

William Osborne Davis (1837-1911)

William Osborne Davis (W.O. as he was known to most) was born on August 5, 1837 on a farm near Birmingham in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He was the oldest son and one of nine children born to Hibbard and Elizabeth (Osborne) Davis.

W.O. Davis was educated in public and private schools during his youth. He worked on the family farm in the summer months and attended school during the winter months. Davis developed a fondness for reading books early on, which was helped fueled by the library in the nearby town of Birmingham.

At the age of 19, Davis began teaching school near Marshalton, Pennsylvania. Later, while he was attending the Claverack Institute in New York in preparation to enter Union College in New York, Davis received an invitation to move west and engage in teaching school in Bloomington, Illinois in 1858. This invitation came from an old friend of the family, Jesse Fell, who was also a native of Chester County, PA.

When the Bloomington school opened, Davis had 20 students, which included several of Fell's own children. In a letter dated November 1858, Davis wrote to a friend and former classmate back in Pennsylvania that his school was progressing nicely. Davis stated that he had a good history class and a "tolerable grammar class." Davis's work as a teacher also afforded him the opportunity to meet his future wife, Eliza Fell, one of Jesse Fell's daughters.

In addition to working as a schoolteacher for a short time, Davis tried his hand at a variety of occupations before settling on his career as a newspaperman. Davis became involved in a tanning business (making leather goods), which quickly proved unsuccessful. When gold had been discovered in the area known as Pike's Peak in Colorado in 1858, Davis and 15 other men from McLean County decided to join the tens of thousands of other emigrants who hoped to strike it rich and went to Pike's Peak. However, Davis, like so many others, ultimately failed and returned to Bloomington empty handed in late 1860.

Upon his return to Bloomington, in March 1861, Davis and his brother and sister tried their hand at farming. But, Davis's farming pursuits were interrupted by the coming of the United States Civil War. In the summer of 1862, a call for volunteers by the Illinois Governor was issued with the purpose of guarding several hundred Confederate prisoners who had been captured in battle. Somewhere between 200 and 300 men from Bloomington answered the call, including Davis. They served guard duty at Camp Butler in Springfield for several weeks.

That same year President Abraham Lincoln appointed Jesse Fell a paymaster with the rank of major in the Union Army. When Davis returned from guard duty in Springfield, Fell chose him as his clerk and the two men reported for duty in Louisville, Kentucky on July 19, 1862.

For the next year and a half, Fell and Davis traveled around the Midwest to pay soldiers and deliver supplies and food. Davis found this way of life too unsettling and having a negative impact on his health. So, he returned to Bloomington.

It was not long after his return home that Davis and Eliza Fell were united in marriage. The couple wed on June 17, 1863 in the home of the bride's father Jesse Fell. The couple moved to Washington D.C. where Davis had been appointed clerk with the new department of Internal Revenue (today the IRS).

However, this type of office work did not agree with his health either, so after working in Washington D.C., for a short time, the couple returned to Bloomington where Davis resumed farming in 1864. He bought out his brother's portion of a farm that their father had bought for

them. But because of the strenuous nature of farming and his continued poor health, Davis wanted to get out of the farming business. While he recognized that “farming was one of America’s basic industries” and an honorable and noble profession, it was not for him.

In 1868 Davis began a new occupation that would change the course of his life, and one that lasted until his dying day. His father-in-law Jesse Fell was interested in starting a new newspaper in the recently founded Town of Normal. Fell had previous newspaper experience, having started Bloomington’s first newspaper, *The Bloomington Observer and McLean County Advocate*, which began publishing on a weekly basis on January 14, 1837. However, Fell learned that the current owners of *The Daily Pantagraph* were looking to sell the newspaper. So, he, along with James Taylor and Davis, purchased the newspaper for \$15,000 on August 6, 1868. Operations of the business were divided into three parts: Fell managed editorial matters, Taylor took care of the equipment and mechanical issues, and Davis handled business matters. Fell and Taylor must have had a good deal of confidence in Davis’s capabilities since he knew absolutely nothing about the printing business or running a newspaper. But, Davis was a very intelligent man and a quicker learner too. He learned his new job so well that he would come to be considered among the most successful newspaper publishers in the state. The men relocated the newspaper to more spacious quarters in a building at 109-111 W. Monroe Street in Bloomington.

