

Hester Vernon Fell (1819-1906)

Hester Vernon Fell was born on March 2, 1819 in Little Brittain, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. She was the sixth child born to William and Rachel (Milner) Brown. Her family was members of the Society of Friends, or Quakers. Her father was a descendent of James Brown (Hester's 3rd great grandfather), who immigrated to the United States from England before 1679. He first settled in Marcus Hook in what would eventually become the state of Pennsylvania. According to family lore, James' brother William came to the United States with William Penn in 1682.¹ Penn is the Quaker settler known for founding Pennsylvania as a haven for Quakers who were persecuted in England because of their religious beliefs.

In October of 1828 Hester's father brought his family to settle in Illinois. They settled on land along the Mackinaw River in Tazewell County that her father had purchased from the government. According to family folklore, Hester told the story that when she was about nine years old, she and her family rode from Pennsylvania in a two-horse drawn carriage with a team of four horses hauling all of their possessions. They spent almost four weeks on their journey west often stopping and spending the night at farm houses along the way. She remembered vividly how bumpy the "corduroy roads over the marshy Indiana land" was.² That fall and winter, the family lived in two log cabins which were on the land. That spring William built a new home for the family out of "hewn logs." It was also recorded that William later traveled to St. Louis, Missouri to purchase glass windows for their new home. This was rather extravagant and unusual for that time because more typical houses near the Browns had window frames which were either left open or covered by oiled paper during colder months.³

Many of Hester's memories of her early life on the prairie of Illinois were recorded by her descendants. One such memory was about the failure of the corn crop in 1833. She recalled that her father had "an abundance of corn" and farmers from across the area came to him to purchase corn. She said that others may have taken advantage of the situation and demanded higher prices but not her father. She said that her father would not take advantage of "their necessity" and only charged them the current price of \$1.00 a bushel.⁴

Education was important to Hester's father. Because there was no school close to where they lived, William decided to hire a private teacher to educate his youngest children. In 1832 William hired a young man by the name of Jesse Fell who was a recent arrival in Tazewell County. Fell would become a very important figure in McLean County and Illinois history. According to Hester's older brother Joshua Fell "came by steamboat to Pekin and footed it to our house, a distance of 16 miles carrying a knapsack."⁵ Fell had come to Pekin on his way to Bloomington to begin practicing law. However, William, whom Fell knew from Pennsylvania, persuaded Fell to stay the winter and teach his younger children. Hester was one of those children being thirteen years old

¹ Frances Morehouse. *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*. (Champaign-Urbana, IL. The University of Illinois, 1916) Biography of Hester Vernon (Brown) Fell

² Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, Biography of Hester V. Fell

³ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, Biography of Hester V. Fell

⁴ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, Biography of Hester V. Fell

⁵ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, Biography of Hester V. Fell

at the time. This was how she met her future husband, Jesse Fell. Several years later when Hester was about seventeen, she and her fifteen year old sister Rachel were sent to Springfield by their father to attend a finishing school for girls. The education she received at this school would have emphasized etiquette, social, and cultural skills. Hester spent two years at this school. According to Fell family history, Hester said that most of her time was “taken up with French lessons and instruction in fine embroidery. What a way to fit girls for a life in a new country!”⁶

After she finished school in Springfield, on January 26, 1838 Hester and Jesse were married. Jesse had been previously engaged to Hester’s oldest sister, Eliza. However, Eliza passed away before the marriage took place. Like Hester, Jesse’s family were also Quakers but she and Jesse had moved away from Quaker doctrine and begun to follow the more liberal doctrine of the Universalist church. They were married by Reverend Nathaniel Wright, a minister at the Universalist Church from Tremont, IL.⁷ Their wedding was a simple and quiet affair that did not include gifts or a honeymoon.⁸ Some of the attendees at their wedding included Jesse’s sister Rebecca and his brother Kersey, his good friend David Davis (his best man), and Hester’s brother Joshua Brown.⁹ The couple then went back to Bloomington where Fell had settled and established himself as a businessman. They moved into the home which Fell had built; a modest-sized farmhouse on 190 acres of land about one half mile east of the Bloomington courthouse.

Hester and Jesse’s married life got off to a rather rocky start. Their wedding was only a year after the Land Panic of 1837. Although Jesse was still living comfortably at the time of their marriage, he soon lost all of the land he owned (including several hundred acres in what is now downtown Chicago) and went bankrupt by 1841 when his real estate creditors were unable to repay him.¹⁰ After going bankrupt, he was forced to return to his first career as a lawyer, though he never really cared for practicing law. Being a lawyer required him to travel sixty miles overnight to Springfield on horseback several times a month. It was a hard lifestyle for Jesse and for Hester who had to cope with his frequent absences. But, it was a necessary source of income.

While he was in Springfield, Jesse would work out of the law offices of Abraham Lincoln. The Fells were also close friends with the lawyer and future president of the United States. Jesse first met Lincoln in the winter of 1834-1835 when he was in Vandalia—then Illinois’s state capital—successfully fighting the annexation of McLean County territory by neighboring counties. In Vandalia, he shared accommodations with John Todd Stuart and Lincoln (which these arrangements were typical for the time), both Whig legislators from Sangamon County. The two would become close friends and political allies.¹¹ Lincoln’s law office was Jesse’s headquarters while he was in Springfield and when Lincoln traveled the 8th Judicial Circuit, Fell’s law offices in Bloomington were Lincoln’s headquarters as well.

