accusations.<sup>194</sup>

But Mary was a strong-willed woman and found ways to get back at Asahel for his nasty temper. During the presidential campaign in October 1860, several political rallies were held in Bloomington. Stephen Douglas and Governor Thomas Corwin (former governor of Ohio), were in town to speak at these rallies. Asahel, being an ardent supporter of the Republican Party, escorted Gov. Corwin to the Republican rally being held across town. At the same time, Mary put a Douglas flag on her husband’s carriage and escorted Douglas to town to attend the Democratic rally. Mary is known to have preferred Lincoln over Douglas so chances are that she did this to undermine her husband which was a very brave and daring thing to do at the time. Later that month, Judge David Davis wrote to his wife Sarah and told her that he was ashamed of Mary Gridley’s behavior. He stated that “a wife, making her husband, a laughing stock bringing him into public ridicule, and hurting his feelings in public, needs the chastisement that ‘Lord Hale’ thought was right under certain circumstances. A great many men would not live with her another day after such an impropriety.”<sup>195</sup> Even after his death, stories continued to be told as to how Mary continued to seek revenge.

Asahel’s life came to an end on January 25, 1881. It was reported that he died of exhaustion and a lung ailment aggravated by fighting a fire at his bank the previous year.<sup>196</sup> Although he died in peace with his family around him, Gridley’s, close friend Jonathan Cheney (who was reportedly at Gridley’s deathbed), claimed that Mary refused to provide Gridley with more warm clothing when his extremities began to get cold. Cheney stated that Mary said it would be too much effort for her to wash the extra clothing.<sup>197</sup> Cheney also recalled that when Reverend S.P. Simpson from St. Matthews Episcopal Church attended Gridley’s deathbed, the minister asked him “General, have you been a profane man. Do you not fear the fires of Hell?”

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<sup>191</sup> Boslooper, 20

<sup>192</sup> “His Work is Done.”

<sup>193</sup> “Tetanus,” Department of Health, Information for a Healthy New York, [http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/tetanus/fact\\_sheet.htm](http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/tetanus/fact_sheet.htm), (Date accessed February 20, 2014).

<sup>194</sup> Schlenker, 16

<sup>195</sup> King, 160; Letter from David Davis to Sarah Davis, October 30, 1860 (Illinois Historic Preservation Agency)

<sup>196</sup> Boslooper, 22

<sup>197</sup> Schlenker, 23

To which Gridley stated “Not a bit of it. I’ve lived in hell since the day I was married.”<sup>198</sup> How much truth is in these claims remains to be seen.

*The Pantagraph*, which published a series of articles about Gridley and his funeral services, printed a lengthy tribute by some of the most prominent capitalists, businessmen, farmers, and professional gentlemen in McLean County before his funeral. John Burnham stated that he felt the people of Bloomington and McLean County would never fully realize “their indebtedness to General Gridley.” Hamilton Spencer said that while Gridley was a strange man, “he was the most honest and upright man he ever knew.” John Ewins said that while “Gridley had enemies, he had friends whom he would help whenever assistance was asked, and would do it cheerfully.” James Ewing, who was an intimate friend of Gridley, stated that his death was “a calamity to the business interests and prosperity of the city of Bloomington.”<sup>199</sup>

His funeral was a lavish event held at “The Oaks.” It was a mixture of all classes of society in Bloomington. Rich, poor, “the moderately thrifty,” young, old, immigrants, and “old settlers” alike all came to pay their last respects to Gridley. *The Pantagraph* reported that it was truly a “cosmopolitan” gathering with 5,000 people in attendance over the course of the hour in which the wake was held.<sup>200</sup> Banks were closed between 2 and 3 o’clock in the afternoon during the actual funeral and all other business was practically at a standstill during his funeral. All of Gridley’s tenants were said to have closed business on that day as well. Between 800 and 1,000 people crowded into Gridley’s mansion for the funeral and even more turned away because there was no room.<sup>201</sup> Rev. Simpson of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church presided over the services. The Gridleys had attended the Episcopal Church for many years (although it was reported that Asahel was not a member of any religious organization) and Asahel contributed largely to erecting the church four years prior to his death.<sup>202</sup> In his sermon, Rev. Simpson reminded all those in attendance that Gridley’s life was dedicated to Bloomington and “that his last conscious thought, outside of his own condition, appeared to be of the prosperity of Bloomington.”<sup>203</sup>

