

James Preston Butler (1838-1918)

James Preston Butler was born on September 2, 1838, in Scott County, near Frankfort, Kentucky, the oldest of William H. and Hattie Jane (Spicer) Butler's eight children. In 1855, the Butler family departed Kentucky for Bloomington, Illinois. A carpenter by trade, William may have been **lured** by the Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops, located on Bloomington's west side. However, he later engaged in the butcher business with Press before his death at age 45 in 1861, shortly before the birth of his youngest child, Esther.

Press (as he was known to most) was seventeen when he and his family arrived in Bloomington. His formal education was limited, split between Kentucky and Illinois. He engaged in a series of successful, yet not entirely satisfying enterprises. He **apprenticed in tin smithing** with master Dedrich Bradner, but quickly abandoned the trade and entered the butcher business, inviting in his father as partner. Upon his father's death in 1861, Press sold his **stock** in the butchery and opened a grocery, bakery, and **confectionary** store on Front Street for about ten years. He then began a long and **gratifying** career as a public servant: firefighting, elected office, and law enforcement. While he and wife, Lizzie, were owners and proprietors of a hotel in downtown Bloomington, the Butler House, from 1885 to his death in 1918, Press's first love was law enforcement, namely, **detective** work.

On February 4, 1862, as 23-year-old Press married 15-year-old Elizabeth A. "Lizzie" Kavanaugh. Lizzie was born in Ottawa, Illinois on February 24, 1846. She moved with her Irish-born parents to Bloomington at the age of six. The Butlers had two sons, William Preston and Edward Charles; and an adopted daughter, Myrtle Elizabeth. From 1868 until 1885, the Butlers made their home at 522 W. Grove Street in Bloomington. After 1885, their residence was also their place of business, the Butler House, a hotel and boarding house located on the northwest corner of Madison and Front Streets, Bloomington.

After leaving the confectionary business, Press became a fire-fighter for the City of Bloomington. Firefighting was physically demanding and dangerous. The hose carts were horse-drawn but maneuvered by men once they reached the site. With little **protective** gear the men were **vulnerable** and fires, more often than not, were fully developed before they arrived. For Press, "There was no feat too dangerous for him when duty seemed to call him." On October 9, 1871, Press, along with 19 fellow fire-fighters from Prairie Bird Fire Company #1 of the Bloomington Fire Department, traveled by the Chicago and Alton railroad to Chicago to help fight a fire that threatened to engulf the entire city. Upon reaching Chicago, the **detachment** was assigned to the city's north and west sides to help get the fire under control. The "Great Chicago Fire," as it was later known, was finally extinguished on October 10, 1871, leaving 300 people dead, 100,000 homeless, and 17,500 buildings destroyed.

The true calling for this public servant, though, was law enforcement. And, it appears, he had a **knack** for it. He became a Bloomington police officer and quickly rose in the rank to captain of the night force. Eventually, he **gravitated** to the role for which he is best remembered: detective.

Press investigated hundreds of cases, either in the employ of the police department or privately as a detective. He collected both admirers and **detractors** over the 25 years of his career as an investigator. Highlighted here are the cases that best reflect his methods; his determination and courage; the dangers, both physical and reputational; and the human drama they created.

The McGrail (White) case is an example of Press's relentlessness in solving a case, no matter how small. In April, 1882, he was asked by citizens of Minonk, in Woodford County, Illinois, to

hunt down that city's **marshal**, who had jumped **bail** and fled for Montana in November 1881. His charge was not a terribly serious one—**perjury** for **allegedly** lying about his illegal sale of liquor in Woodford County on a Sunday. Several of his supporters pooled their resources and put up his bond. But McGrail then fled with a female **companion** (Fannie Buche) and an assumed name—Dr. Henry White—first to Omaha, Nebraska, where Press picked up his trail, then to Miles City, Montana, where the couple thought they were beyond the reach of even the “longest arm of the law.” They were mistaken. Press captured the pair in Miles City on April 18 with, he wrote, “lots of trouble,” and returned them to the Woodford County jail in Eureka.

In 1883, Press found himself on the trail of a “**notorious forger** and safe-blower.” He responded to a tip that the suspect was headed for the Union Depot on Bloomington’s west side. Press **intercepted** him before he could embark, recognizing him by the **valise** (bag) the **tipster** had described, and moved in for the arrest. But, rather than go quietly into **custody**, the suspect drew a **Colt** revolver and fired at his **pursuer**. He missed, but Press drew his pistol and, as frightened rail customers took cover, the two men entered a blazing gun battle, with the **suspect** eventually fleeing, but shooting over his shoulder to cover his retreat. Eventually, both expended their ammunition and a footrace ensued. Press nabbed the bandit “in the middle of a creek . . . a mile from the starting point.”

Arguably the most gruesome and complex crime Press investigated (although he was not the principal investigator) was the murder of three men on a Mt. Pulaski, Logan County, Illinois farm sometime between the August 18-20, 1882. The bodies of Charles McMahan (age 40), and his hired hands, Robert Matheny (age 20), and John Carlock (age 16) were found bound, gagged, blinded, and their throats cut. Robbery appeared to be the **motive**; it was thought that Mr. McMahan kept a substantial amount of money and bank certificates on the farm, along with an unsold corn crop. However, it appeared the men met their violent end over \$200 in cash (the equivalent of \$5,470 in 2022) and a pocket watch.

