

## Benjamin Franklin Funk (1838-1909)

Benjamin Franklin Funk was born on October 17, 1837 to Isaac and Cassandra Funk. Benjamin was the seventh of the ten children born to Isaac and Cassandra. Ben's father Isaac was one of the early settlers in McLean County. On May 3, 1824 brothers Isaac and Absalom Funk and William Brock arrived in the area that became known as Funks Grove.<sup>1</sup> Upon their arrival they set up a 12x14 foot shanty cabin and set out "breaking the prairie and buying and selling cattle."<sup>2</sup> They had learned the business of raising cattle in the Miami River Valley region of Ohio where they lived prior to coming to Illinois. As the Funk family land holdings increased, it became necessary for Isaac and Cassandra's children to help with farm work.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin was known as "Trott" by family members because he was always "trotting" along to keep up with his older brothers on the farm.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin began attending the prep school at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington in 1860.<sup>5</sup> In 1862 he cut his studies short when he enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. He served three months with Company G of the 68<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry near Alexandria, VA.<sup>6</sup> Upon his return, he resumed his studies at IWU and graduated in 1865.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin also continued to work on the family farm. His father Isaac died in 1865 without a will. Isaac's children successfully divided his estate, which was an estimated \$1,000,000 which included 25,000 acres of land (adjusted for 2012 would be about \$14 million).<sup>8</sup> It is not known whether the amount of the inheritance was divided evenly, but there were no outside parties involved in reaching an agreement.<sup>9</sup> Ben's share was 2,100 acres.<sup>10</sup>

On August 21, 1865 Benjamin married Sarah Hamilton of LeRoy, IL. They had one child, Frank.<sup>11</sup> In a testament to the strength of the relationship he had with his wife, Ben said she was his "efficient helper, advisor, and the giver of cordial support of all his business and political life."<sup>12</sup> Two years after their marriage they moved to Bloomington and settled at 1008 N. Main Street. Ben built their home at a cost of \$12,000 (adjusted for 2012 would cost about \$185,000).<sup>13</sup> The sixteen-room home was frame construction with brick nogging covered with wooden siding, thus well insulated. Five white marble fireplaces and recessed full length mirrors

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<sup>1</sup> John Burnham, George P. Davis, and Ezra Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Bloomington, Illinois, Volume II: School Record of McLean County with Other Papers.* (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1903) 633

<sup>2</sup> Dr. E. Duis. *Good Old Times*, (McKnight and McKnight Publishing, 1968) 580

<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Stubblefield Schertz; Stephen C Funk; Betty Stubblefield Elliott; Funks Grove Cemetery Association; et al. *A Tree Grows in Funks Grove: A History of the Funk-Stubblefield families of McLean County, Illinois.* (McLean, IL: The Association, 1984) 86

<sup>4</sup> *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County* (Chapman Bros.: Chicago, 1887) 195

<sup>5</sup> Email Correspondence with Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan University Archivist and Special Collections Librarian, June 18, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I: The War Record of McLean County with other papers.* (Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co. 1899) 85

<sup>7</sup> Email Correspondence with Meg Miner, IWU archivist, June 18, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Helen M. Cavanagh. *Seed Soil and Science: The Story of Eugene D. Funk.* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1959) 5

<sup>9</sup> Duis, 588

<sup>10</sup> *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County*, 195

<sup>11</sup> Cavanagh, 452

<sup>12</sup> "Former Mayor B.F. Funk is Dead," *The Pantagraph*, February 15, 1909

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/infl.cgi>

graced the interior.<sup>14</sup> Ben's son Frank lived in the home after Ben's death. Frank and his wife lived in the home until he sold the house to Dr. Watson Gailey in 1940. Gailey razed the building and constructed a new one-story, white painted building to house his new eye clinic. The original wrought iron picket fence from the Funk home remained in place as part of the contract of sale. The building (and the fence) still remains today and continues to be home to the Gailey Eye Clinic.<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin continued to split his time between his home in Bloomington and supervising his 2,200 acre farm (which was managed by tenants on a daily basis).<sup>16</sup> His farm included 500 head of cattle and 25 Clydesdale and Norman horses.<sup>17</sup> Many considered the cattle from the Funk farm among the best shipped from McLean County to Chicago to be traded and sold.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin became very active in the political affairs of Bloomington. He believed that every citizen must take an active interest in politics. Identifying himself with the Republican Party, Ben became a leading member of the party in Illinois. His first venture into politics was his election to the Board of Supervisors from Normal Township (since his home on Main Street was at that time part of Normal Township), serving between 1870-1871.<sup>19</sup> Benjamin then ran for mayor of Bloomington in 1871 and successfully beat the Democratic incumbent Mayor T.J. Bunn. In the run up to the election, *The Pantagraph* printed several articles supporting Funk for mayor. The paper exclaimed, "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."<sup>20</sup>

