

John Howard Burnham (1834-1917)

John Howard Burnham was born on October 31, 1834 in Essex, Massachusetts. His parents, John Burnham and Sarah Choate Perkins, were descended from some of the first settlers of New England including a John Burnham who came to America in 1634 from Norwich, England and fought in the Pequot Indian War of 1637.

In 1855 John moved to Barrington, Cook County, Illinois. He taught school there for two years until he had saved up enough money to come to Bloomington, Illinois and enroll at Illinois State Normal University in 1858. He would become the first student from Cook County to graduate from the school which had been founded in 1857.

When the U.S. Civil War began with the fall of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861 several students attending ISNU immediately answered President Abraham Lincoln's first call for troops. Many joined Company K of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry including Joseph Howell who was principal of the Model School.¹ Howell asked the faculty to appoint Burnham to take his place as principal of the school, which they did.² After that first call for troops Charles Hovey (first president of ISNU), and other members of the faculty decided to organize the male students into a military company. Captain John W. White was selected as a paid drill master to come and instruct those students in riflery and military marching. These young men, including Burnham, drilled every day after school and all day on Saturday.³ Upon graduating on July 2, 1861, Burnham and the fellow members of "section A" made their last parade and "dissolved with the distinct understanding that" they would "keep up correspondence and in case of a fresh call for troops" would enlist as a company in order to form one of the best regiments in the state.⁴

That chance came when now Colonel Charles Hovey returned to Bloomington from Washington D.C. to put together a company for the newly formed 33rd Regiment of the Illinois Volunteer Infantry. On August 20, 1861 the 46 patriotic members of the "Normal Rifles," as they called their club, enlisted en masse and formed Company A of the 33rd Regiment with Col. Hovey as the commander of the entire 33rd Regiment. It was often called the "Teacher's Regiment" because many members of the regiment were teachers and students. Burnham began his service with the rank of a first lieutenant and was later promoted to the rank of captain on September 6, 1862. All total, 117 ISNU faculty and students fought for the Union Army. Every male student except for those with physical disabilities in the classes of 1860, 1861, and 1862 volunteered.⁵

The regiment was first sent to Camp Butler in Springfield on September 1st. They were ordered to march to Washington D.C. on September 28, 1861. However, before they could begin their journey, they were redirected to Arcadia, Missouri where they were stationed to begin "learning the duties of a soldier's life."⁶ While stationed out of Arcadia, they fought in their first battle at Fredrickstown, Missouri on October 21, 1861.

¹ Virgil Way, compiler. *History of the Thirty-Third Regiment, Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 22nd August, 1861 to 7th December, 1865.* (Gibson City, IL: The Association, 1902)74

² John A. H. Keith, ed. *Semi-Centennial History of the Illinois State Normal University.* (Normal: Illinois State Normal University, 1907) 20

³ Way, 74

⁴ Way, 74-75

⁵ Keith, 28

⁶ Way, 76

After a long winter in Arcadia where a great many men either died from disease or were forced to resign due to disability, the regiment moved on to Helena, Arkansas in the spring of 1862 where they then engaged the Confederate Army at the battle of Cache River on July 7, 1862.⁷

On March 17, 1863 Burnham was forced to resign his commission after being in poor health for over a year. This was due to a series of illnesses he had suffered from in 1861 and 1862. During the winter of 1861-62 he contracted typhoid fever in Arcadia, Missouri and then in the summer of 1862, he contracted malarial fever in Arkansas.⁸

Shortly after he left the 33rd, the regiment was ordered to Mississippi where they joined with the 13th Army Corps. That summer, the 33rd fought in the battle of Vicksburg on July 3rd and 4th, 1863 where 30 officers and men were killed and 100 wounded. In 1906, the State of Illinois erected a monument dedicated to the regiment on the site of this battle. The name of every Illinois soldier engaged in the Vicksburg battles was engraved on the bronze tablets of the monument.⁹

A few months after he returned to Bloomington in 1863, Burnham was elected the Superintendent of Bloomington Public Schools. This was a two year position which he resigned after a year to become the editor of *The Pantagraph*, a position in which he remained for the next three years. In 1867 he became a contractor for the King Bridge Company of Cleveland, Ohio. Through this job, he was responsible for the construction of iron bridges in half of the counties in Illinois as well as many Wisconsin counties. He also acquired much knowledge about the history and geography of Illinois in his 35 years of bridge contracting.

