

## James Allin (1788-1869)

James Allin was born on January 13, 1788 in North Carolina. He was the son of Isaac and Sarah Frances (Randle) Allin. In 1798 at the age of ten, his family moved to Boone County, Kentucky. After remaining in Kentucky for one year, the Allin's headed further West across the Ohio River to Dearborn County, Indiana.<sup>1</sup> They lived there for a short time until finally settling in a community called Rising Sun in Ohio Co., Indiana where Allin received most of his education.

When Allin was 21 years old, he worked on a flat boat that floated grain and produce down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans.<sup>2</sup> In 1817 he married Catherine Livingston who was born in Kentucky in 1801. Together they had five children: William, James Jr., John, Lee, and Catharine. Within two years of their marriage, the couple moved to Edwardsville in Madison County, Illinois and then in 1821 moved to Vandalia in Fayette County which at the time was the capital of Illinois. While there, James served as a county commissioner, overseeing the administrative, financial, and legislative responsibilities of the county government.

Around the same time that Allin moved to the capital, the very first settlers of Keg Grove, Illinois, (as the area was originally called) emigrated up from Kentucky in 1822. This grove was located 100 miles north of Vandalia and located in what was then Tazewell County. These settlers were hunters and gatherers. They lived in log cabins far from their nearest neighbors. When those early settlers first arrived, the Native Americans who lived in that area, the Kickapoo, were spread throughout Central Illinois with the majority living at the Grand Village of the Kickapoo (near today's town of Ellsworth, IL). The Indians and white settlers remained on fairly good terms until the state and federal government began to order the Native Americans from the area around 1823. Some of the first families to settle in the area were the Hendrix, Dawson, and Orendorff families. Within a year, twelve more families settled in Keg Grove.<sup>3</sup>

The area was eventually renamed to Blooming Grove in about 1824. According to local lore, the grove was named Keg Grove because "some white men, probably hunters, once hid a keg of rum or whisky at Sulphur Springs, at the Hinshaw farm near the west side of the grove."<sup>4</sup> Another version of this same legend states that "Indians found a keg of whiskey which had been cached, and that this gave the name which the grove bore for many years." Credit for the name change is given to Mrs. William Orendorff, who felt the name of Blooming Grove was more appropriate "on account of the flowers and foliage of the maple trees in spring-time."<sup>5</sup>

Originally, McLean County was part of Tazewell County. Tazewell County was formed in 1827 out of a portion of Fayette County after citizens lobbied for a closer county seat. Like in the formation of McLean County a few years later, the main reason for this was because the county seat for Fayette County was over 100 miles away in Vandalia, IL. This made it incredibly hard for residents of the outlying portions of Fayette County to vote in any type of election. The county seat for the new county of Tazewell was placed at Mackinawtown, (known

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<sup>1</sup> *The History of McLean County, Illinois* (Chicago: WM. Le Baron, Jr. and Co., 1879) p.318

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Masters, *Genealogy of James Allin*, (1979)

<sup>3</sup> "75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Blooming Grove Settlement," *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society*, Volume I. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1899) p.282-284

<sup>4</sup> "75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Blooming Grove Settlement," *Transactions Vol. 1*, p.284

<sup>5</sup> Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County*. (McKnight and McKnight Publishing Company, Second Edition, 1968) p.7

today as Mackinaw).<sup>6</sup> That same year, the first elections were held in the new county. While citizens of Blooming Grove could now more easily participate in local politics, it was still a long journey to the new county seat at Mackinawtown. It was located about twenty-five miles away from Blooming Grove and the journey by horse or wagon was long, taking at least a day.

By between 1828 and 1830 residents of the area around Blooming Grove began to circulate the idea for the formation of their own county. The people of Blooming Grove and other neighboring areas wanted to be more involved in local government and wanted their voices heard at all levels of government. But, with the county seat located so far away, it was not feasible for them to do so. By creating their own county, they would be able to participate actively in local government and have a say in politics in general. This idea was not highly favored by the people of Mackinawtown.<sup>7</sup> It was also around this time that James Allin arrived in the area.

In 1829 James Allin arrived in Blooming Grove with a stock of goods which he had purchased prior to leaving Vandalia. He began to sell them out of William Walker's home, another early settler to the area. In the following months, Allin learned of the interest of forming a new county. Allin agreed with those who settled Blooming Grove that there should be a county seat closer to where they lived. Allin, who had a talent for land speculating, assisted William Orendorff, W. H. Hodge, Rev. James Latta, and other settlers in promoting the formation of a new county. Allin also observed that there were many elements already in place to create a town. There was "a post office, church privileges (with services being held in private homes or schools), a good school, a good store, and one or two physicians, a minister or two, a blacksmith shop...a corn mill, and a cemetery."<sup>8</sup> With all of these things in place already, it seemed logical to those who lived in the area that the new county seat could be situated in Blooming Grove.

