

Ezra Prince (1831-1908)

Like many young men in the early 1800s, Ezra Morton Prince came west to Bloomington, seeking his fortune. He was born on May 27, 1831. This young lawyer was originally from Maine, and had attended Bowdoin College there and then Harvard Law School. Later in life, Prince commented that he had been “designed for the professional life” as he was born with one leg shorter and smaller than the other.

Ezra came to Bloomington at the urging of his cousin, Leonard Swett. Swett was a lawyer too, and a good friend of Abraham Lincoln. Later in his memoirs, Prince recalled that “one May morning (in 1856)” he looked out of the window of Swett’s office 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, and 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.” Prince and Lincoln became good friends. Soon Prince, the new, young lawyer in town, was riding the Eighth Judicial Circuit along with Swett and Lincoln.

Like Lincoln, Prince was a staunch supporter and founding member of the Republican Party in Illinois. The Republican Party was formed in opposition to the Kansas Nebraska Act which allowed new states formed in the West to choose whether to be slave or free. Shortly after his first meeting with Lincoln, on May 29, 1856, Prince attended the Republican State Convention held in Major’s Hall in Bloomington. This was where Lincoln gave his famous “Lost Speech.” In this speech, Lincoln said it was slavery that was the root cause of the country’s problems. The reason it is called the “Lost Speech” is that everyone listening to it was so enthralled, that no one thought to write it down.

In October of that same year, Lincoln came to Bloomington on his way to Tremont to make a campaign speech supporting the Republican candidate for president, John Fremont, and his running mate, William Dayton. Lincoln took a train from Springfield, and then had to travel onto Tremont by carriage. He asked his friend, Prince, to ride with him. They traveled the Peoria Road, today Route 9, which was a favorite road for emigrants moving west. As Lincoln and Prince rode along, they passed many “prairie schooners” carrying settlers West. Since it was near the end of the election campaign, people in these wagons would yell out the names of their favorite candidates; “Buchanan and Breckinridge!” or “Fremont and Dayton!”. Lincoln and Prince would shout back, “Fremont and Dayton!” Prince later wrote that he “wondered whether Mr. Lincoln had any idea that in four years people would be cheering his name for the presidency as we were then (shouting) that of Fremont.”

Three miles west of Danvers, Lincoln and Prince stopped for the night at a place called Mickens. They stayed at a tavern where the “conditions were primitive and poor.” The two men shared a bed as was the custom of the time in crowded inns, and Prince described the food as vile. But, Prince said, Lincoln was never heard to complain of his food. The cost of lodging, supper, breakfast and stabling the horses was about 75 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.”

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. For Mr. Lincoln was himself the most interesting topic of conversation, and he was perfectly ready to satisfy my Yankee curiosity.” Prince’s friendship with Lincoln continued until Lincoln’s death nine years later.

In 1866, Prince married Barbara Millar in Pittsfield, Illinois. They would have five children, two of whom preceded them in death. He was a life-long church member. He joined the Free Congregational Church here in 1859 and when this church later became the Unitarian Church, he was a founding member.

He was a life long supporter of the Republican Party, though he was never successful at winning elective office. He did serve as a Master in Chancery, an assistant to a judge, for four years and on the Board of Education for two. Besides being a prominent lawyer in town, Prince was also very active in the community. He was one of the founders of the first public library and taught at Wesleyan’s law school.

He was also one of the founders of the McLean County Historical Society in 1892 and the organization’s first secretary. When a new courthouse was being built in Bloomington after the Great Fire of 1900, he successfully worked to have a room in that building set aside for the ”preservation and custody of the invaluable document of the Society.”

Among Prince’s major contributions to McLean County were the historical records he wrote and kept of the county’s early days and his memories of Abraham Lincoln. He wrote many volumes of local history, plus articles and interviews in *The Daily Pantagraph*.

When he died on August 27, 1908, *The Daily Pantagraph* reported that “all expressed regret and genuine sorrow, especially those who knew him. His views on politics and religion, and most especially on matters of local history, were always sought and ever of value to his fellows.” He is buried next to his wife and daughter.

Discussion Question: Reread Prince’s stories about Abraham Lincoln. From these stories, what information could you gather about Abraham Lincoln, his values or personality characteristics?