Book Review

Paul E. Stroble


Thomas Ford (1800-1850) was the eighth governor of Illinois and is the namesake of Ford County, Illinois, just north of Champaign. No full-length biography of Ford has yet been written but a few years ago Robert P. Howard, who has since passed away, followed his 1972 classic Illinois: A History of the Prairie State with a wonderful book with a telling title, Mostly Good and Competent Men; Illinois Governors, 1818-1988. Howard gives a short biography of Ford and rates him as Illinois' second greatest governor—a close second behind Edward Coles who in the 1820s, helped defeat a proposal designed to make slavery in Illinois a more widespread and allowable institution. Ford helped turn Illinois' economy from the consequences of a disastrous debt to a new era of fiscal accountability.

Ford's father died, presumably killed by highwaymen, when Thomas was not quite three years old. Thomas' mother moved from Pennsylvania to St. Louis and finally to Monroe Co., Illinois. Thomas worked from a young age, guided by his half-brother George Forquer. Forquer himself was a successful Illinois lawyer and served as Illinois secretary of state, state attorney general, congressional candidate, and member of the state legislature before his early death in 1838. Thomas graduated from Transylvania University in Kentucky then returned to Illinois and took up the law practice. Beginning in the 1820s Ford became more prominent in state judicial affairs and, although he did not run for public office, he attended most of the state legislatures at Vandalia, then the state capital, beginning in the early 1820s.

In 1842, when the democratic nominee for governor, Adam W. Snyder, died prior to the election, Ford was selected as the new nominee. The popular whig candidate, former congressman and governor Joseph Duncan, was considered unbeatable against any democratic candidate—except, that is, for Ford, whose public record (unlike other democratic hopefuls) contained nothing objectionable. Ford won in August 1842 with 57% of the vote.

The state capital had been removed to Springfield in 1839. The Tenth Illinois General Assembly (1836-1837) had passed a broad program of internal improvements—state-owned railroads, waterways, and the Illinois and Michigan Canal in northern Illinois. Believing that revenues from these projects would eventually provide funds, the legislature authorized payment for these programs on the state's credit.

Unfortunately the prosperous national economy of the early- and mid-1830s succumbed to depression in the late-1830s, and shortly there were insufficient funds to finish most of the improvements projects. By the time Ford became governor, the state of Illinois possessed a debt of just over $15 million. Taxes were few and very unpopular, and money was tight. Most believed the debt would have to be repudiated. But Ford, believing that Illinois' future depended upon a better solution, authorized a series of economic measures, including a property tax, which began whittling away at the debt. The completion of the canal in 1848 helped spur the growth of northern Illinois which, in turn, provided tolls and tax money for the state. Though neither a natural leader nor an impressive speaker, Ford's solution saved Illinois' future growth as well as its national reputation.

Ford's administration also became known for a more notorious incident. By the early 1840s the Mormons under the leadership of the brothers Joseph and Hyrum Smith had become target of considerable persecution. Troubles in western Illinois had broken out into lawlessness. With Ford's promise of protection, the Smiths and some others accepted arrest in Hancock County. But the local militia at Carthage, the county seat, were strongly anti-Mormon, and nothing was done to stop the assassination of the Smiths in 1844. Ford maintained that his efforts fell within the limitations of his executive role but his handling of the situation drew criticism from Mormons (as one would expect) and non-Mormons alike.

Another issue of Ford's administration was lawlessness elsewhere in Illinois. Pope and Massac Counties, where gangs of thieves and robbers terrorized law-abiding people. Law-enforcement in that region, Howard notes, was not solved until a few years after Ford's administration concluded.

Journeys Home: Thoughts and Places
by Paul E. Stroble

Stroble fondly recalls his growing-up years in Vandalia, Illinois in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of these essays first appeared in Springhouse. His own pen-and-ink illustrations accompany the text.

124 pages, softbound
$7.95 plus $2.50 shipping and handling from Springhouse, P. O. Box 61, Herod, IL 62947
Ford died of tuberculosis in 1850, a month after the cancer death of his wife. (Howard’s book contains pictures of Ford, his wife, and one of their children.) Only one of the Fords’ five children had a happy life; their two sons were lynched as criminals in Kansas in the 1870s. Before his death, Governor Ford penned a history of Illinois spanning the years 1818, when Illinois became a state, and 1847, the year after Ford’s administration ended. Ford’s friend, the noteworthy Illinois statesman James Shields, took charge of the manuscript and saw it into print in the year 1854. The proceeds of the book were to be used to help the Fords’ children.

The book became an instant classic, not only because of Ford’s often acerbic and critical judgments but also his astuteness in analyzing Illinois’ history and the peculiar politics of its frontier period. It was not the first book on the period. Shawntown and Vandalia editor and attorney James Hall published descriptive books in the 1820s and 1830s; John A. Wakefield published a history of the Black Hawk War in 1835; and an unremarkable history of Illinois appeared in 1844. But, Ford’s book was something unique in its tone and detail. In print for several years in the 1800s, the book was republished in the 1940s and again in 1968 for the state’s sesquicentennial. Now it appears in this fully annotated version, edited by Rodney O. Davis, professor of history at Knox College and a distinguished expert on the politics of early Illinois.

