

Oliver Spencer Munsell (1825-1905)

Oliver Spencer Munsell was born on June 8, 1825 in Miami County, Ohio. He had one older brother, Charles, a younger brother, Edward, and a younger sister, Clara. At the age of seven his family moved to Paris, Illinois, where Oliver spent the rest of his childhood. He received his early education by attending a **subscription school**.

During Munsell's youth, Abraham Lincoln was said to be a frequent visitor in his family's home in Paris. He was particularly proud of his connections to Lincoln. Much later in life, Munsell recalled that the future president would visit his family's home while Lincoln was a practicing lawyer. During one such visit, when Munsell was fifteen years old, he recalled that Lincoln treated him with kindness, and honored him with his "attentions and confidence." These actions won Munsell's "**fervent** boyish admiration and love."

In 1841, at the age of sixteen, Munsell entered Indiana Asbury University (today known as DePauw University). Munsell graduated in 1845 with honors and a Bachelor of Arts. He then decided to pursue a law career, and a year later, passed the **bar exam** to become a lawyer.

It was during his time at Asbury that he was inspired by the president of the university, Reverend (later Bishop) Matthew Simpson, to join the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1842. Because of this, after Munsell was admitted to the bar in 1846, he realized his true calling was the ministry. That same year, he left behind a career in law and became a licensed Methodist preacher and principal of a Methodist school in Danville, Illinois.

On September 4, 1851, Munsell married his second wife, Elizabeth Whipp. They had five children together, three of whom died in early childhood.

Munsell ran the school in Danville in an old Methodist church and then transferred to Mount Morris in 1856. Perhaps due to his successes at these two schools, in 1857 Munsell was elected president of Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, which at the time was closed.

Illinois Wesleyan University was first organized on September 23, 1850 by a group of thirty **civic** and religious leaders. The first classes of the university were held in the Methodist Church in Bloomington in October 1850, while the **trustees** worked to secure land on which to build the university. Due to the ongoing financial struggles, the university suspended operations just after the New Year in 1855.

At this time Oliver and his older brother Charles were hired to get the university's finances in order. Charles was appointed the primary financial agent of I.W.U., and Oliver was made president of the university. The brothers inherited quite a mess, consisting of over \$5,000 of debt from the uncompleted North Hall, which they would increase to \$9,853 (or over \$280,000 in 2018) to complete the building. While Oliver focused on getting classes started again, his brother Charles immediately set out to raise \$75,000 to operate the school and pay off the debt.

The brothers' efforts proved successful. They worked hard to finish construction of North Hall in time for the university to open that fall. On September 10, 1857 the school reopened with three professors and seventeen students. *The Daily Pantagraph* reported the following summer that, "the Trustees have made arrangements for the opening of the University this coming fall and are able to assure the public that the Institution, so far as the maintenance of the school for three years to come is concerned, is upon a reliable basis."

One major event that marked Munsell's presidency more than any other was the United States Civil War. During the first year of the war, only one student left the university to enlist in the army. The following year Illinois Governor Richard Yates sent a telegram asking for 200 volunteers to report to Springfield by 9 o'clock the next morning. This caused more than three-

fourths of the students to leave the university to answer that call. Most of these students returned for the 1862-63 school year.

While the U.S. Civil War raged on, Munsell visited Lincoln at the White House in Washington, D.C. in June 1863, about three weeks before the Battle of Gettysburg. In an interview towards the end of his life, Munsell recalled that he had asked “for the privilege of a personal interview” with the president, “not for any business relation, but in a meeting of friendship.” According to Munsell, near the end of that interview he asked Lincoln if he thought that the country would survive the war. Lincoln gave a tearful and emotional response, stating that he had no doubt that the country would survive, although he may not live to see it. Lincoln emphasized that, “God will bring us through safe.” Munsell stated that he left that meeting “thanking God, as I had never before thanked Him, for such a leader in our country’s deadly hour of **peril**.”

After the war was over, enrollment at I.W.U. grew to a new record of 198 students. The university also became **coed**, allowing women to begin attending classes during the 1870-71 school year. That year, twenty-two women enrolled and their arrival helped the enrollment of the university swell to 212 students. More than a century later, a new women’s dormitory was dedicated in honor of Munsell in January 1947. Named “Munsell Hall,” the converted residence was named for him to acknowledge his presidency at the time the university became coed.

However, Munsell’s distinguished career at I.W.U. came to an abrupt end with his **resignation** in 1873. Just two years after women were admitted to the university, scandal struck. In February of that year, allegations were made against Munsell that he was “repeatedly guilty of gross and immoral conduct with the young lady pupils of the institution.” Munsell denied these **allegations** and provided letters of support from faculty members that stated there was no evidence, and that every case of complaints of acts of **indiscretion** had occurred with a third party member present.

A trial was conducted on March 19 and 20, 1873. Four faculty members and eight female students were called to testify. Not much was written in the notes of what exactly was said at the trial. But enough evidence was presented for the Board to expect Munsell to submit his resignation—which he did at the end of the trial.

Immediately following the trial, the Board of Trustees submitted a public statement to the *Pantagraph* **condemning** Munsell’s actions. In it, the trustees proclaimed that they regarded Munsell kissing different ladies “unwise and improper and that his position as the President of the University heightens the **folly** and **impropriety [sic]**.” However, they emphasized that there was no criminal intent in the case, that all acts were done in the presence of a third party, and that his actions were not **flagrant**. They hoped to preserve the good name of the university so that it may continue to grow.

After Munsell’s resignation in 1873, he and his wife moved to Shelbyville, Illinois where he pursued the banking business. After living in Shelbyville for three years, Munsell purchased a large piece of land in Council Grove, Kansas, and relocated there with his family in 1876. Once in Council Grove, he became the president of the newly established State Bank of Council Grove. He also became involved in politics, and by 1880 was elected as a State Representative in Kansas on the Republican ticket. He served as a state representative until 1887.

His second wife, Elizabeth Munsell died on February 21, 1898. Her remains were brought back to Bloomington and she was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

On March 13, 1905, Dr. Oliver Munsell passed away in Kansas City, Missouri. The cause of his death was listed as **respiratory paralysis**. He was seventy-nine years old. Word of his death

spread to all the places he had lived throughout his life, and his death was mourned by many who knew him. His body was brought back to Bloomington for burial, and he was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his second wife.

Discussion Question: What would you have liked to have asked Abraham Lincoln? What do you think Dr. Munsell would say was his biggest accomplishment in his life? There was a huge debate about whether there should be coed schools. What do think some of the issues were that they discussed?