

T. J. Bunn (1832-1916)

Thomas Jefferson (T.J.) Bunn was born on August 29, 1832, in Xenia, Ohio. He was the son of Lewis and Margery (Haines) Bunn. The family moved to McLean County when T.J. was just six months old and settled in a log cabin in what is now downtown Bloomington. Back then, Bloomington was a small, untamed “western” town with only 150 people, mostly from Southern backgrounds. Over his life, Bunn played an important role in the town's growth, watching it develop over the next 74 years of his life.

T.J. attended a local school until he was old enough to learn blacksmithing, a trade his father, Lewis Bunn, was skilled in. At that time, it was common for sons to follow in their father's footsteps. However, a serious eye injury from a splinter of iron caused T.J. to change his career path. Instead of continuing as a blacksmith, he learned to be a printer.

In 1855, T.J. worked as a clerk for a company called Baker and Edgar. By 1872, he became a broker and loan agent for the Central Illinois Loan Agency, located at 115 N. Center Street. In 1875, he partnered with Lucius L. Holmes to open a bank called T.J. Bunn and Co. Bank, which grew successful and later merged with the Third National Bank by 1882.

T.J. married Mary E. Hutchinson in 1854, and they had four children. They lived at 702 West Washington Street, hosting elegant parties for their social circle. These parties were often featured in the local newspaper, *The Daily Pantagraph*.

Besides banking, Bunn was also an active politician and a strong Democrat. However, during a time when political tensions were high, he ran as a Republican for two local offices in 1859 and 1863. In 1863, he was elected City Treasurer. As a Union supporter, Bunn wanted to distance himself from the "Copperheads" (Democrats who were sympathetic to the Confederacy). He won the election and continued to rise in local politics. In 1870, he was elected mayor of Bloomington, serving a second term in 1877.

During his second term as mayor, Bunn worked to improve Bloomington's infrastructure, including the first paved roads in the city. The paved road stretched from North Center Street to Chestnut Street, and then west to the Chicago and Alton railroad station. Later, a pine block pavement was added to the downtown square. Because of his efforts, he became known as the "father of Bloomington pavements."

Bunn also served as the city's Postmaster during the administrations of Presidents James Buchanan and Grover Cleveland. Despite his successes, he faced controversy later in life. In 1888, he claimed that the Bloomington Board of Education owed him \$16,000 for handling their funds as treasurer for twelve years. Although the position wasn't paid, he found a clause in the city charter that allowed him to keep a 2% commission on the money he managed.

The case caused a lot of debate, with some questioning whether it was ethical for a Postmaster to also be on the Board of Education. In 1889, the court ruled against Bunn, stating that the position was honorary and previous treasurers hadn't taken a commission. He was told to return most of the money, but was allowed to keep the \$1,200 from his last year of service. Bunn took the case to an appellate court, but the decision was upheld.

After a long career of public service, T.J. Bunn passed away on October 20, 1916, at the age of 84. His health had been in decline after a fall the previous year, and he had caught a cold that worsened over time. His obituary praised him as a highly respected figure in Bloomington and McLean County. He was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.