Within that year, Allin brought forth the proposal to the Legislature of Illinois that land should be designated to become a new county (which would be named McLean). Since the act had not yet been passed, Allin circulated petitions to residents of other groves near Blooming Grove to garner support for a new county. Allin sent Thomas Orendorff and James Latta to the capital at Vandalia with the petitions since his health was poor at the time. Because Allin was familiar with the inner workings of the state legislature (since he had lived in Vandalia for several years) his efforts were successful. The Speaker of the House, William Lee D. Ewing, heard the petition and asked what the county was to be named. Latta offered "Hendricks" in honor of a representative from Indiana, who was also one of the first settlers in Blooming Grove. Ewing agreed to the formation of the new county only if it was named after his friend the late U.S. Senator, John McLean. Since Mr. Hendricks was still living, Ewing thought it wise to name the county after someone who had passed away. Ewing said it best, "for no one's reputation is safe until he's dead."<sup>9</sup> The Legislation was approved and on Christmas Day of 1830, the bill was passed to create McLean County.

The location of the county seat of the newly formed McLean County was chosen to be in Blooming Grove. The reason for this was most likely because Allin offered 22 1/2 acres of his own property in return for the county seat to be located at Blooming Grove. This seat would be

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<sup>6</sup> Duis, p.6

<sup>7</sup> Duis, p. 8

<sup>8</sup> "75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Blooming Grove Settlement," *Transactions Vol. 1*, p.287

<sup>9</sup> Researcher's notes, "Overview of McLean County," James Allin Cemetery Walk Research Folder, compiled by Judy Stone, 1998

Bloomington, renamed by Allin himself.<sup>10</sup> As the plans for Bloomington were drawn out, Allin chose the highest point of the land that he donated as the town square. Allin and Isaac Baker worked to lay out the town, dividing the land into lots. Baker surveyed the lots and helped build some of the first homes in Bloomington. Allin was also credited with picking the “prettiest location for the city.” The actual location of the town (the land donated by Allin) was on the northern edge of Blooming Grove, bounded by North (today’s Monroe Street), East, West (today’s Roosevelt Street), and Front streets. The center block of the town was the courthouse square. The first courthouse was constructed in December of 1832. This was technically the second courthouse as the first court cases were held in Allin’s own home. The new courthouse was a one-story frame building and was used as a school as well. John Burnham wrote about the early settlement of Bloomington in his book *History of Bloomington and Normal in McLean County IL*. He stated that “with the noble trees of Blooming Grove in its rear and the rolling prairie in the front on the north, the original town was a remarkable tract of land.”<sup>11</sup>

The first board meeting with the County Commissioners for McLean County was held on May 16, 1831 at Allin’s home.<sup>12</sup> At the same meeting, Allin was made postmaster and the post office was placed in his store. Bloomington, not yet baptized, was officially believed to be commissioned on July 4, 1831. At that time the auctioning of land was held giving settlers the opportunity for a fresh beginning in a newly minted town. The proceeds of the auction were used to fund the start up of the County.<sup>13</sup>

As Allin advanced his own interests he also continued to help new immigrants who continued to arrive in Bloomington. Allin would sell lots to these newcomers for low prices. If the new settlers had little money, he would lower the price. If they had no money, he would give the lot to them with the wish that they work to improve the land. Allin was a shrewd business man especially when it came to land speculation. As recalled by the author Dr. E. Duis,<sup>14</sup> Allin sent his ten year old son William on horseback to Springfield to enter some land he hoped to procure. At the time, the roads and bridges were scarce and William traveled across the open prairie. Allin heard that a neighbor of his was attempting to acquire the same land. In order to best this neighbor, it was necessary for William to enter the land first. William was successful and upon encountering the rival neighbor as he was leaving the land office, the neighbor asked how he (William) got there. William replied that he came across the prairie. Needless to say the man was angered at being outwitted by a ten year old boy.<sup>15</sup>

The town of Bloomington continued to grow and so did Allin’s faith in the town. With a circulation of newsletters (much like a travel brochure), there was a flurry of settlers that began to move to Illinois. By the end of 1836, 450 people lived in Bloomington which was a significant increase from when the first census of Bloomington was taken in 1834 when about 140 people lived in Bloomington.<sup>16</sup> Because of this new influx of people to the area, a road from Bloomington to Pekin was planned. Many townspeople traveled to and from Pekin for business and other activities because it was located on the Illinois River, which was a port of entry for

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<sup>10</sup> Duis, p. 10

<sup>11</sup> John Howard Burnham. *History of Bloomington and Normal in McLean County, IL*. (Bloomington: J.H. Burnham Publisher, 1879) p.21

<sup>12</sup> Dwight Frink, *James Allin*, (1905). Dwight Frink Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>13</sup> Burnham, p. 26

<sup>14</sup> Duis, p. 215-216

<sup>15</sup> Frink, *James Allin*

<sup>16</sup> Duis, p.12-13

shipping goods. Also in 1836 (five years after Bloomington was established) talk of a rail road running from Chicago to Alton IL began to surface.<sup>17</sup> Allin, who owned a tract of land on the proposed building site, gave a portion of what was needed to bring the railroad to Bloomington. When the first train arrived seventeen years later in 1853 from the north, “no one in the city took a deeper or more sentimental pride in that event than did Mr. Allin.”<sup>18</sup> These modern additions to Bloomington brought a continuing influx of people which lead to a further growth in population.