Ford’s history (in the sesquicentennial edition) was one of the first books I purchased on early Illinois back in the 1970s. Several of those 1968 University Microfilm editions of early Illinois classics were available and are still worth looking for: Ford’s history, Pioneer History Illinois, and My Own Times by John Reynolds, Illinois’ fourth governor, Adam W. Snyder and His Period of Illinois History by John F. Snyder, History of Negro Servitude in Illinois by N. Dwight Harris, History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois by Morris Birkbeck and George Flower, and others. At that time I was beginning work on my 1992 book about Vandalia’s years as the Illinois capital. I found Ford so engaging and evocative that I ended up devoting five chapters to Illinois’ early politics! (In the final book, the five became one.) It’s one of those books I don’t often pick up anymore but which I’d not want to be without. Ford’s observations, because first hand, are not annotated except for an occasional clarifying footnote, and Davis provides several helpful annotations which clarify and sometimes correct certain observations. Legend has it that Shields excised large portions of the text out of respect for persons then living toward whom Ford leveled harsh judgments. Howard repeats this legend, which had not before been researched. But Davis and also Terrance Tanner examined copies of the book and found that only a few sentences and passages had been altered and softened. Tanner also provides a history of the various 1850s printings.

Ford’s fourteen chapters cover the following territory.
1. The Achievement of Statehood, 1818-1821
2. The Pioneer State, 1821-1827
3. Political and Social Development, 1827-1830
4. and 5. The Black Hawk War, 1831-1832
6. The Internal Improvement Era, 1833-1840
7. Judicial and Financial Issues, 1838-1842
8. Civil and Religious Discord, 1841-1842
9. Financial Ills and Legislative Remedies, 1842
10, 11, and 13. The Mormons in northern Illinois
12. The Illinois and Michigan Canal, 1843-1845
14. Crime and Violence in Massac County, 1846

One should not miss Ford’s several descriptions of pioneer culture and how it changed between 1818 and 1847 from the very primitive to the comparatively refined. One should also not miss his characterizations and anecdotes of early politicians: William Foster, who was appointed to the Illinois Supreme Court, took his pay, and left before serving a day; the unnamed Abner Field, who started a fight in the house of representatives; Lieutenant Governor A.F. Hubbard, who (in modern parlance) seemed a few stakes short of a puppet; the pompous but compassionate Ninian Edwards who served as governor and U.S. Senator; the well-intentioned statesmen who passed the “Little Bull Bill” for the improvement of Illinois cattle breeding, a law which proved politically damaging to its supporters; the Sangamon County delegation in the legislature, including Lincoln, who made a variety of deals to secure the state capital for Springfield. (Senator Paul Simon offers considerable proof to diminish this story.) There are many other stories and characterizations.

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selected a passage (pp. 57-58 of this edition) which displays Ford's style as well as his observations of social mores and of political controversies. "Personal politics, intrigue, and a disregard of the public welfare were carried from the primary elections into the legislature. Almost everything there was done from personal motives... A smooth, sleek, supple, friendly manner, which by gaining favor imposed upon credulity, made a politician formidable... The genius and humor of the times invented or imported a slang language very expressive of the achievements of these political heroes, Such an operator in politics was said to carry 'a gourd of possum fat' with which to 'grease' the members... The easy, facile, credulous fool who was the victim of artful fascination was said to be 'greased and swallowed.' A man was 'greased' when he was won over to the purposes of another by a feigned show of friendship and condescension; and he was 'swallowed' when he was made to act to suit the purposes of the intrigue, whatever it might be. Sometimes the act of lubrication by which a man was fitted to be 'swallowed' was supposed to be performed with 'soft soap.' It was no uncommon thing to hear that such a one 'had a great deal of soft soap about him,' and was a 'great hand to swallow people.' Gov. Edwards was said to be the greatest hand to swallow people in all the country; and when he was last a candidate for governor it was charged on him that he had not only swallowed a great many of his former enemies, but that he had actually performed the grand operation of swallowing himself."

Both an apologia for his gubernatorial administration and a reminiscence of history observed, Ford's book (written 150 years ago next year) continues to "stand the test of time," now in this attractive edition.

THE WINDS WERE SPARKLING AND DIAMOND CLEAR, AND YET FULL OF COLOR AS AN ORAL; AS THEY GLITTERED THROUGH THE VALLEY, AND I KNEW THE GOLDEN AGE WAS ALL ABOUT ME, AND IT WAS WE WHO WERE BLIND TO IT, BUT THAT IT HAD NEVER PASSED AWAY FROM THE WORLD. AE (GEORGE RUSSELL)