

ADAM GUTHRIE

Sources & Activities

Primary Sources

- “Longest Resident of City,” *Daily Pantagraph*, October 13, 1902.
- “Oldest Resident of Bloomington,” *Bulletin*, September 15, 1904.
- Photographs of the Ark (Guthrie’s tobacco shop)

Secondary Sources

- “History Made at Guthrie’s Cigar Store,” *Pantagraph*, February 5, 1950.
- “Adam’s Ark a Favorite Gathering Place in Late 1800s,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*, by Bill Kemp.
- “Bloomington’s ‘Great Fire’ of 1900 Quickly Swept through 45 Buildings,” *Pages from the Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*, by Bill Kemp.

This book is also available for purchase at the Museum.

Suggested Activities & Discussion Questions

- **Activity 1**: Have students read the articles about the Ark and the Great Fire in downtown Bloomington. Students should then respond to the following questions: What did Guthrie do after the Fire? How would you react to your business being destroyed or damaged? Would you rebuild/relocate? What factors would you consider to make this decision?
- **Discussion Questions**: Adam Guthrie was remembered as popular and well loved. Was his life a success? By what measure would you make your judgment? Explain your position.



ADAM GUTHRIE (1825-1904)

Adam Guthrie was a McLean County man through and through. He moved to the area with his family when he was only one year old and here spent the rest of his 79 years. He was remembered as one of the earliest settlers and became one of the most beloved “old-timers” sitting around his cigar shop talking about “the good old days.”

Adam Guthrie was born on March 10, 1825 in Circleville, Ohio. He was one of 12 children born to Robert and Catherine (Spawr) Guthrie. Just a year later, the family moved to Funk’s Grove in McLean County where his father staked a claim to 160 acres and built a log cabin. They moved twice more, always closer to the city of Bloomington, and finally in 1833 into the town itself. Those early years in McLean County were difficult ones for early settlers. Bloomington was still a frontier town and the living conditions were primitive. During the winter of 1830-1831 the family endured what became known as the “winter of the deep snow.” Adam’s father had gone to St. Louis on business and was unable to get home for several weeks due to huge snowdrifts and **impassable** roads. While they waited for his father to return, Guthrie and the rest of his family survived by eating mainly boiled corn.

Adam received a good education in Bloomington. He attended a **subscription school**. Subscription schools were the earliest forms of elementary schools in McLean County. A subscription school was funded by a monthly tuition fee paid by the parents of the children who attended and was paid directly to the teacher. In return, the teacher was responsible for acquiring a building and setting the curriculum. Adam attended school in the winters and worked with his father in plastering and carpentry during the summers. Later, as an adult, Adam had his own **plastering** business (the 19th century version of dry-wall) and helped plaster the walls and ceilings of over 200 homes in the growing community. *The Pantagraph* stated, “It is not at all surprising that he (Adam) has as much business on hand as he can attend to,” as he was considered the number one workman in the area.

In 1849, Adam married Lucinda Butler of New York. They had three children. They lived at 802 North Center Street and attended the Methodist Episcopal Church. Their marriage lasted nearly 40 years until Lucinda’s death in 1889.

During the United States Civil War, Adam enlisted in the Union Army. He became a corporal in Company A of the 94th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. His regiment was known as the

“McLean County Regiment” because all of the men who served in it were from McLean County. He only served for eight months and was discharged due to ill-health caused by **fatigue** and **exposure**. During his time in the army he participated in a number of battles, **sieges**, and **skirmishes**. One was the Battle of Prairie Grove in Arkansas. In this battle the men of the 94th kept up such a destructive defense that no rebel troops “could be brought against them without being cut to pieces, while (the) men of the 94th were comparatively unharmed.” The 94th never retreated.

Upon his return to Bloomington in the years following the war, Adam worked a variety of jobs. He worked as a policeman for two years. For a short time after that, he resumed his job in plastering. In 1866 he was elected as Township Assessor, a job he held for fifteen years. While he was the Township Assessor, he spent a year working as a deputy recorder for his brother who was clerk of the Circuit Court. In 1870, Adam also worked as a census taker.

After serving as Township Assessor, in the early 1880s Adam (now in his sixties) began a new career as a **Tobacconist**. At the time, nothing was known of the health dangers of smoking and many men smoked cigars as a form of relaxation. He operated a cigar store started by his brother Noah. It was known as “Noah’s Ark” and was located at 101 West Jefferson Street across from the old courthouse, today’s McLean County Museum of History. “Noah’s Ark” was later called “Adam’s Ark” and then just “The Ark.”

The Ark became a gathering place for the older gentlemen of McLean County. Here the men would sit around talking about politics and telling stories. Adam’s grandson later recalled, “They talked quietly and smoked cigars by the box. Most of them had long, white beards and wore frock coats. They talked about the Deep Snow of 1831 and it got deeper every year.” Some of the well-known customers of the shop included Benjamin Funk, former Mayor of Bloomington, Joseph Fifer, former governor of Illinois, and Sidney Smith, a famous cartoonist. The Ark remained at its location on Jefferson Street until it burned down in the Great Fire of 1900.

In 1899 Madame Annette, a feature writer for *The Daily Bulletin*, interviewed Adam Guthrie. By then he was considered one of Bloomington’s oldest residents. Adam told of the city’s earliest days and how it grew from a village of “a hundred inhabitants to the present population of 25,000.” He described the winter of 1836 when there was a drastic change in the weather. After two to eight inches of snow, it began to drizzle. The temperature then suddenly dropped, freezing all the rain and snow. Anything, including chickens that were outside during this time, froze to the ground. Adam also recalled that in the “old days,” Lincoln was his favorite lawyer because of the many stories Lincoln would tell in court and around town.

On September 15, 1904, Adam Guthrie died after a sudden illness. He had been one of the most popular men in the city, remembered as “rather quiet but very friendly, gracious and pleasant.” His grandson recalled, “Everybody knew him. His death was a surprise and a shock to the community despite his advanced years.” He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.