

John Wood:

12th Governor of Illinois

By Reg Ankrom

In his book *Mostly Good and Competent Men*, a useful survey of Illinois governors that ends with Jim Thompson's unprecedented fourth term in 1988, the late Robert P. Howard devoted only three pages to the state's 12th governor, Quincy founder John Wood. Howard devoted an average of 9.5 pages to each of the other 36 governors.

One could easily argue that Howard gave Wood a fair shake. Succeeding Gov. William Henry Bissell, who died in office on March 18, 1860, Lieutenant Governor Wood served only ten months as the state's chief executive. Yet, Howard had nearly as much to say about William Lee Davidson Ewing, a Vandalia Democrat who in late 1834 served only 17 days as the state's fifth governor. Ewing's best claim on history was that he beat Abraham Lincoln twice for the position of House speaker. Yet he earned two and one-half pages in Howard's book.

Considering Wood's work on state business, Howard's coverage was fair. By the time Wood was sworn in that March, the Illinois General Assembly had adjourned and most of its members had returned home. Government was leaner in the mid-nineteenth century, and with little for him to do at the state capital in Springfield, Wood got the approval of legislative leaders to operate the governor's office from his 14-room, Greek Revival mansion in Quincy. Little state business was taken up at Wood's Quincy office. But what he did there would be important to



Abraham Lincoln, whose first test in war was to come in the year ahead.

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John Wood was the second child born to Dr. Daniel and Catherine Crouse Wood of Sempronius, New York. While he venerated his father—General George Washington personally



John Wood

commended Dr. Wood for his healing work with diseased and wounded Revolutionary War soldiers at Valley Forge, John Wood never spoke of his mother.

For reasons not known, Catherine Crouse Wood in 1803 abandoned Dr. Wood, five-year-old John, and his seven-year-old sister Clarissa. Catherine returned to her home in Palatine, New York, a three-day journey away. There, she cohabited with one John Weaver.

In the ten years before Weaver died she bore him four daughters, all out of wedlock. John Wood made no effort to correct local histories, which reported that she had died.

In 1860 Wood returned to New York, had his father's body exhumed, and brought it back to Quincy for reburial in Woodland Cemetery.

Although he was just eight miles from the St. Johnsville Lutheran Cemetery where his mother was buried, Wood made no effort to visit her gravesite. After Catherine's death in 1848, a New York probate judge wrote to Wood to ask if he wished to administer his mother's estate or to claim any of the "goods, chattels, or credits" from it. The probate record reports Wood renounced any right to do so.

Wood's esteem for his father, however, never faltered, even though Dr. Wood, too, separated himself from his children. At some point before 1810, the doctor sent John and Clarissa to Florida, New York, where they grew to adulthood in the home of their cousin James Wood and his wife Mary Armstrong Wood. James and Mary were nearly 20 years older than the children. Although he had learned German from his father, which would serve him in several ways

in the years ahead, most of John Wood's maturation occurred in Florida. The James Wood home was near the family home of Samuel Seward, whom President Thomas Jefferson had appointed the town postmaster. John Wood was a school mate of the Seward children, including the fourth child, William Henry Seward. Growing up at the eastern edge of New York's "Burned Over District," both would develop in an environment that advocated moral

causes—temperance, women’s rights, and the abolition of slavery. As young men, both would become Whigs, then Republicans, and political colleagues of Abraham Lincoln.

Wood was just shy of twenty years old when on November 2, 1818, he left Florida to become part of an emerging vanguard of westward migration. He wintered in Cincinnati and in early 1819 set a course for Illinois. He spent the summer in Shawneetown, where the Ohio River met Illinois’s southeastern bank and learned something of land speculation at the federal land office there. Wood hiked across the state and spent the winter of 1819-20 in Madison County. At Edwardsville, he met two men who would figure prominently in his future: federal land Register Edward Coles, a Virginian who had freed his slaves enroute to Illinois, and Willard Keyes, a Vermont native. Wood and Keyes formed a loose partnership to farm near today’s New Canton in Pike County. They harvested three crops on land they did not own in their two years there.

