

Benjamin Franklin Funk (1838-1909)

When Bloomington residents turn on their faucets today and receive clear, clean water, they can give a large “Thank you” to Benjamin Franklin Funk, a man who would be remembered as the “Father of the Bloomington Waterworks.” Benjamin Funk believed every citizen should take an active interest in politics and civic life, and he put that belief into action in his own life.

Benjamin Funk was born on October 17, 1837 to Isaac and Cassandra Funk. His parents were early settlers in McLean County. His father, one of the founders of Funk’s Grove, had an extensive cattle trading business and expanded his farm holdings to over 25,000 acres. When he died, Isaac’s estate was valued at over \$14 million by 2012 figures. Benjamin was the seventh of ten children, and from an early age helped out with the work around the farm. He was known as “Trott” by family members because he was always trotting to keep up with his older brothers on the farm.

In 1860 Benjamin began attending Illinois Wesleyan University. During the Civil War, he interrupted his studies with a brief enlistment with Company G of the 68th Illinois Infantry stationed with the Union Army in Virginia. After returning home and to IWU, he completed his studies and graduated in 1865. When his father died that same year, Benjamin inherited 2,100 acres of land.

On August 21, 1865 Benjamin married Sarah Hamilton of LeRoy, IL. They had one son, Frank. Two years later, they moved to the home they had built at 1008 N. Main Street. It had sixteen rooms and five marble fireplaces. They lived there the rest of their lives. Their son Frank lived there until 1940 when he sold it to Dr. Watson Gailey, who razed the house to build his eye clinic which remains at that location today.

Benjamin divided his time between Bloomington business and civic affairs and his farm. His farm included 500 head of cattle and 25 Clydesdale and Norman horses. At that time horse teams were essential for field work. Funk farm cattle were considered among the best to be traded at the Chicago market.

In Bloomington, Benjamin became a leading member of the Republican Party. His first election was to the Normal Township Board of Supervisors. At that time, North Main Street was considered to be part of Normal. In 1871 Funk successfully ran for mayor of Bloomington. He was endorsed by the Pantagraph which said, “Mr. Funk is in every way fitted to make an excellent mayor. He will look zealously to the interests of the city in every question that arises.” Funk served five consecutive one-year terms and later, in 1884 and 1885, served two more.

The most important improvement he helped bring to the city was a safe, public water supply. Before this time people had to rely on cisterns and artesian wells for water. Since these were frequently located near outhouses in backyards, they were easily contaminated and led to outbreaks of typhoid and dysentery. Using water from an underground aquifer near an abandoned mine, the city built a 200 foot tall standpipe (a type of water tower) to create water pressure to deliver water through newly constructed pipes to homes throughout the city. The standpipe even had an open-air viewing platform at the top so that residents could climb the tower and enjoy the sights of their city. As mayor, Benjamin Funk also insured that “the financial standing of the city steadily improved.”

In 1892 Funk was elected to represent the 14th District in Illinois in the United States Congress. According to the Pantagraph, his election allowed “him to represent Illinois agriculture with the honest, whole-hearted integrity for which he was known.”

Funk was also a member and director of the Bloomington Loan and Building Association and stockholder in the Walton Plow Company. He was elected President of the Board of Trustees of Illinois Wesleyan University and served there for 20 years. He was also a Trustee for the Asylum for the Blind in Jacksonville, IL.

Benjamin Franklin Funk died on February 14, 1909 after a long illness. His funeral was held at the Grace Methodist-Episcopal Church in Bloomington. He was buried in Evergreen Cemetery.

Discussion Question: Benjamin Funk believed everyone should be involved in politics or civic life. Would you agree or disagree? Please give reasons for your answer. What opportunities for involvement do you see today?

** Why is a safe water supply so vital to a community?