On February 20, 1871 less than three years after Fell, Taylor, and Davis entered into business together, a notice of dissolution appeared in *The Daily Pantagraph*, informing its readers that the partnership between Fell, Taylor, and Davis has been permanently dissolved. It was reportedly due to the retirement of Fell and Taylor. Davis took over Fell and Taylor’s interests in the paper, thus making him the sole owner and publisher of *The Daily Pantagraph*. Under Davis’s leadership, the newspaper would gradually grow and strengthen over the years. This eventually led to *The Daily Pantagraph* becoming one of the largest and most respected newspapers in Illinois. His idea was that “if anyone should read no other paper than *The Daily Pantagraph*” that he might have a “fair knowledge of the news of the day, more particularly of the news of Central Illinois.” He also avoided covering stories of scandals and sensations in the pages of his *Pantagraph*. He felt that printing stories like this was outside the “field of legitimate journalism.”

The first few years of Davis’s sole ownership, however, were tough. According to family lore, during those early years Davis was frequently in financial difficulty—so much so, that on some Saturday nights Davis had to pawn his pocket watch to meet payroll. But Davis persevered. He dug in and was determined to publish a good paper on sound principals that would outlast the competition.

As *The Daily Pantagraph* continued to grow and become more profitable, Davis came to the conclusion that if he was going to be able to continue to grow his paper further, his newspaper would need a bigger home—and not just any home. It was Davis’s desire to construct a building that was designed for the sole purpose of housing his newspaper. In 1875 David purchased a new location for *The Daily Pantagraph* at the corner of Madison and Washington streets in Bloomington. Twelve years later, the building was expanded due to the continued success of *The Daily Pantagraph* and remained the home of *The Daily Pantagraph* until 2015. Perhaps the biggest contributing factor to Davis’s success in building up *The Daily Pantagraph* was how he treated his workers—he consistently chose people who were well suited for “detailed work” and, after training them, kept them for long term employment. Davis treated his workers like a father would his children.

W.O. and Eliza had three children; an only son Hibbard (known as Bert), and daughters Helen and Jessie. Davis was a devoted husband and father. He kept a watchful eye over his children as they were growing up, especially his middle child Helen with whom he had a very close relationship.

On January 21, 1900, Davis's life change forever. On that day his wife Eliza passed away. This was a devastating blow to Davis as he cared for her deeply. Like her husband, Eliza had always had fragile health.

From the time of her death it appears that Davis lost a great deal of motivation. It was reported that he "suffered a deep personal bereavement in the death of his wife." He also began spending more time away from home, especially traveling with his daughter Helen and her two children, Elizabeth and Adlai Stevenson. In 1908 (three years before Davis's death) *The Daily Pantagraph* was incorporated as "The Daily Pantagraph Company." Davis remained the head of the company, serving as president. His son Bert was made vice president.

On the evening of May 22, 1911 William O. Davis died peacefully at his home at 602 E. Chestnut Street. The year before his death he suffered a stroke, from which it was thought he would not recover. But, after spending the winter in the mild climate of New Orleans, he recuperated quiet well despite having somewhat restricted use of his limbs. Yet, several months before his death, his health began to fail again with stomach issues.

At the time of his death, business at *The Daily Pantagraph* had never been better. During his 43 years as owner and publisher, Davis had raised subscriptions of the Weekly and Daily to about 14,000 per week. A truly amazing feat considering the combined subscription rates when he took over were only about 1,400 per week. He had truly created a serious and well-respected newspaper to which he devoted almost his entire life to.

Funeral services were held three days after his death at the Unitarian Church, where he had been a long-time member. Davis was laid to rest in the Fell Family plot next to his wife of 37 years in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.