Allin remained dedicated to the prosperity of Bloomington. He was very active in the community and helped to promote the continued growth of the area. In addition to all he had done towards the founding of Bloomington and McLean County, he was also responsible for helping to found Illinois Wesleyan University in 1850. Joined by a list of other notable men of the town, Allin was on the first board of Trustees that established the university. Since there was a great Methodist population in the area, (including Allin) it was decided that the university would be a Methodist Christian College (even though those who were involved in its inception were of various faiths). In hopes of making the idea a reality, two of the founding members, James C. Finley and John S. Barger, attended conferences throughout 1850 with no success. Due to the lack of finances, the men were turned down. Finally, a report was written by Finley and Barger that detailed the financial support and the necessity of an educational stronghold in Bloomington. It was submitted to a Methodist committee on education of Illinois. The report was approved in late 1850 and before the Methodist conference adjourned, the founders of Wesleyan, including Allin, signed their names to the paper that would seal the establishment of Illinois Wesleyan University. In December of 1850 a meeting was held to determine the officers that would serve on the Board of Trustees and Allin was elected as Vice-President.<sup>19</sup> In June of 1851 the Board of Trustees accepted Allin’s proposal to donate ten acres of land to the school which was located “north of the city and immediately north of his residence, said lands to be surrounded by streets each four rods wide.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the university, Allin helped develop a library of sorts. With the population continuing to grow and a growing need for books within the established schools and churches, a movement began to form a free library. In 1840 Dr. Henry, Dr. William C. Hobbs, Allin, and Jesse Fell were the most active members of the community involved in this undertaking. They took it upon themselves to establish a library which anyone in town could use. They purchased about one thousand volumes of books from Philadelphia and brought them back to Bloomington. The library, named the McLean County Library, was “a splendid” library at first but in the end was an utter failure due in part to poor management. Dr. Hobbs, who was the one most responsible for managing the library, “let subscribers keep books out as long as they pleased, return them as they pleased, or not at all, and could not bear to fine anyone for keeping books over time.” The consequence of his actions was that the books became scattered or lost and within a few years the library was forced to close.<sup>21</sup> Bloomington was left without a

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<sup>17</sup> Burnham, p.21

<sup>18</sup> Frink, *James Allin*

<sup>19</sup> Elmo Scott Watson. *The Illinois Wesleyan Story 1850-1950*. (Bloomington: Illinois Wesleyan University Press, 1950) p.32

<sup>20</sup> Watson, p. 34

<sup>21</sup> *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume II*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1903) p. 224

library until 1857 when the Ladies Library Association (known today as Bloomington Public Library) opened a new public library on Center Street.

James Allin was a popular man which was proven by his election to the Illinois State Senate for two terms beginning in 1836. As a Senator and as a citizen of Bloomington, Allin was truly dedicated to the city he helped create. On June 20, 1854 the citizens of Bloomington showed their appreciation of Allin at a ceremony held for the opening of Bloomington's newest and finest hotel, the Pike House. The hotel was built of wood and cost \$25,000, (which would be close to \$700,000 today). Many of Bloomington's leading citizens were in attendance and offered praise to Allin. In a toast given by Allin to the respected citizens of Bloomington, he described his affection towards the city: "My favorite daughter-Bloomington-a puny child and the object of intense parental solicitude, now springing up into a Blooming and vigorous womanhood; the idol of her father and the belle of the commonwealth."<sup>22</sup> In response to his toast, Mayor William Wallace said: "The venerable founder of Bloomington-James Allin-a man never appalled by difficulty, and who never lost sight of the splendid future of our flourishing city in the dark hour of her trial."<sup>23</sup>

James Allin lived to the age of eighty-one and passed away on May 5, 1869. Allin lived to see his hopes and dreams come to life as Bloomington continued to flourish. "He lived worthily and died in the belief that his efforts for the advancement of Bloomington could never be questioned."<sup>24</sup> James Allin was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

By: Emily Swartz, 2011

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<sup>22</sup> Burnham, p.22

<sup>23</sup> Burnham, p.22

<sup>24</sup> Frink, *James Allin*