On January 23, 1866 Burnham married Almira S. Ives. Their marriage was reported to have been a very happy one that lasted for fifty-one years. Almira was known as a talented artist, and her work hung in the home of art lovers throughout the community. She was also very active in the community and was well respected because of that. She participated on the fundraising committee to build the Episcopal Church in 1876 and was a member of the Letitia Green Stevenson Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Almira's brothers Charles and Frank Ives became important business associates of Burnham and he eventually formed a partnership with Frank, called Burnham and Ives.

But today, Burnham is perhaps best known for his love of history and contributions towards recording Illinois history. His first known project was in 1879, when he wrote "A History of Bloomington-Normal" in the intervals between business pursuits. Some of his historical articles also made it into *The Daily Pantagraph*, including one on April 17, 1870, where he refuted a previous claim that Illinois has no natural scenery worth seeing by citing beautiful Starved Rock State Park in nearby Utica, Illinois.

This love of history led Burnham to become one of the founding members of the McLean County Historical Society, founded in 1892. He held the position of treasurer in addition to editing the historical society's journals until his death in 1917. He edited the *War Records of the County*, published in 1902, which described the Civil War service of he and others of the county. This book became the first volume of the McLean County

⁷ Way, 77

⁸ Way, 79-80

⁹ Keith, 25

Historical Society's publications. He also wrote and edited several other works, including *A History of the Destruction of Kaskaskia by the Mississippi River*, *History of an Ancient Indian Fort in McLean County*, and *School Records of McLean County*. Burnham was also the Director of the Illinois State Historical Society as well as one of the founding members of the society in 1900.

On October 14, 1892 the same year the McLean County Historical Society was founded, a fire destroyed Burnham's house which was located on the southeast corner of Evans and Mulberry Streets. The house could not be saved due to an inadequate reaction by the fire department. However, neighbors helped the Burnhams remove their belongings including Almira's paintings. The home and barn of neighbor General George F. Dick burned as well. The cause of the fire was unknown but was thought to have been an act of arson.

In addition to his work with the historical society, Burnham participated in many other community organizations including the Masonic Lodge, Odd Fellow's Lodge, Normal College Alumni Club, various Republican political organizations, and the Board of Illinois Soldier's Orphan's Home (later renamed the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors Children's School). He was a vital member of the committee which designed Miller Park, and he personally supervised the planting of trees and building of the dam that created the lake. He was also the chairman of the first Board of Park Commissioners as well as serving on the McLean County Board of Supervisors from December 1914 until his death. One of Burnham's final projects was to assist in preparing the history of the University of Illinois.

John H. Burnham died on January 20, 1917 at Brokaw Hospital four weeks after a major operation for an unknown chronic ailment. Funeral services were held at Second Presbyterian Church on January 22, and he was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. On June 26 of that year, the McLean County Historical Society held a joint memorial for founding members Burnham and George P. Davis. They said that "as a writer, Captain Burnham was both original and resourceful. His aim was to get at the pith of the subject with as much brevity as possible. He disliked garbled or warped history in whatever form it may appear...He was always an ardent seeker after truth and the marvelous things of history...nothing ever daunted his courage when in the pursuit of a laudable purpose...as a citizen, he was always loyal, conscientious and upright, and made for himself a good name and fame, which he spread over the entire state of Illinois...He was always gentlemanly and courteous in his demeanor to others and was never accused of slighting a friend or of misleading him¹⁰."

By: Laurie Peterson 2008

¹⁰ Biographical Sketch by the Committee Appointed by the McLean County Historical Society, 1917. McLean County Historical Society Archives.