

William Thompson Price

The Falls History Project
Discovering Local History

14th Edition: 2014-15



Wm. T. Price

INTRODUCTION

*“All historical experience must be imagined before it can be understood.”
(Historian David Blight)*

Helping young people imagine the history of their community is a worthy challenge. For the past 15 years we have fostered that process through the Falls History Project. Through 14 projects, 15 dedicated interns, 44 interviews with local residents, and a good deal of research into available archives, we have opened the portals on several aspects of our regional history. In the process we continue to establish a growing archive for use by future students.

Our 2015 project was the third that focused exclusively on a 19th Century topic, in this case the life and times of William Thompson Price. Price is arguably the most famous Black Riverian in our roughly 175 year history. He came from Pennsylvania to the Wisconsin frontier in 1845 with nothing but a wealth of ambition and by the time of his death in 1886 rose to prominence as a logger, farmer, entrepreneur, lawyer, and politician. He died while representing the 8th District of Wisconsin in the National House of Representatives. His restless energy, resourceful attitude, and tough-mindedness remind us of the type of individuals that ventured into frontier Wisconsin during those pre-statehood years. Price represents that generation of Anglo-European Americans who rode the wave of “Manifest Destiny” into the Old Northwest, ultimately developing settlements and enterprises on land once inhabited by indigenous people. In this region of frontier Wisconsin, that meant land ceded by the Ho-chunk people in a controversial 1837 treaty with the Van Buren administration. The community’s history carries the weight of that complex origin into the present day – something we have explored in other projects.

Researching Price was a bit of an accident. Our original intent was to explore the Temperance Movement of the 19th Century and its connection to Black River history. In the process, however, William Price kept “showing up” owing to his very public involvement in that issue. We learned that as a young man Price struggled with alcohol, not surprising in the rough and tumble logging camps of the northern woods. What led to his conversion and intense zeal for the cause, it is hard to say. This aspect of his life, however, was only one part of a fascinating story and we decided that his broader story was the natural focus of our research.

Like so much of local history, the story of Price has faded into the mists of time – my sense is that if you stopped ten people on the street in 2015 and asked them what they know of William Thompson Price, one or two might recall the Price Mansion, but little else about his life. When he died while serving in Congress in 1886, Price was eulogized by several colleagues,

including Senator John Spooner of Wisconsin fame. With melodramatic flare, Spooner observed that on the “wintry day of his burial, which brought prominent men in large numbers from the cities throughout the State to his desolate home, there came out from the lumber camps, up in the pine woods, red-shirted, kind-hearted lumbermen, to take their part, with bowed heads and tear-blinded eyes, in the last sad rites at his grave.” Those “red-shirted, kind-hearted lumbermen,” of course, represent an important strand of Black River history, and Spooner’s reference indicates something important about Price’s life.

Senior Zane Dukes served as our 15th FHP intern and took on the Price story with enthusiasm. Zane completed AP US History during his junior year and brought a creative approach to the topic. He utilized a number of sources in writing the paper. His research brought Price “to life” in his mind and he became deeply impressed by the strong character that Price exhibited throughout his storied career. Thanks again to Mary Woods at the Jackson County History Room for her assistance with the research. It is our hope that you will enjoy this year’s story.



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Part 1: Businessman Price

“In the spring of 1845, rich in ambition, energy, and the other elements of true manhood, but, like so many thousands who preceded and who followed him from the populous East to the western land of hope, poor in every other way, he turned his face and steps westward . . .”
(Senator John Coit Spooner, Address to the Senate, 1886)

William Thompson Price was born in humble circumstances on June 17, 1824 in the Barre Township of Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania. His father was sheriff and farmed in Barre Township, and young William's options for education were sparse. His life involved revolved around farm work when he was younger, and it wouldn't be until he was a teen working as a store clerk in Hollidaysburg that he started to broaden his horizons by taking time to educate himself in law. At age 21 and feeling limited prospects in situation, he decided to move west. First landing in Iowa, he eventually ventured north to Wisconsin with “only 25 cents and an axe in hand.” He immediately plunged into the world of logging in the pine forests of the area.

In 1846, at age 22, Price impressed Jacob Spaulding enough to be hired as a bookkeeper and business manager. Originally from Massachusetts, Spaulding had been in the Black River Valley since 1839 and is considered the founder of the village. Spaulding must have seen promise in the young Price and their association continued for many years. Not only could Price keep the books for another's business, he also had a lot of skill managing his own. The first great example of this was his logging company, which he started with Amos Elliot in 1848, the same year that Wisconsin became a state. He kept up this work for five years but then moved out of the Black River Falls area and took his family to La Crosse.