After his election in 1871, Funk served for five consecutive one-year terms as mayor. During his administration, he made great efforts in improving the city of Bloomington and its service to the community. "He installed the first sewer in Bloomington and continued paving the streets of Bloomington which began under the previous administration of Mayor T.J. Bunn."<sup>21</sup> The first pavements were made of local bricks from Napoleon Heafer's brick yard.<sup>22</sup> These first streets that were paved ran from North Center Street at the Courthouse Square to Chestnut Street and then west to the Chicago-Alton railroad station to where Chestnut Street dead ended.

The most important improvement to the city during his tenure in office was the improvement of the water supply. Before the public water supply was established, people relied on private and public cisterns and artesian wells because there was no lake or river of any substance near town. Cistern water especially was subject to excessive contamination from outhouses and other contaminants which led to deadly outbreaks of water born ailments such as typhoid and dysentery.<sup>23</sup> In 1868 a group of investors attempted to build a coal mine. The company digging the mine hit a vein of water and was unable to reach the coal. After a very dry summer in 1874, the city took advantage of this newly found supply and created a municipal water system.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cavanagh, 452

<sup>15</sup> "Gailey to Build Eye Clinic," *The Pantagraph*, Feb. 22, 1941

<sup>16</sup> Schertz, 357

<sup>17</sup> *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County*, 195

<sup>18</sup> "Former Mayor B.F. Funk is Dead"

<sup>19</sup> *Transactions of McLean County Historical Society Vol. II*, 580

<sup>20</sup> "B.F. Funk for Mayor," *The Pantagraph*, April 11, 1871

<sup>21</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society Vol. II*, 581

<sup>22</sup> Laurie Peterson, "T.J. Bunn Biography," 2008

<sup>23</sup> Bill Kemp. "Standpipe once skyline sentinel of B-N." *The Pantagraph*, October 16, 2011

<sup>24</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society Vol. II*, 581

In August of 1874 work began on sinking a well in the area of the abandoned mine shaft. The well was 40 feet in diameter and 28 feet x 8 inches in depth and was located on Bloomington's north side near Madison Street.<sup>25</sup> The water was successfully pumped out of the well but there was not enough pressure to move the water throughout the community. In the summer of 1875 a standpipe was built. It was located on the north side of Division Street, just west of what is now the Union Pacific/Amtrak line. It was 200 feet tall and 8 feet in diameter, making it the tallest structure in the city at the time.<sup>26</sup> The city of Bloomington even allowed residents to climb up the circular staircase to the top of the standpipe. This narrow staircase was "sandwiched between the brick masonry and iron pipe all the way to the top-opening out to an open air viewing platform with a small railing surrounding it."<sup>27</sup> After 42 years, in 1912 the standpipe was demolished after the city council voted to tear it down because of its disrepair.

Water mains and fire hydrants were soon run throughout the city providing drinking water and pressurized fire hydrants. The total cost of the project (which included "eight miles of water mains, the engines and machinery, the stand-pipe, four drinking fountains, seventy hydrants, and everything that connected with the Water Department") was about \$87,000 (which in 2012 would be about \$2.1 million).<sup>28</sup> These additions and improvements to the city were funded by a special tax which was assessed to property owners. Funk, who was referred to as "the father of city waterworks" later in life,<sup>29</sup> is credited with setting this precedent of paying for municipal improvements with a tax assessment which allowed other cities and towns in Illinois to do the same.<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin Funk finished a five term run as mayor in 1876 only to return and serve again in 1884 and 1885. After receiving the nomination on April 1, 1884 at the Republican Convention in Bloomington, a letter to the editor was printed in *The Pantagraph*, praising his past administrative duty to the city as mayor. The letter exclaimed that with Funk as mayor, "The financial standing of the city steadily improved," and the implementation of the water works system made it possible "for our city to become a great commercial and manufacturing place."<sup>31</sup> After serving a combined seven terms as mayor of Bloomington, Funk turned down the offer twice for re-nomination after 1885. He left the office with great acclaim and success.

