

Thomas F. Tipton (1833-1904)

Thomas Foster Tipton was born on August 29, 1833, in Franklin County, Ohio, to Hiram and Deborah (Ogden) Tipton. The family moved to McLean County, Illinois, in 1844 and settled in Money Creek Township. Sadly, his father passed away in 1845, and after his mother remarried in 1847, Thomas decided to live on his own. At 13, he moved in with his uncle on a nearby farm, working during the summer and going to school in the winter.

By age 16, Thomas became a schoolteacher, while still studying and reading on his own. At 18, he briefly studied medicine but soon switched to law, working in the law office of H.N. Keitly in Knoxville, Illinois. He passed the bar exam in 1854 and opened his own law office in Lexington, where he lived for the next seven years. On October 23, 1856, Thomas married Mary J. Strayer, and they had four children: Belle, Harry, Hellen, and Laura.

In 1862, the Tipton family moved to Bloomington. A year later, Thomas formed a law partnership with Reuben Moore Benjamin. He also worked with other lawyers throughout his career. In 1870, Tipton was elected as a circuit judge to replace Judge John Milton Scott, who moved to the Illinois Supreme Court. Before becoming a judge, Tipton served as the state's attorney for the 8th judicial circuit in 1867 and 1868.

Tipton was re-elected as judge in 1873 for another six years. In 1877, he resigned from the bench and was elected to the U.S. Congress, serving one term as a Republican representative before returning to his law career. He was later re-elected as circuit judge in 1891, serving until 1897.

As a judge, Tipton was known for his opinions on social issues. In the 1870s, several Black families fought to send their children to white schools. In 1871, Tipton upheld the policy of segregating schools, but in 1872, he ruled against the Danvers School Board for trying to build a separate facility for Black children, saying the public funds were being wasted. This case (Chase vs. Stephenson) helped shape later laws against racial discrimination in schools.

In 1892, Tipton ruled that women could vote for trustees of the University of Illinois, though they had to provide their own ballots, as the law did not include provisions for government-funded ballots for women.

Tipton knew Abraham Lincoln, having met him in Bloomington in the 1850s. Tipton was an outspoken supporter of the Union during the Civil War, although he didn't serve in the military. He gave speeches, wrote articles, and shared his thoughts on many issues, including witchcraft and religion, in the press.

A devout Christian, Tipton was a trustee of the First Methodist Church in Bloomington. He believed strongly in Christianity, even though he was never formally a member.

Thomas Tipton passed away on February 7, 1904, after battling stomach cancer. His obituary described him as an important figure in central Illinois. He was remembered as a man of integrity, warmth, and humor, and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.