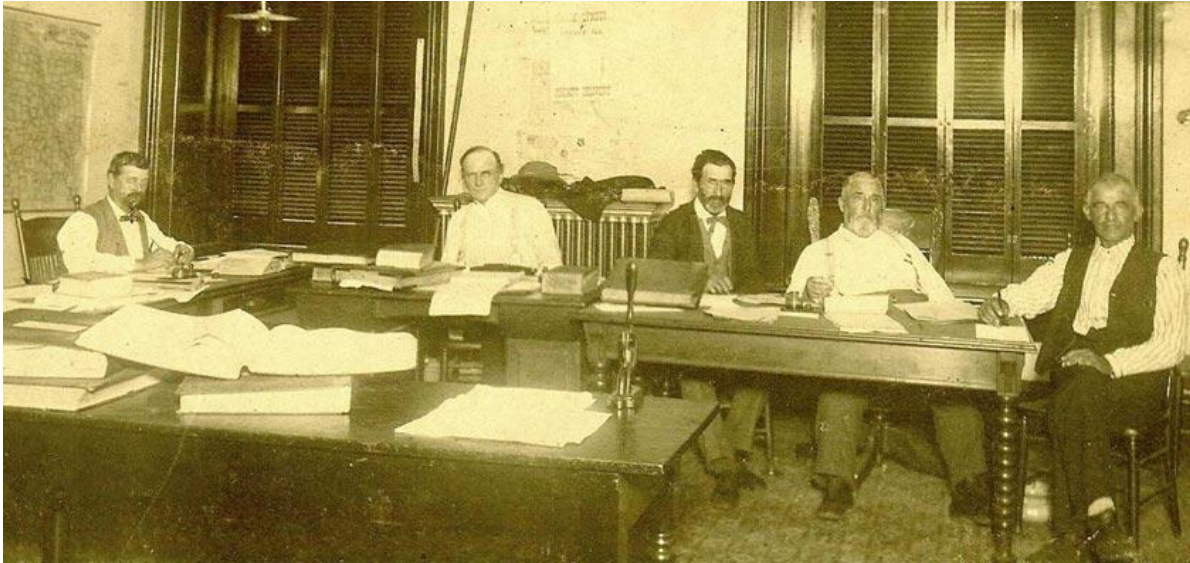


Once Upon A Time in Adams County: From Ireland to Adams County, one man leaves his mark

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This photo shows the 1901 Adams County Board of Assessment: From left to right are W. M. McNay, J. Sprigg, Maurice Kelly, C.S. Hearn and Henry Meisser. (Photo courtesy of Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County)

By SCOTT G.G. REED

In the summer of 1837 a small army of Irishmen and their families arrived in the frontier town of Quincy.

Their task was to construct one of the country's most ambitious railway projects, the Northern Cross Railroad. Plans were for the railroad to run from Front Street up Broadway, formerly known as Railroad Street, and east as far as Columbus. Included among this band of Irishmen was a youngster named Maurice Kelly. A lad of only seven years in 1837, he would bear witness to Quincy's remarkable growth and take an active role in shaping the future of his adopted city, county and state.

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Maurice Kelly, born in March 1830 in County Cork, Ireland, was the fourth of six children of Patrick and Honora (Cashman) Kelly. The Kellys came to America aboard the ship John Cumming, arriving in New York City on May 11, 1837. They stayed briefly in New York before coming to Quincy with the prospect of work for the state of Illinois, due to its "Internal Improvements Act" to build railroads and canals. By the mid-1840s the young Kelly family saved enough money working on the Northern Cross Railroad to buy some land in Concord Township and engage in farming. Being temperate and industrious, the family prospered.

Maurice, known as Morris to friends and family, saved enough money to buy his own land southeast of Liberty Township. Young Maurice's political ambitions quickly became apparent when he started to dabble in the small town politics of the township. He landed the first of many political victories by being named a parade marshal for Stephen A. Douglas at the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Quincy in 1858.



