

## Almira S. Ives Burnham (1840-1932)

Almira Sarah Ives was born on November 2, 1840 in Oswego, Kendall County, Illinois to parents Almon and Sarah (Ervin) Ives. Almon, Almira's father, was born in Chautauqua County, New York and was one of the early settlers of Kendall County. He and his family moved to that county around 1834, where and when he engaged in farming. However, owing to ill health, Almon gave up farming and turned instead to a career in law.

In June 1853, Almon, Sarah, and their nine children moved from Kendall County to Bloomington, where Almira resided for the rest of her life. Sadly, shortly after the family arrived, Almira's mother, Sarah, died in 1854.

Almira married Captain John H. Burnham in 1866. The couple wed on January 23 of that year and remained together for 51 years until Mr. Burnham's death in 1917. The couple shared a passion for knowledge that was **evident** in each of their professional pursuits.

Born on October 31, 1834 in Essex, Massachusetts, John Burnham came to Cook County, Illinois in 1855 to teach. After saving enough money, he enrolled at the new Illinois State Normal University (ISNU) in 1858. In August 1861, Burnham enlisted in the United States' Union Army as a member of Company A of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry. Following his Civil War service, cut short by ill health, Burnham returned to Bloomington in 1863 and was elected for a two-year term as Superintendent of Bloomington Public Schools. Halfway through his term, he **resigned** to become editor of Bloomington's *Pantagraph* newspaper, a position he held for three years. In 1867, Burnham founded a bridge construction firm, and for 35 years contracted with hundreds of townships that needed iron bridges constructed.

Almira took up art work for the "pure love it." She was a lifelong student of her craft, studying under fellow artists near and far, and making frequent, long trips with her husband to New England to visit family and improve her skills sketching and painting the coastlines.

When not frequenting the east coast, Almira Burnham created from her studio on the second floor of their home in Bloomington at 507 E. Mulberry Street. In addition to full-sized canvases, Burnham's brushstrokes were also found on **china** and works in miniature, as well.

Burnham regularly exhibited her works throughout the region. In Bloomington, her art could be seen at storefront exhibitions like those at Hawley's Repository on Front Street, A.T. Fagerburg's at 514 N. Main Street, J.E. Gregg's framing studio, in the parlors of the Eddy Building at the corner of Main and Market streets, and at Marian Ives's piano studio.

Burnham also showed outside of Bloomington, usually without issue and often even with a sale or two. However, once upon returning a collection of works from exhibit at the 1892 Illinois State Fair in Peoria by way of rail, the train car on which the paintings were loaded caught fire near Pekin and the entire collection (an estimated value of \$1,500 or roughly \$45,000 in 2017 dollars) was either completely destroyed or damaged by smoke and water. And, less than two weeks later, Burnham's art faced another fiery blaze.

At midnight on October 14, 1892, smoke billowed and shouts of fire sounded as the homes and barns of multiple Bloomington residents between Douglas and Mulberry streets, west of Evans Street—including the Burnhams'—went up in flames. The cause of the fire was not known, but was reported to have begun in the barn of General George F. Dick. *The Daily Leader* reported that Almira's sister was the first to note the fire and act to alert the **inhabitants** of the houses. Firefighters arrived quickly to the scene once notified, but by that time the **outbuildings** were all ablaze. Additionally, the firefighters were **hindered** in their efforts due to the fact that the **water main** on Mulberry Street was small and could not carry enough water to put the large

fires. When it became apparent that the largest of the flames could not be **quelled**, every effort was made to remove as many possessions from the homes as possible before they burned entirely. John Burnham was out of town at the time of the fire, but Almira and her sister successfully saved several hundred dollars worth of paintings from the artist's upstairs studio. Almost immediately after the fire, rebuilding efforts began. It was reported that the interior of the home was promised to also be "greatly improved" with new features, including a completely lighted studio for Almira.

It is unknown whether this or another studio is the creative space that Burnham briefly shared with friend and fellow local artist Emily Howard. But, in 1896 the *Daily Leader* made note of the "rare beauty and **merit**" of the works on display in these two artists' studio.

Around 1905, the Burnhams moved to 1321 E. Washington Street, where Almira's paintings "hung from floor to ceiling on every wall." It was described as a "**veritable** art gallery." The Washington Street home included a second floor studio, in which hung a collection of several hundred paintings by Burnham.

In addition to exercising her own artistic talents, Burnham was also a **patron** of the arts and a promoter of the larger local art scene. At a meeting of the Blooming Sketch Club on February 27, 1888 at Withers Public Library, Burnham was one of four members appointed to organize a new art association. Formed with the goal to "encourage and promote the study, **cultivation** and practice of art in the city of Bloomington, and vicinity," the society lasted four years until 1892. It was reorganized in 1922 as the Bloomington Art Association, which Burnham was elected an honorary director because of her long time efforts in the arts in the community.

Outside of her artistic **endeavors**, Burnham was active in a number of clubs and societies. She participated in activities put on by the Ladies' Aid Society, the Ladies' Building Society, a veterans' graves decoration committee, the Illinois Social Science Association, a women's astronomers club, the Illinois State Conference of Charities, and the local chapter of the **Daughters of the American Revolution** from 1916 until her death in 1932.

Almira Burnham died on December 6, 1932 at Brokaw hospital from complications of pneumonia. From July to December 1931, Burnham resided in the hospital after suffering a broken hip in a fall at her home. She shortly returned to the hospital in May 1932 until her death in December. Burnham's funeral was held on December 8 at her residence on Washington Street in Bloomington. Reverend Father Arthur B. Cope of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church (of which Burnham was a longtime member) and Reverend Forest L. Fraser of First Baptist Church officiated. Burnham was buried in Bloomington Cemetery, now Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

The McLean County Museum of History holds three Burnham oil paintings in its art collection, including a still life of four pink roses, painted circa 1890. Donated by Timothy Ives in 1996, the painting hung in the Franklin Park home of U.S. Vice President Adlai E. Stevenson I and his wife Letitia Green Stevenson. The painting features Burnham's renowned **dewdrops**.