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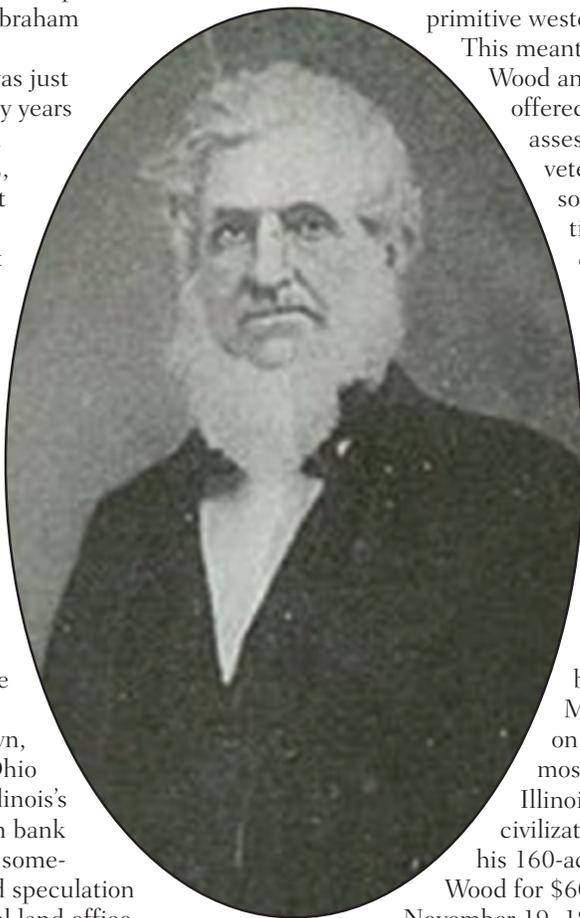
Both Wood and Keyes were interested in land within the Illinois Military Tract, a 3.5-million acre wedge between the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. The tract ran from the rivers’ confluence at today’s Grafton northward to a line across today’s Rock Island, Henry, and Bureau Counties. Congress had designated the

land as bounty for veterans of the War of 1812. Few were interested in leaving their established eastern homes for entitlements to 160 acres of land in primitive western Illinois.

This meant opportunity for Wood and Keyes. They offered to locate and assess properties for veterans who sought information before deciding to buy or sell.

The business provided Wood’s first acquisition in what would become Quincy. Land owner Peter Flinn considered the quarter-section, situated on a bluff above the Mississippi River on the western-most edge of Illinois, too far from civilization. He sold his 160-acre parcel to Wood for \$60 on November 19, 1822.

Wood’s friend Edward Coles became Illinois’ second governor in 1822. When in his inaugural address Coles advocated repeal of the state’s slave and anti-black laws, the General Assembly of largely Southern men took the opposite course. With pro-slavery sentiment strong in Illinois—the 1820 census recorded nearly 1,000 slaves held in the state—the legislature scheduled a referendum for August 2, 1824, to amend the constitution to make slavery legal. Wood was among friends in Illinois whom Coles urged to oppose the campaign for slavery. Coles’s team succeeded. Illinois voters defeated slavery by a margin of 57 to 43. The percentage in western Illinois, where Wood worked against slavery, was 96 to 4.



Although there was no more than a handful of residents in the region, Wood in September 1824 began a series of advertisements in the *Edwardsville Intelligencer* announcing the formation of a county in western Illinois. In January 1825, the legislature carved a new Adams County from Pike County. Locals named the new county seat Quincy and would name the public square John’s Square. Their choices honored the leader of their party, President John Quincy Adams. John Wood was prominent in business, civic, public, and social affairs of his community of Quincy for the rest of his life.

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John Wood had not been slated for the two-year-old Republican Party’s first statewide ticket in 1856. But when Republican leaders learned that German immigrant Francis Hoffman, their candidate for lieutenant governor who Republicans thought would attract the state’s German vote, could not meet the residency requirement for office, he stepped aside. Abraham Lincoln, chairman of the party’s nominating committee, recommended Wood, and the committee concurred. Wood was of German descent, an early employer of German emigrants, and was popular among Germans through-



out western Illinois. The Bissell-Wood ticket was elected.

It was the national race that year, however, which proved a cosmic event. John C. Fremont was the Republican Party's first candidate for the presidency. Running on the party's anti-slavery platform, he almost beat Democrat James Buchanan. Fremont did not win a single electoral vote in the South, but had he taken the electoral votes of Pennsylvania and either Illinois or Indiana from Buchanan, Fremont would have been the 15th president.

Focusing only on the North was to be the campaign strategy for Abraham Lincoln's campaign team—and the rationale for Southern secession. It also became the reason for the short-term of Governor John Wood.

Close enough to his party's counsels to know that the end of Southern control of the federal government would threaten the South's slave institution, Wood knew the result could be Southern rebellion and disunion. Since the end of the Mexican War in 1848, Illinois governors had ignored the declining strength of Illinois' state militia. Wood was aware that with only a small force of federal troops, the president would have to rely on the states for soldiers and sailors. As governor, then as quartermaster general of Illinois at the outset of the Civil War, Wood focused his attention on the rehabilitation of the state militia. As Wood had predicted, President Lincoln called on the states for 75,000 men after the South bombarded Fort Sumter on April 15, 1861. The *New York Tribune* reported that Illinois was best prepared to answer the president's call. 

—Reg Ankrom is a member of the Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County and president of the Stephen A. Douglas Association of Chicago. He resides in Quincy.

For further reading:

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John Wood mansion, circa 1920.



Statue of Illinois governor John Wood in downtown Quincy.

Photo by William Furry