

ASAHIEL GRIDLEY

Sources & Activities

Primary Sources

- “The Legislature,” *Western Whig*, January 8, 1851.
- “The Central Road,” *Western Whig*, January 29, 1851.
- Letter from Asahel Gridley to *Western Intelligencer*, February 6, 1851 (from *History of McLean County, Illinois*).
- “Senator Gridley,” *Western Whig*, February 18, 1851.
- “Rail Road,” *Bloomington Intelligencer*, January 19, 1853.

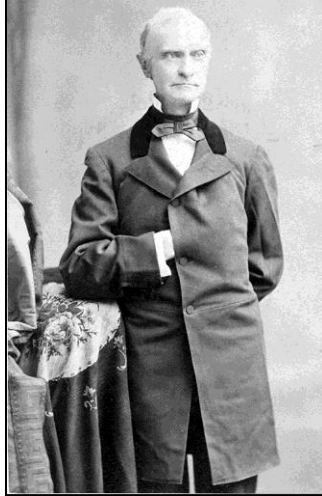
Secondary Sources

- “Railroads’ Arrival in 1853 Momentous Event in City History,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*, by Bill Kemp.
- “Telegraph Brought Profound Changes to Bloomington,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*, by Bill Kemp.

This book is also available for purchase from the Museum.

Suggested Activities & Discussion Questions

- **Activity 1**: Student should read the primary sources from above. Have them respond to the following questions: Why would it have been important for the railroad to come to Bloomington? What did it mean to Bloomington? What impact did it have on Bloomington? Do you think Bloomington would be what it is today without the railroads? Why or why not?
- **Activity 2**: Have students write a letter to Senator Gridley arguing for or against the railroad coming to your town. They should use the sources for evidence and cite in the letter.
- **Discussion Question**: When did Gridley’s strong personality help him? Be specific.



GENERAL ASAHEL GRIDLEY (1810-1881)

“To give the history of Gen. Gridley, you would relate the history of Bloomington and to give the history of Bloomington, you would relate the history of Gen. Gridley,” said Judge John McClun upon the death of Asahel Gridley. Indeed, there was no one else who so affected the early growth and development of Bloomington and McLean County.

Asahel (pronounced Ash-el) Gridley was born on April 21, 1810, near Cazenovia, New York. His mother wanted him to be teacher and sent him to a nearby academy. But Asahel had other plans. After one year, he quit school, left home and at the age of ten, was hired on as a store clerk in Cazenovia. By the time he was 14, both of his parents had died. His father had left him a small sum of money which was invested for him until he turned 21. By that time, “his little fortune” had grown with interest to be worth over \$40,000 in today’s dollars. Gridley took the money and headed west.

On October 8, 1831, 21 year old Gridley arrived in Bloomington, Illinois. There were only ten to twelve families living there at the time. He used his money to open a general store at the north-west corner of Front and Main Streets. He stocked goods of all kinds to meet the needs of the settlers and the few remaining Native Americans from the surrounding area. Periodically, he rode to St. Louis to purchase goods for his store, and he also traveled back East to Pittsburg, PA on buying trips. It was on one of these trips he met his future wife, Mary Enos.

In January, 1832, a plan was adopted to build a courthouse for the new McLean County on land donated by another early settler, James Allin. Gridley won the bid to build the new courthouse. This same year, the Black Hawk War began when Native Americans who had been forced out of Illinois tried to return to their former homelands. Gridley closed his store and joined the McLean County **Militia**. He was immediately named an officer in the group. Although the McLean County group returned home with mixed reviews, Gridley was afterward elected **Adjutant General** of the McLean County Regiment and most people referred to him as “General” for the rest of his life.

Back in Bloomington, Gridley’s businesses thrived. He became not only a merchant, but a **land speculator** and town developer. In 1835 he laid out and sold plots for the town of Gridley, and the next year, helped develop the town of Lexington. In 1836 he also helped Jesse Fell and James Allin start Bloomington’s first newspaper, today known as *The Pantagraph*, by

arranging the purchase and shipment of a printing press and other needed supplies. This same year he returned to Pittsburg to marry Mary.

The marriage would prove to be a stormy one. Both Asahel and Mary had strong personalities and short tempers. They had ten children, only four of whom grew to adulthood. The first, Juliette, was born in 1837, the same year the Gridleys moved into their first home purchased from their former landlord and friend, James Allin.

1837 also was a year of financial disaster in the United States. It took a few years for the full effect to reach Bloomington, but by 1842, Gridley had to declare **bankruptcy**. His business dealings depended on his customers paying their bills so he could pay his. As businesses failed all over the country, his did too. Hard times followed for the Gridley family.

Asahel had already become involved politics. He served as McLean County treasurer from 1839 to 1841. The next two years he was elected a representative to the Illinois General Assembly. Possibly, it was during this time that he met Abraham Lincoln. When he went bankrupt in 1842, Jesse Fell and other friends suggested Gridley study law. Soon he was riding the **Eighth Judicial Circuit** with Lincoln and David Davis. In 1851, Gridley was elected a state senator and served two terms. This meant he was serving in Springfield several days in a row, and then riding all night to be home to work in Bloomington the following day.

It was during Gridley's time as a state senator that he was able to ensure Bloomington's future and continued growth and prosperity. First, the Illinois Central Railroad, and a short time later the Chicago and Alton Railroad, were built through Bloomington. In 1853, Gridley helped bring the first telegraph to Bloomington and won the building of the **Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops** for the west side of the city. He also organized the McLean County Bank, Bloomington's first bank. That same year, the first **locomotives** arrived to much fanfare in town. Due to the building of the railroads and the C & A Shops, Bloomington's population **surged** from a village of 1,600 people in 1850 to a city of over 15,000 by 1870.

By 1859, Asahel Gridley was recognized McLean County's first millionaire. Much of his wealth was in **real estate**. By the time of his death, he owned 26 farms, eight businesses and warehouses, plus his mansion on Grove Street. Gridley built "The Oaks" in 1860 at a cost of \$40,000, what would be well over a million dollars today. There, the Gridleys displayed the beautiful art work and keepsakes brought home from their European travels. During the 1860 campaign, Asahel gave Lincoln a tour of his **lavish** new home and furnishings. After the tour, Lincoln said, "Gridley, do you want everyone to hate you?" Apparently he thought Gridley was showing off.

Gridley did have a reputation as **boisterous, opportunistic**, and ill-mannered. His friends and enemies suffered **slurs**, fights, and law suits. When drinking too much he would say and do things he would later deeply regret. But Gridley also appeared to be a man when the argument was settled; he was ready to go on as before. Many friends including Lincoln were loyal to him. On January 25, 1881, Asahel Gridley died of **complications** due lung problems and exhaustion suffered from fighting a fire at his bank the previous year. He died at the Oaks with his family and friends around him. A **visitation** was held at his home for one hour before his funeral, with over 5,000 people attending. According to *The Pantagraph*, they included young and old, rich and poor, immigrants and old settlers alike. Banks were closed and most business in town was at a standstill during his funeral. As one of his **eulogies** later said, "No other pioneer had more to do with the laying of the foundation of Bloomington than General Asahel Gridley." He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.