In LaCrosse Price continued his work in business, opening up a livery stable and linking it back to Black River Falls in 1854 with a stage line. In addition, from 1854 to 1859 he partnered with C.R. Johnson to open the first law firm in Black River Falls. In the midst of these varied activities, Price suffered huge financial losses as a result of the Panic of 1857. Ultimately he found himself \$25,000 in debt to various creditors, an obligation he paid back in full within seven years. Returning to his roots, he worked in logging to regain his footing, and did so with so much honesty and diligence that his creditors, once his debt was paid back, gifted Price a \$300 watch and chain.

Price's business enterprises continued to grow in diversity and success. It was during the Civil War years that he joined forces with Dudley Spaulding, son of Jacob, in operating the Albion Flour Mill and various lumber mills in the area. In 1864 he purchased a stage line from St. Paul to Sparta and became a successful line operator in the region. In 1871 at the age of 47, Price bought farmland in the Hixton area and eventually owned well over 3000 acres in Jackson County. During this period his logging business grew by leaps and bounds. At its peak his operation harvested 60,000,000 feet of lumber per year and employed 750 men in the camps. This made Price the single largest operator in Wisconsin.

Part 2: Citizen Price

"Mr. Price was a restless man, impatient of restraint, intolerant of opposition . . . He was strong in friendships, bitter in his hatreds, always outspoken and blunt, sometimes harsh in his judgment of friends, sometimes unjust, doubtless, to opponents, but there was in him and his life so much generous impulse, of good neighborhood, of sympathy for all who suffered, of honest, faithful public service, and of genuine love of country, that he was popular with the whole people of his State, and had troops of partisans and personal friends.

(Senator John Coit Spooner, Address to the Senate, 1886)

William Price was a great figure not only in business, but also in the community as a whole. Business development, of course, often overlapped with the improvement of the community and his various operations meant hundreds of jobs in Black River and certainly beyond. In this regard, Price became well known regionally and his influence seemed to go in several directions at once.

Price's civic interests went beyond business. Having been interested in law from a young age, Price established the first law offices in the community in the 1850s. He also proved instrumental in establishing the first church in the village. After a logging accident left a man dead and without a proper clergyman to preside over the funeral, Price himself spoke for the man and laid him to rest. Not caring to do so again, he sought out a clergyman to bring to Black River Falls and, once one had been found, was responsible for establishing the Methodist church -- the first church in Black River Falls -- and the first religious services, both in 1847. His leadership extended to other areas as well. The Jackson County Bank, for example, was under his leadership from the time of its founding. He would remain its president for years, stepping down in 1884, two years before his death.

Price also was instrumental in the operations of the Black River Improvement Company, serving as President for 16 years until the time of his death. In addition, he served as president of the Village of BRF and Head of the county's Agricultural Society. The man shouldered a lot of responsibility between his business and social leadership, and yet still managed to be an active presence within the lives of individuals and a role model to the common man. Early Black River settler Bert Gripple offers us a unique description of Price: "Mr. Price has always acted as a real nice man. He is a kind neighbor, model husband, and contributes liberally to churches and charities. He pays one hundred cents on the dollar and his own business. He is affable, courteous, neither drinks whiskey nor gambles, nor has he ever been reputed to be a lover of naughty women; and he has the respect of the whole community." Another contemporary commented, "There are other thousands telling good St. Peter that but for Price they would have died drunkards, and with these is an army of mothers, wives, and children who have come to welcome the one who wiped away their tears and gave them happy homes by making sober men of their sons, husbands, and fathers." Yet one more view of Price as expressed in the Badger State Banner, forerunner to the Banner Journal, seems to capture the essence of public perceptions of the man:

"He reads men at sight, reckons them up in a quick, incisive way; has splendid command of the King's English; uses it in a very expressive way; hates whiskey; does everything without fear or favor; is a born leader and strong man among men. He has done more, and is doing more for this town and valley than all the nice, straight-waisted, prim, over-careful and over-pious men that ever came to Black River Country."

Part 3: Price the Builder

One cannot talk of Price and his presence within Black River Falls without bringing up the Price Mansion. A beautiful house, so great that it was not only called a mansion but a castle, it was perhaps one of Price's most distinguished actions in his time in Black River Falls. An extravagant home completed in the early 1880s, boasting all kinds of flourishes and luxuries, it was not only grand but expensive. Luxury is something that the Price Mansion had in spades. Even now the house, in its prime, would be an impressive thing to behold, but at the time of its creation it was even more so. It had a total of twenty rooms, six fireplaces, and two bathrooms, something quite extraordinary at the time. The decoration of the house was done with only the best of everything in mind. Both stunning blue tapestries and green marble were imported all the way from Italy in order to be built into the Price Mansion. The tapestries cost in excess of \$2,500, with the marble also demanding a large amount of money. Alongside the imported decor were more local, but still top of the line, design decisions. The front hall featured maple woodwork that cost \$10,000, and the conservatory built into the house was decorated by stained glass. The house itself had a ceiling 12 feet tall and was altogether an architectural masterpiece. It was estimated that Price spent \$40,000 on the construction, with primary work being done by J.J. McGillvray.



