

## **T. J. Bunn (1832-1916)**

Thomas Jefferson (T.J.) Bunn was born on August 29, 1832 in Xenia, Green County, Ohio. He was the son of Lewis and Margery Haines Bunn. The Bunn family came to McLean County in 1833 when T.J. was only six months old. The family settled in a log cabin in what is now downtown Bloomington. In 1833 Bloomington was still an untamed “western” town with a population of a mere 150 inhabitants, mostly of Southern heritage and descent. Throughout the course of his life, Bunn would have a strong influence on the growing town and watched it grow and develop over the next 74 years of his life.

He attended a local public school until he was old enough to begin to learn the blacksmith trade. His father, Lewis Bunn, was a successful plow maker and blacksmith. At the time it was tradition for young men to carry on the trades and occupations of their fathers but a serious eye injury caused by a dropped splinter of iron caused young T.J. Bunn to reconsider his vocation. He then began learning the printer’s trade.

The 1855 City Directory listed Bunn as working for Baker and Edgar as a clerk. Then in 1872 he was a broker and loan agent for the Central Illinois Loan Agency whose office was located at 115 N. Center Street. In 1875 he partnered with Lucius L. Holmes and opened a bank at 113 N. Center Street. T.J. Bunn and Co. Bank was very prosperous and eventually merged with the Third National Bank by 1882.

Bunn married Mary E. Hutchinson of Concord, Christian County, Kentucky on May 4, 1854. They had four children: Frank L., Harry C., Fannie L., and another daughter whose name is not known. The family resided at 702 West Washington Street and hosted lavish parties for their fellow members of society. Accounts of these parties were often featured in the pages of the local newspaper, *The Daily Pantagraph*.

In addition to his banking, Bunn was also known as a prominent local politician and a staunch Democrat.<sup>1</sup> However, when he ran for the office of Township Collector in 1859-1860 and when he ran for City Treasurer in 1863, he ran as a Republican. During this time tensions were rising between Republicans and Democrats over the issues of states’ rights and slavery. Many Northern Democrats who were loyal to the Union, were lumped together with “Copperheads,” or Northern Democrats who favored peace, believed that the Confederacy could not be defeated and opposed Union war policy. Bunn may have run as a Republican in order to separate himself from the extremely unpopular Copperheads and give himself a better chance at being elected to office. Evidence of this is found when Bunn announced his candidacy for the office of City Treasurer in 1863. An article in *The Daily Pantagraph* endorsed him saying that “Tom is a good man, being Union to the core and as such will be worth a thousand Copperheads.”<sup>2</sup> He was elected City Treasurer on April 6, 1863.

Bunn continued to rise in the political ranks in Bloomington. In 1870 Bunn was elected mayor of Bloomington.<sup>3</sup> He was reelected for a second term in 1877. By 1877 Bloomington was a city of 25,000 people and it still had no paved roads. In his inaugural address in May of 1877 he stated that it was his wish that Bloomington begin paving it’s

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<sup>1</sup> “Oldest Ex-Mayor Called By Death,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 21, 1916

<sup>2</sup> “City Treasurer,” *The Pantagraph*, March 24, 1863.

<sup>3</sup> “T.J. Bunn, Esq., for Mayor,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, March 2, 1870

streets like so many other larger cities had begun to do.<sup>4</sup> So under Mayor Bunn Bloomington laid its first pavement made of local bricks from Napoleon Heafer's brick yard. The paved road ran from North Center Street to Chestnut Street and then west to the Chicago-Alton railroad station. Later a pine block pavement was installed at the north side of the downtown square railroad. His obituary called him the "father of Bloomington pavements."<sup>5</sup> Bunn also served as Postmaster of the City of Bloomington twice, once during President James Buchanan's administration and again during President Grover Cleveland's administration, both of whom were Democrats.

However, despite the successes of his public career he managed to find himself embroiled in controversy. On May 12, 1888 Bunn took legal action to support his claim that the Bloomington Board of Education owed him \$16,000 as a commission from the twelve years he spent as treasurer of the board of education. During that time he handled \$800,000 worth of the board's funds. While the position did not have a salary attached to it, Bunn discovered a clause in the city charter which entitled him to 2% of the money he handle. Bunn stated that section three of the charter stated "all taxes levied in accordance with the provisions of this act shall be paid over by the officer collecting the same to the treasurer of the board of education, and upon all money passing through his hands; the said treasurer shall be allowed to retain two per centum."<sup>6</sup> He then proceeded to hire an attorney to support his claim to the money.

During the time leading up to his trial he became a very controversial figure. An article printed in *The Pantagraph* on May 21, 1888 questioned whether or not it was ethical for someone serving as a United States Postmaster could also serve on the Bloomington Board of Education. In the same article, the prosecuting attorney questioned Bunn's entitlement to the money since he had waited several years to demand compensation.<sup>7</sup> The trial to determine whether or not Bunn would receive the funds he stated he was entitled to was held on April 30, 1889 nearly a year after Bunn's initial claim. At the trial the 8<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court ruled against Bunn because the position was intended as an honorary one and the previous treasurers had claimed no commission. They ruled that he was no longer eligible for reelection and required him to pay back the rest of the money.<sup>8</sup> However, they allowed him to keep \$1,200—the commission he earned the year before.

Bunn then proceeded to take his case to the appellate court in Springfield to try and get the lower court's decision overturned. However, Bunn would not receive the decision he was hoping for because the appellate court upheld the lower court's decision. The judge in Springfield stated that the Circuit Court was correct in its ruling. He also reiterated that the law clearly stated that the office of the treasurer "shall be permitted to retain 2 per centum and this means out of the current year" and that Bunn was not allowed to take back payment for the years he had served prior to his discovery of the clause.<sup>9</sup> A few days later Bunn notified the board of education that he was ready to

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<sup>4</sup> "Mayor Bunn's Inaugural," *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 1877

<sup>5</sup> "Oldest Ex-Mayor Called By Death."

<sup>6</sup> "A Moderate Fortune," *The Pantagraph*, May 12, 1888

<sup>7</sup> "The Law In The Bunn Case," *The Pantagraph*, May 21, 1888

<sup>8</sup> "The Bunn Case," *The Pantagraph*, April 30, 1889

<sup>9</sup> "The Bunn Case," *The Pantagraph*, February 19, 1890

return the money minus the commission he was allowed to keep from his final year of service to the board.<sup>10</sup>

After a long, honorable career of service to the community, T.J. Bunn died on October 20, 1916. He had remained active until only a few days before his death. He had developed a slight cold a few weeks prior that caused him to gradually decline. His obituary also noted that he had suffered a serious accident the year before when he fell into the elevator shaft at the Corn Belt Bank building and never quite recovered. *The Pantagraph* stated that “his name will go down in the history of Bloomington and McLean County as one of the highly respected and honored men of the community.”<sup>11</sup> He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Laurie Peterson, 2008

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<sup>10</sup> “A Noted Case Settled,” *The Pantagraph*, February 22, 1890

<sup>11</sup> “Oldest Ex-Mayor Called By Death.”