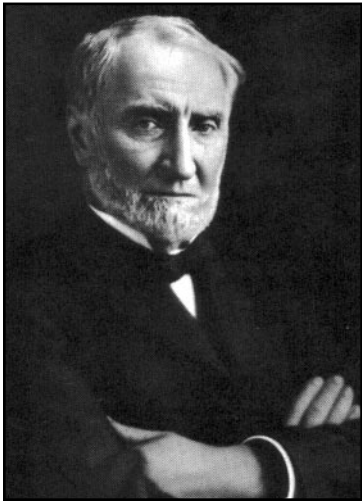


WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Joseph G. Cannon



Few Congressmen in history were as popular as Joseph Gurney Cannon. None was as omnipotent.

Yet at one time, the man who affectionately became known as the “Tyrant from Illinois” seemed destined to remain a clerk in a country store. His parents, devout Quakers who detested slavery, brought Joe to Parke County, Ind., from New Garden, N.C., in 1840, when he was only four years old.

The Cannons’ covered wagon diverted from the Old Pike (now U.S. 40) east of Terre Haute towards Annapolis, a small Quaker settlement near the Friends’ Meeting House at Bloomingdale, where Dr. Horace Cannon’s medical skills were needed. At the Parke County Court House, Joe watched lawyers Thomas H. Nelson and Sen. Edward A. Hannegan, brilliant orators, debate legal issues. On one occasion, Cannon’s father was convicted for hiring a free

black man who failed to post a bond as required by state statute. The ordeal taught young Joe how laws, however unjust or disgraceful, were enacted and enforced.

In early 1851 Dr. Cannon drowned in Sugar Creek trying to reach a patient. Not yet 15, Joe became his family’s chief support, farming and working at a Penn Township general store for \$150 a year. In 1855 Terre Haute attorney John P. Usher subpoenaed him to testify on behalf of a teenage girl, the plaintiff in a slander case. Joe’s life was irrevocably altered as Usher’s cross examination “cleared away all mists of gossip” and secured Joe’s friend a substantial verdict.

At a political rally that fall, Cannon persuaded Usher, who later became Lincoln’s Secretary of the Interior, to allow him to study law in Terre Haute. After using Usher’s exceptional law library for 18 months, it took Joe only six months at Cincinnati Law School to earn a degree. Returning to Terre Haute, he expected to associate with the prestigious law firm of Usher & Patterson. But Usher counseled the energetic young man to open his own office in a small Illinois town, allowing Joe to work for him only until he was ready to embark on his own.

Disheartened by the rejection, Joe moved to Shelbyville, Ill., and then Tuscola. With help from brother William, a successful banker and realtor, he subsisted until elected Douglas County District Attorney in 1861. With encouragement from Illinois Gov. Richard J. Oglesby, another former Terre Haute resident, Cannon was elected to Congress in 1872. Re-elected a record 22 more times, he settled in nearby Danville in 1876. In 1903 at age 67, “Czar Joe” was named House Speaker and ruled that body with an iron hand for nine years.

Cannon’s wife, former Methodist schoolteacher Mary Reed, died in 1899. Revered even by his political enemies, “Uncle Joe” Cannon died in Danville on Nov. 12, 1926, at the age of 90; he was survived by two daughters. The Cannon House of Representatives building in Washington, D.C., honors his memory and his remarkable 46-year political career.

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