Shortly after the debate, Maurice was named to the Adams County Board of Supervisors, a position he would retain for much of his life. Here he honed his skills as an orator and politician, arguing for or against improvements being made in the county. Kelly helped decide the fate of proposed bridges, public buildings and rail lines. An important decision made while he served on the board was to construct the third and grandest Adams County courthouse to date. Its location was a critical concern. For several months the board was split fairly evenly on building the new courthouse in either Washington Park or Jefferson Square. Jefferson Square, which included Quincy's first cemetery, was located between Fifth and Sixth from Broadway to Vermont, site of today's Adams County Courthouse. After much debate and input from members of the community and city officials, Jefferson Square was selected as the new location for the courthouse. If the vote had gone the other way, Washington Park as we know it would not exist.

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In 1860 Maurice Kelly was elected sheriff of Adams County at a particularly volatile time in the history of our country and of Adams County. The county's population was on the rise and crime was steadily rising. Civil War loomed on the horizon, and the issue of slavery was being hotly debated around the country. Quincy was right across the river from slaveholding Missouri, and Kelly as sheriff was certainly in an unenviable position.

Sheriff Kelly discharged his duties faithfully and earnestly. On Nov. 29, 1861, he presided over the public execution of Attison Cunningham. Attison and his nephew were arrested the previous May for the murder of Ratliffe Harrison just outside Payson. They were tried and found guilty of the crime with the nephew sentenced to 10 years and Attison receiving the death penalty. It was up to Sheriff Kelly to arrange the details of the hanging, only the second such execution in Adams County.

In 1862 he was the unanimous choice of the Democrats to run for sheriff again but decided one term was enough and bowed out. He met and married Jane Brennan, a neighbor outside of Liberty, and set to work building up his farm and raising a family. His first child, Nora, was born in 1861 followed by four more children in the next 10 years. His farm grew into one of the highest regarded in Adams County, and he was consulted on all things agricultural for the rest of his life, even being quoted in national newspapers. He remained active on the board of supervisors during the remainder of the 1860s and eventually was talked into running for other offices again.

In 1870 he was elected as state representative, and four years later he was elected state senator, serving two full terms and most of a third. Senator Kelly was the first to present a bill making minors punishable

for attempting to obtain liquor by falsely representing their age. The bill was defeated as there was fierce opposition to it, and it took many more years before this became law in Illinois.

In 1881 Sen. Kelly offered a resolution pointing to an early adoption of the power of veto in appropriation bills. That resolution was narrowly defeated but eventually was reintroduced and passed in 1884.

Kelly also had an important role in the selection of the location of the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors Home in 1885. This was a huge decision with 52 cities vying to have the facility located in their city and county.

Quincy was eventually chosen through the exertions of a delegation of local notables including Lorenzo Bull. In 1885 Kelly resigned his senate seat to accept the position of revenue collector for a nine-county district in western Illinois. He was appointed by President Cleveland.

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During the next two decades, this well-known and admired Adams County resident stayed active in Democratic endeavors including welcoming visiting national VIPs such as President McKinley, presidential candidate and great orator William Jennings Bryan, and many other regional and national figures. When Kelly attended a fair or community picnic, he was invariably called upon to make a speech or be the guest of honor.

On Oct. 6, 1911, Maurice took a walk from his home in Liberty to the post office to collect the mail, which was his daily custom. He stopped at John Campbell's store on Main Street to rest and talk awhile. He was sitting on a box in the store when without warning his heart failed, thus ending the life of one the most popular men in Adams County. Resolutions of respect were adopted by the state assembly with particular attention paid "... to his record that will long live after him."

Kelly's numerous contributions to local and state laws, building facilities, railroads and highways live on today, most visibly with the Illinois Veterans Home at Quincy. Maurice Kelly and other members of the Kelly family are buried at St. Brigid's Catholic cemetery in Liberty.

Scott Reed is the Mid America Regional Manager for Terlato Wines International. He is a member of the Historical Society and is currently writing a book on the Irish in Adams County. Born and raised in Quincy, he now resides in Edwardsville.

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