Since there were no eye-witnesses, the Decatur *Herald-Despatch* deemed the **grisly** event a mystery. The event drew widespread attention and was reported in newspapers throughout the United States. As **speculation** and rumors flew, Press Butler was called upon to consult.

Press immediately traveled to the crime scene and sought to make plaster of Paris casts of the footprints (a technique still employed by police investigators today), but a rain had flattened the tracks, making casting **impracticable**. He was also able to collect gag material which, as it turned out, led to the solution of the crime. The **meticulous** way the gags were prepared—with wooden dowels knotted in for the mouths of the victims—linked them to John H. Hall, who was allegedly overheard by a witness talking about binding, gagging, and murdering his robbery victims in Texas (his apparent M.O.). Hall was captured in St. Louis on his way to Texas, tried, and convicted (on entirely **circumstantial** evidence, **hearsay** from the victim’s family, and a jailhouse “**snitch**,” the **credibility** of whom was never established). He died in the prison hospital at Joliet State Prison of **consumption** (tuberculosis) on February 22, 1887, claiming his innocence to the end and pointing a finger at others.

The Goodfellow murder case was one of the most well known investigations in 19th century Bloomington, and a topic of conversation many years after its **resolution**. Aaron Goodfellow was, indeed, thought to be a “good fellow” by his family, friends, and colleagues. He was a retired farmer and a **bailiff** for the McLean County **Circuit Court**. He was also a **prominent mason** in Bloomington, holding the post of junior **warden** (third in command) of the Wade Barney Lodge. His brothers in masonry described him, by resolution, as “so good a citizen and so true a man.”

Goodfellow had been playing a game of **croquet** with friends on North McLean Street near Franklin Park and started for his home, located at 511 E. Chestnut Street, by way of an alley at about 9 o'clock in the evening of August 4, 1879. Mr. Goodfellow was confronted by two armed men demanding money, possibly mistaking him for someone else. Goodfellow thought the **stickup** was a **hoax** and that the two men, whose faces he could not make out in the darkness, had been put up to it by his **mischievous** friends. So, when he was ordered to raise his hands and surrender his money, he waved the confronters off and continued his journey home. Some believed he tried to playfully wrestle the guns from the **assailants** thinking, again, that the matter was staged for amusement. At any rate, both men—believed to have been drinking and screwing up their courage earlier at a nearby pub—shot, striking Goodfellow in the chin and the abdomen. The shooters took his wallet and vanished into the night. Goodfellow then staggered and, at one point, ran (which probably did nothing to slow the bleeding), toward his home about one block away, shouting for help along the way. He collapsed at his front gate. Help came, but nothing could be done; Goodfellow died the next morning.

Press was on the case immediately, inspecting the scene and interviewing witnesses. But, since the assailants had hurriedly left the scene, hopped a freight train in Normal, and enjoyed a **considerable** head start, they wouldn't be easy to track down. Goodfellow's neighbor and friend, Joseph Fifer (then McLean County **state's attorney** and later an Illinois state senator and governor of Illinois), heard the victim yell and rushed to help him to his house. He then retraced what he thought were Goodfellow's steps and found a bloody handkerchief in the alleyway, which he promptly turned over to Press. The investigation led Press to the shanties on East Street, where he interviewed a woman named Nellie Brown, a prostitute who lived in the shanties. When he showed her the **handkerchief**, she identified it as belonging to one Patsey Devine (AKA Pat Kelly and Thomas Coyne), who was also **holed up** there, lying in wait, it appeared, for a robbery opportunity.

Then came the real detective work. Press learned that Devine was from Alton, Illinois, and that his mother still lived there. He contacted the **postmaster** there to watch for any letters arriving from Devine to his mother. Sure enough, a few months later, the postmaster wired Press that a letter had arrived from Devine to his mother, prompting Press to travel immediately to Alton. He found the letter, and in it, Devine stated he was staying with a relative in the mountains of Sullivan County, New York, to where the **persistent** Press journeyed nearly 900 miles and arrested him. After two trials (one in Bloomington and one in Clinton), and a narrow escape from a **lynch mob** in Bloomington, Patsey Devine—denying to the very end the shooting of Goodfellow—was hanged in Clinton, DeWitt County, Illinois on May 12, 1882.

Around 1884, Press reinvented himself yet again when he and Lizzie became the owners and **proprietors** of the Butler House, a three-story, wood frame hotel on the northwest corner of Madison and Front Streets in downtown Bloomington. The Butler House was a typical hotel in that patrons could stay a night or two; but, those planning longer stays in the city could use it as a **boarding house**. Either way, guests could rest, dine, lounge, play **billiards**, indulge in cigars and spirits, and, if need be, get a shave and a haircut. Today, the site of this hotel is a city-owned parking lot (named after the Butler family) and is all that remains of the Butler House and the three and a half decades it thrived under the diligence of Press, Lizzie, and family.

On December 8, 1911, Press experienced a fainting spell, which "caused a severe fall." In 1914, at the age of 75, he suffered a pair of mildly debilitating **strokes**, but it appears he recovered. In fact, he and Lizzie were described as being in "the best of health" as they celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary in 1916. However, just two years later, Press died on

January 28, 1918, at the age of 79. Press was initially buried in the vaults at Bloomington (later Evergreen Memorial) Cemetery beside his son, William, who had died in 1907; and grandson, Preston, who had died in 1912.

On February 11, 1920, Lizzie was **interred** with Press, William, and Preston in the **vaults** at Bloomington Cemetery. However, on July 8 of that year, all four were permanently transferred to Park Hill Cemetery and Mausoleum for unknown reasons.