The house saw more additions when electricity became available to Black River Falls. The electric plant at the time was owned by the Price family through Price's son Hugh, and as a result the mansion was the first home in the city to have electricity. The beauty of the house met with the esteem of William Thompson

Price to make for a great place for social gatherings. The home on “Price Hill” was used to host various events and social gatherings in Black River Falls. This reputation gave it added relevance and made it a town treasure until it was razed in 1950. First and foremost, the house served as a magnificent home to Julia Price and her children. By the time Julia Price died, Margaret was the only remaining member of the immediately family (brother Hugh died in 1904). She decided to sell the house to Gaylord R Sechler in 1919 before moving to California. The mansion remained in the possession of the Sechler family for years, eventually passing from Gaylord down to his grandson Robert. Ultimately the home fell into disrepair and was razed in 1950, much to the chagrin of local residents. Its destruction was mourned, but bits of it still remain to be seen. For example, the fence around current day Anderson Financial is actually what’s left of the fence that surrounded the Price Mansion at the time of its destruction. The original site of the mansion is now home to Evangelical Lutheran Church.

PART 4: PRICE THE POLITICIAN, LATER YEARS, AND DEATH

“ . . . he was familiar, almost from the outset of his career in Wisconsin to the day of his death, with public duties of different grades, from the offices of the town and village to that of Member of Congress, and I only assert what goes without saying in my State when I say that he brought to the discharge of every public duty tireless industry, patient and intelligent attention to detail, and unusual sagacity.”

(Senator John Coit Spooner, Address to the Senate, 1886)

In his later years, William Price grew more and more interested in law and politics. Men of his nature were naturally drawn to the political world and perhaps saw it as an extension of their business enterprises. A Democrat in his early years, he joined the newly formed Republican Party in the middle 1850s. His first foray into state, then national politics, came in 1851 when he was elected to the Wisconsin Assembly when only 27 years old. Two years later he was elected as judge for Jackson County. Price’s career in politics would continue off and on for the remainder of his life. Beginning in 1870, when he was 46 years old, his political career became more and more the center of his attention. He was elected State Senator five times and in 1882 made the jump to National politics being elected as a member of the 48th US Congress representing the 8th District of Wisconsin. He was reelected to that position in 1884 and 1886 and was serving at the time of his death. Throughout his time in Congress he was well respected for his skills as an orator and solid stance on various issues. Most notably was his

stubbornness on the matter of temperance. Again, for Price this issue sprang from personal experience and he became well known for his strong stand against alcohol regionally and beyond. If we apply modern sensibilities to Price, it is safe to say that his politics were a blend of conservative economic thinking and somewhat liberal social policy. Beyond his work for temperance, he was noted for his actions on behalf of Civil War veterans and their widows.

Price's death in December of 1886 at the age of 62 came after a battle with cancer that lasted a few months. He fought valiantly and when local doctors indicated there was simply no cure, he solicited the aid of a practitioner of Christian Science from Chicago named Mrs. Fenne. Ultimately, however, he was unable to overcome the disease. Though townspeople knew he was ill, his death came as a surprise to local residents. As reported in the Badger State Banner on 10 December, "It's noticeable that the announcement has caused a shock. Intimate friends passed by each other on the streets without speaking -- too full of emotions to even talk about it. . . depicting a realizing sense that Black River Falls lost its greatest and most distinguished citizen - its best and most influential friend -- one who has been interested in and a leader of nearly all its public enterprises."

Part 5: Epilogue: The Price Legacy

*"Resolved, that in Honorable William T. Price and his successful career in life, the young have an example worthy of imitation, in self-reliance, industry, patience, economy, and success."
(BRF City Council Resolution, December 1886)*

The funeral of William T. Price was certainly a notable occasion for the small city of Black River Falls. It was estimated that more than 3000 people were in attendance and the funeral was actually held at the Price mansion. One can only imagine the buzz surrounding such an event as passenger trains brought visitors to the downtown depot. Thousands of people made their way up the hill and gathered on the grounds, while seating for the actual funeral within the home was limited. Dignitaries came from far and wide, including a contingent of Congressmen, among them Senator John Spooner and future Governor, 31 year old Robert M. LaFollette. Methodist ministers A.D. Dexter and G.W.L. Brown presided over the service and music was provided by a choir that included Charles Van Schaik, an aspiring and now famous photographer from the region.