Although Funk stepped out of the political arena in 1885, he returned to politics in 1892. At the State of Illinois Republican Convention held in Decatur on April 26, 1892 Benjamin Funk was nominated for U.S. Representative of the 14<sup>th</sup> District in Illinois.<sup>32</sup> He served one term in the 53<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Congress from March 4, 1893 to March 3, 1895.<sup>33</sup> During his one term in the House of Representatives, Funk spoke up in support of the "reformation of the law dealing with selling by short weights and measures" in Washington D.C. He supported New Mexico's admission as a new state. Funk fought against the passage of the Wilson-Gorman tariff bill which would have lowered tariffs and in his opinion, "would have prevented prosperity from

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<sup>25</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society Vol. II, 581*

<sup>26</sup> Kemp, "Standpipe once skyline sentinel of B-N"

<sup>27</sup> Kemp, "Standpipe once skyline sentinel of B-N"

<sup>28</sup> J.H. Burnham. *History of Bloomington and Normal in McLean County, Illinois. (Bloomington: J.H. Burnham, Publisher, 1879) 82*

<sup>29</sup> "Former Mayor B.F. Funk is Dead"

<sup>30</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society Vol. II, 581*

<sup>31</sup> "How He Managed the Affairs of the City While Mayor," *The Pantagraph*, April 16, 1884

<sup>32</sup> "His Name is Funk," *The Pantagraph*, April 26, 1892

<sup>33</sup> Biographical Director of the United States Congress, "Benjamin Franklin Funk,"

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000427>

returning” to the nation during the Panic of 1893.<sup>34</sup> He was also a strong spokesman for agricultural matters and his membership in Congress allowed “him to represent Illinois agriculture with the honest, whole-hearted integrity for which he was known.”<sup>35</sup>

Funk was a member and director of the Bloomington Loan and Building Association and stockholder in the Walton Plow Company.<sup>36</sup> He was interested in education and was elected President of the Board of Trustees of Illinois Wesleyan University in 1877 and served in that capacity for 20 years.<sup>37</sup> He was also appointed as a trustee of the Asylum for the Blind in Jacksonville, IL in 1885 by Governor Richard Oglesby. This was a school dedicated to educating students who were hearing impaired and/or blind.<sup>38</sup> Funk’s service to his community, state, and county was summed up in a short biography printed about six years before his death. Ira Merchant wrote that:

*As a presiding officer his record for fair treatment has not been excelled. As a business man his service has been for economy and judicious expenditure. At any and all times, whether serving the people of Washington, Springfield, of his home city of Bloomington, he has well earned the title of Honest Ben Funk.*<sup>39</sup>

Benjamin Franklin Funk died on February 14, 1909 after a long stomach ailment. His funeral was held at Grace M. E. Church in Bloomington. Ben left behind his wife Sarah, son Frank, and three grandchildren (Mary Cassandra, Florence and Benjamin F. Jr.). He was also survived by his siblings: George, Jacob, Lafayette, Absolom, and Isaac.<sup>40</sup> He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois

In 1912, three years after his death, Benjamin’s son, Frank donated three acres of land in Funks Grove for a new school site. The school was named *Benjamin F. Funk School* in honor of his father. The school educated students in grades one through twelve until 1948 when the high school portion was consolidated with the nearby Heyworth school district. Students in grades one through eight continued to attend *Benjamin F. Funk School* until 1993 when the school closed and the students were sent to Heyworth for school. The building still stands today and is now a private residence.<sup>41</sup>

By: Emily Swartz, 2012

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<sup>34</sup> Cavanagh, 41-43

<sup>35</sup> Stubblefield-Scherz, 357

<sup>36</sup> *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County*, 195

<sup>37</sup> *The Wesleyana*, 1895. Illinois Wesleyan University Yearbook

<sup>38</sup> “Illinois School for the Visionally Impaired,” <http://www.isvi.net/Historical%20Timeline.htm>

<sup>39</sup> *Transactions of McLean County Historical Society Vol. II*, 581-582

<sup>40</sup> “Former Mayor B.F. Funk is Dead”

<sup>41</sup> “(Shirley) Ben Funk High School, [www.illinoishsglorydays.com/id413html](http://www.illinoishsglorydays.com/id413html)