There were two sets of pallbearers for the funeral. The first set was at the house and included Judge John McClun, Adam Guthrie, and Jonathan Cheney. Those close friends and associates bore Gridley’s body to Bloomington Cemetery (today known as Evergreen Memorial Cemetery), his final resting place. The procession along Grove Street was long with great numbers of people dressed in black lining the street. Cheney recalled that Mary insisted that her husband’s casket be carried out the rear door instead of the front door because her “rugs had already taken enough punishment.”<sup>204</sup> The second set of pallbearers met the funeral cortege at the gravesite and was made up of members of Gridley’s Masonic Lodge, Bloomington Lodge No. 43. Gridley was a Master Mason at the time of his death. Masonic burial rights were observed at the gravesite with Master Thomas Stevenson presiding. Gridley was buried in the family plot next to several of his children that had preceded him in death.

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<sup>198</sup> Schlenker, 5

<sup>199</sup> “Gridley: The Public Estimate of His Character and Services to Bloomington,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 26, 1881

<sup>200</sup> “Gone to his Grave,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 28, 1881

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>202</sup> “Gridley: The Public Estimate of His Character and Services to Bloomington;” “His Work is Done”

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>204</sup> Schlenker, 23

Even after his death, Gridley continued to upset those around him. His surviving children became embroiled in a series of dramatic events that were displayed in the pages of *The Daily Pantagraph* in the same style as today's tabloids. When his eldest daughter Juliette Gridley Schoenrock found out that her father's will had left her only a fraction of the amount her other siblings received, she was furious. Calling her father "the dictator of this city for 40 years," she went on a verbal rampage, using a rather vivid narrative to relate all kinds of unsavory (and probably falsified) things about her family.<sup>205</sup> Juliette also said that she felt the will was made while her father "was in a frenzied and excitable state," and that those around her father were responsible for the creation of this unfair will.<sup>206</sup> She then stormed into a lawyer's office contesting the will. The court ruled against her in 1883 and Juliette returned to Europe with her second husband, Count Ernest Schoenrock of Switzerland. However, before she returned to Europe it was said that she went to her father's grave and stomped on it saying "Old Grid! This is just where you ought to be!"<sup>207</sup>

Gridley, despite all his short comings, was a man dedicated to the development and advancement of McLean County. His last surviving child, Mary Gridley Bell, commissioned a statue of her father on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his arrival in Bloomington. On October 8, 1931 the statue was dedicated in the rotunda of the McLean County Courthouse in Bloomington. The bronze sculpture was made by Oskar J. W. Hansen, a Norwegian sculptor from Chicago. During the ceremony, several of Bloomington's leading citizens at the time gave speeches about Gridley's legacy and all of the contributions he made to the area. Judge Louis FitzHenry, who knew Gridley during the last few years of his life, served as the master of ceremonies during the dedication. In his speech, he stated that "probably no other pioneer had more to do with the laying of the foundation for Bloomington than General Asahel Gridley."<sup>208</sup> While the statue no longer stands in the center of the rotunda, it remains in the old McLean County Courthouse, (today the McLean County Museum of History) and can be found at the end of the north hall.

By: Candace Summers, 2014

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<sup>205</sup> Schlenker, 25

<sup>206</sup> Hiatt, 9

<sup>207</sup> Schlenker, 26

<sup>208</sup> "Statue In Tribute to Gridley Unveiled," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 8, 1931