

Ezra Morton Prince (1831-1908)

Ezra Morton Prince was born on May 27, 1831 in Turner, Maine. His parents were Job Prince and Zilpha Spalding Prince. He had two brothers, Leonard and Rufus, and one sister, Zilpha. He was a frail child having been born with his right leg shorter and smaller than his left. Later in life he said that for this reason, “he was designed for a professional life.”¹ He was educated at common schools and then attended Bowdoin College from 1851-1853. After attending Bowdoin, he selected law as his profession and began studying in the office of the Hon. Washington Gilbert in Bath, Maine. The following year he entered Harvard College to finish his law studies. He remained there for one year until he was admitted to the bar. While attending school, he also taught several semesters in the common schools and high schools in Turner.

In April of 1856 he came to Bloomington at the behest of his cousin Leonard Swett. Like Prince, Swett was also a lawyer. Swett came to Bloomington in 1849 and established a law practice. Swett was also a lawyer on the Eighth Judicial Circuit and this was how he met and became good friends with Abraham Lincoln. It was Swett who introduced Prince to Lincoln.

Prince recalled later in life that “one May morning [in 1856],” while he was in Swett’s office, he looked out the window and saw Lincoln’s “striking figure” walking to the courthouse in downtown Bloomington. Prince recalled that Lincoln was a “tall, gaunt man, sallow complexion, coarse dark hair, an old battered stove pipe hat, set on the back of his head, coarse rough boots, innocent of blacking, baggy pants, much too short for his legs, and a rusty old bombazine coat that hung loosely about his frame.”² Soon after this, Prince and Lincoln became well acquainted since Lincoln was a regular on the Circuit coming to Bloomington often until he became President. They even traveled the Eighth Circuit together on occasion.

Prince was also a staunch supporter of the Republican Party having been a member since its organization in Illinois in the summer of 1856. The Republican Party was created in opposition of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 which was created by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas. This act stated that the settlers of a new territory could decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery in their territory. The newly founded Republican Party was strongly against this act or any act that would allow the expansion of slavery.

Shortly after his first encounter with Lincoln, Prince attended the May 29, 1856 Anti-Nebraska State Convention of Illinois which was held in Major’s Hall in Bloomington. This was the convention that organized the Republican Party of Illinois. This was also the convention where Lincoln gave his now famous “Lost Speech.” In this speech, Lincoln was said to have spoken out against the expansion of slavery and said it was slavery that was the root cause of the country’s problems. Towards the end of his life, Prince contributed and edited the book *The Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society: Volume III*, which commemorated this convention and Lincoln’s legacy in McLean County.

In October of the same year, Lincoln came to Bloomington on his way to Tremont, Illinois to make a speech campaigning for the Republican candidates, (John Fremont

¹ “Ezra M. Prince Called by Death,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 28, 1908.

² Ezra Prince. “A Day with Abraham Lincoln,” date known, 1

and William Dayton) during the election of 1856. Bloomington was the closest railroad station to Tremont, as Tremont did not have its own. When he arrived in Bloomington, Lincoln rented a carriage and asked his friend Prince to take him to Tremont. Because they did not start the journey until noon that day, this would be an overnight carriage trip. They followed the Peoria Road called the “Great Line through Central Illinois for Western Emigrants.” Parts of this road still exist today which follows Route 9 in western McLean County. All along their journey, “the road was lined with emigrant wagons,” which they called “Prairie Schooners.”³ This being near the end of the 1856 election, politics was on the mind of all who traveled this road. As Lincoln and Prince rode past these wagons, (their wagon being lighter than those of the emigrants) the people in those wagons would yell out their favorite candidates: “*Buchanan and Breckinridge!*” or “*Freemont and Dayton!*” Lincoln and Prince would shout back “*Freemont and Dayton!*,” who were the anti-slavery candidates. Prince later wrote in his account of this “Day with Abraham Lincoln” that he “wondered whether Mr. Lincoln had any idea then that in four years from that time people would be cheering his name for the presidency as we were then that of Freemont?”⁴