⁶Harriet Fyffe Richardson. *Quaker Pioneers*. (Milwaukee: Privately Printed, c.1940) 14.

⁷ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 26

⁸ Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 14

⁹ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 26

¹⁰ Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 26-27

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

One thing that the Fells had in common with Lincoln was their views on slavery. Both Jesse and Hester's fathers were ardent Abolitionists who were known to have assisted slaves fleeing the South through the Underground Railroad. Family lore states that William Brown's (Hester's father) dog Pete would growl at strange whites but be friendly and quiet toward blacks.¹²

Because the Fells were still suffering from financial losses Jesse had suffered during the Panic of 1837, Jesse was forced to sell the land their farm was on. He sold this land to David Davis because he needed to settle part of a loan which he owed Davis and Davis' law partner Wells Colton. So in 1843, Davis acquired Fell's farm and 190 acres of land as part of the settlement of this loan. Fell and his family then moved north and east of Bloomington, (today the Town of Normal) where Fell built a log cabin and established a new farm.¹³ They named their home "Fort Jesse," but many of their peers called it "Fell's Folly" because it was so far away and separated from Bloomington by a stream.¹⁴ This farm was located close to where Ft. Jesse Road runs in Normal today.

According to Fell family lore, Hester often spoke of hearing wolves and foxes howl at night because of how far away the house was from town. This bothered her particularly while Jesse was away. She was always nervous when Jesse was away (which happened quite frequently) because she feared that "he would be overtaken and killed."¹⁵ Hester also liked to tell the story of how once while Jesse was away on business a "wandering Indian came near the house." She opened the door, handed him food, and waved him away.¹⁶

Hester and Jesse had seven children: two sons; named Henry Clay and William B. (who died after three weeks) and five daughters; Eliza, Clara, Rachel, Fannie, and Alice. They were also the guardians of a girl named Ellen McGinnis. Ellen's mother was a servant for the Fells and she frequently brought her young daughter along to play with the Fell children while she worked. One day, she asked Hester if Ellen could spend the night; Hester agreed. Ellen's mother never returned and Hester took pity on the orphan girl and incorporated her into her family, treating her kindly as if she was their own child. Ellen later attended Illinois State Normal University like the Fell daughters did and eventually became a teacher at the Illinois Soldiers and Sailor's Children's School in Normal. She is said to have done this out of gratitude for Hester Fell in caring for her as a child.¹⁷ Three of the other Fell children also became teachers; Rachel became a botany assistant at ISNU, Eliza studied and taught piano in Chicago, and Fannie taught Latin, Greek, and German in the College Preparatory department of ISNU.

In 1845 Fell and his family relocated to Payson, IL, (near Quincy, IL) where he bought and managed a nursery.¹⁸ From "Fruit Hill," he sold few trees, but he marketed and sold enough fruit to make the venture pay off.¹⁹ Because this business venture did not pan out, the Fells moved back to Bloomington by November 19, 1851 after trading

¹² Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, Biography of Hester V. Fell

¹³ Helen E. Marshall, "Jesse W. Fell, Friend of Education," *Teacher Education*. (Illinois State Normal University, September 1957), 15

¹⁴ Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 27.

¹⁵ Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 27.

¹⁶ Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 27.

¹⁷ Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 39-40.

¹⁸ "Jesse W. Fell," *The Index*, (1892).

¹⁹ Marshall, "Jesse W. Fell, Friend of Education," 15

his farm in Payson to his brother Robert for Robert's farm of 240 acres in Bloomington.²⁰ In 1857, Jesse constructed a home located on what was then the corner of Broadway and Irving Streets. Jesse most likely chose this site because he wanted to be near the site of the newly founded "Normal School," otherwise known as Illinois State Normal University. He had been the driving force for the school being founded in Bloomington earlier in the year. His home was also located in what would later become the Town of Normal. Their home is considered the first house built in Normal (officially founded in 1865). The land which the Fell home was located on was known as "Greenwood."²¹

Their new home was used as a church for a time because there were no churches yet built in town. Their home was also the site of several lively dance parties for the Fell children who attended ISNU. Although Jesse was opposed to alcohol consumption and public dance halls, he seemed to have no problem with dancing in general. He hired men to take up the carpet making it easier for dances to be held in their home and Hester used her new ice cream maker to make ice cream for the parties. Their home was very comfortable and had several items new to Bloomington including the first furnace, window screens, the first piano sold in Bloomington, an indoor bathroom, and of course, the ice cream freezer, which Hester often loaned to neighbors.²² Their home also was the site of the first school in Normal, since the "model school," which was to be located at ISNU, had not yet been completed.²³ After living in this house for about 25 years, Jesse and Hester moved to a new house in 1882. This house is located on the south-east corner of Broadway and Vernon Streets and still stands today.

After Jesse's death on February 25, 1887, Hester remained in the house and managed nearly all of its affairs until her own peaceful death on June 12, 1906. She was eighty-seven years old at the time. Their marriage had been happy and complimentary—he being an idealistic dreamer, she being practical, orderly, and supportive of her husband.²⁴ They are buried side by side in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

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²⁰ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 31

²¹ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 33-34

²² Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 31

²³ Morehouse, *The Life of Jesse W. Fell*, 34

²⁴ Richardson, *Quaker Pioneers*, 129