Price's immediate family legacy survived through his children, but not beyond. His marriage to Julia Campbell in 1851 lasted until his death 35 years later. Julia's sister, Margaret Campbell, became the wife of Dudley Spaulding, thus forging an alliance between two giants of Black River history. Not much is documented about the relationship between Price and the

Spaulding family, but it is fair to assume that it was significant in the formative part of the town's history.

William and Julia Price, like others of their generation, suffered the tragedy of losing children. May Price, born in 1852, suffered a head injury at age 20 after being kicked by a horse, and died an untimely death. Willie Price, born in 1857, died in infancy. Willie's death coincided with the financial panic of the same year, events that must have been devastating for the family. Hugh (1859-1904) and Margaret (1871-1957) were the surviving Price children, although neither had children, thus ending the family line.

Hugh and Margaret grew up in the Price Mansion alongside their mother and father. Hugh followed his father into politics, filling the 8th District seat for the remainder of the term. He eventually moved to Silver City, New Mexico where he was involved in silver mining and lived for the remainder of his life in the American southwest. Margaret stayed with her mother Julia until her passing in 1919, at which time she moved to California for the remainder of her life.

Price's legacy in Black River Falls and the region certainly remains significant. His 41 year connection to the growing village coincided with the initial establishment and development of the community. His involvement in nearly every aspect of the regional economy, coupled with his role in politics – local, state, and national – put him in the center of the community's life.

COMMENTARY ON SOURCES

As with a good deal of local history, information on William Price is scattered and must be pieced together from a variety of sources. We were able to utilize sources in the Jackson County History Room of our public library related to the histories of both Jackson and Clark County. Accounts from the archives of local newspapers had many references to Price and we were able to locate his obituary from 1886. Because Price died while serving in the US House of Representatives, and in keeping with the common practice from that period, "Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of William T. Price" published by the Government Printing Office in 1887, proved to be a good source of information for attitudes about Price by his Congressional colleagues.

William T. Price is buried in Riverside Cemetery in Black River Falls. Senior history intern Zane Dukes spent time during his last year of high school exploring the life and times of Price.

Below is a unique photograph of “Price Hill” in Black River Falls. The Price Mansion, built in the early 1880s, was a landmark structure in the region.



Appendix: Major Events in the life of William T. Price

17 June 1824	William Thompson Price was born in Barre Township, Huntington County, Pennsylvania.
1845	Price ventures briefly to Iowa and then to Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Black River was a village that had been established by Jacob Spaulding in 1839. Starting from scratch, he began to aggressively pursue logging interests in the region.
1846	Price was hired by Jacob Spaulding as a bookkeeper and general business manager.
10 July 1851	William Price and Julia Campbell of Grant County were united in marriage.
1851	A daughter, May Price, was born to William and Julia Price.
1851	Price was elected to the Wisconsin Assembly, beginning his involvement in politics that lasted until his death. He originally was a member of the Democratic Party, but with the formation of the Republican Party in 1854, he changed his affiliation.
1853	Price was elected County Judge.
1854	Price moved to LaCrosse, opened a livery stable, and established a stage line between LaCrosse and Black River Falls. In the same year, in partnership with C.R. Johnson, he formed the first Law firm in Black River Falls which operated until 1859. Price also became involved in the mercantile business.
1857	The Panic of 1857 resulted in business failure for Price and left him badly in debt to several creditors. Ultimately Price paid back his debt in its entirety and rebuilt his business interests.
1857	A son, William T., was born but died at the age of 10 months.
1858	Price was elected to the Wisconsin Senate (he was re-elected to the Senate in 1870, 1878, 1879, 1880, and 1881).
1859	A son, Hugh, was born.
1860	Price went into business with Dudley Spaulding, son of Jacob Spaulding. They operated the Albion Flour Mill and various lumber mills in the area.
1864	Price purchased the stage line from Sparta to St. Paul from the estate of D.S. Moore of Milwaukee. He remained very active during this period in operating various lines in the region, employing hundreds of workers.
1871	A daughter, Margaret (Maggie) was born.
1871	Price purchased a 120 acre farm in Hixton. He continually added to his land-holdings for the next 15 years and eventually owned 3000 acres.
31 July 1872	May Price was killed as a result of being kicked by a horse. She was 20 years old.
1882	Price was elected to represent the 8 th District of Wisconsin in the 48 th Congress as a member of the US House of Representatives. He was re-elected in 1884 and 1886.
6 December 1886	Price died at his home in Black River Falls, Wisconsin. It was estimated that more than 3000 people attended his funeral, including many dignitaries from the world of politics, including Robert LaFollette, Sr.