They stopped at a place called “Mickens,” which was three miles west of Danvers, Illinois. There they stayed at a tavern where the “conditions were primitive and poor” even for a “way-side tavern of the time.”⁵ Lincoln and Prince shared a bed and Prince described the food as vile. But Prince said Lincoln was never heard to complain of his food. The cost for lodging, supper, breakfast and horse keep was about seventy-five cents. As they drove off, Lincoln said that was pretty cheap, but then Prince said he must have remembered the “muddy coffee and yellow biscuit” they had for breakfast, and with a laugh said “but perhaps considering what we got, it was enough.”⁶

Prince also recalled that Lincoln was “an ideal traveling companion. If you wanted silence you could have it, if conversation you could have it and on your own ground. To Mr. Lincoln was himself the most interesting topic of conversation, and he was perfectly ready to satisfy my Yankee curiosity.”⁷ Prince’s friendship with Lincoln would continue until Lincoln’s death some nine years later.

On July 2, 1866 Prince married Barbara Maria Millar in Pittsfield, Illinois. They were married by Reverend M. Kublin. They would go on to have five children though two of those children, one son and their only daughter, preceded them both in death.

Prince was also a member of the Free Congregationalist Church since 1859. This church later became the Unitarian Church and he was one of the founders of that church in Bloomington and was a lifelong member.⁸

While Prince was a life long supporter of the Republican Party, he was never very successful at politics. He was an unsuccessful candidate for the Illinois State Senate in 1856 and an unsuccessful candidate for City Clerk of Bloomington in 1861. He was appointed as Master in Chancery, (officer of the court) of McLean County for four years and served as a member of the Bloomington Board of Education for two years.

³ Prince, 5

⁴ Prince, 5

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⁶ Prince, 6

⁷ Prince, 6

⁸ “Ezra M. Prince Called by Death.”

Besides being a prominent lawyer in Bloomington, Prince was also a very active member of the community. He was one of the founders of Bloomington's first public library and one of the officers of the Library Association. He even taught at the Law School at Illinois Wesleyan University.

He was also one of the founders of the McLean County Historical Society in 1892 and was the Society's first secretary. Prince was a very active member of the Historical Society right up until his death in 1908. In 1901 with the construction of the new courthouse underway after the Great Fire of 1900, "he was one of the most active of those who advocated the setting aside of a room in that building for the preservation and custody of the invaluable documents of the Society."⁹ His efforts must have worked because the Historical Society was housed in one room on the third floor of the Courthouse after its completion in 1903 until 1922.

His major contribution to McLean County was most likely his written records of county history. He contributed to and edited all three volumes of the *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society*. He also edited the 1908 *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County* and contributed to two other histories of McLean County. In addition, he wrote hundreds of column inches of information for *The Daily Pantagraph* about his travels out West, about Lincoln, or about the history of McLean County in general. He also wrote and read many papers for the Historical Society.

The last few years of his life were relatively quiet. Having largely discontinued the practice of law, he would rarely appear at the actual prosecution of cases in court. But, he continued to remain active in the community by writing and submitting articles to *The Daily Pantagraph* and writing for the Historical Society.

Sadly, his wife passed away on May 2, 1908. Just a few months after that, upon returning from visiting family in Benton Harbor, Michigan, Prince began to suffer from the affects of kidney and bladder disorders. He was admitted to Brokaw Hospital and died a few days later on August 27, 1908. In 1902, Prince had written precise directions for his own funeral and wrote a short autobiography which he gave to each of his children. *The Daily Pantagraph* reported that news about his sudden death had spread throughout Bloomington quickly and all expressed regret and genuine sorrow, especially those who knew him. It was also reported that "his views on politics and religion, and most especially on matters of local history, were always sought and ever of value to his fellows."¹⁰ *The Daily Pantagraph* published a copy of that autobiography he had written just a few years before. His funeral was held at the Unitarian Church, of which he had been a member of, and he was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his wife and their daughter, Grace, who had died in childhood.

By: Candace Summers, 2009

⁹ "Ezra M. Prince Called by Death."

¹⁰ "Ezra M. Prince Called by Death."