

Francis Black
February 20, 1815 – November 9, 1910

Overview
Francis Black was one of Hampton, Illinois's most influential early citizens and played a significant role in the commercial and civic development of Rock Island County during the nineteenth century. Born on February 20, 1815, in Barre, Worcester County, Massachusetts, Black descended from a family with deep American roots. His grandfather, Captain John Black, served as a commander of a company of minutemen during the Battle of Bunker Hill, while his great-grandfather, Marmaduke Black, immigrated to America from Scotland around 1731. Black's father, Hon. Archibald Black, was a respected public official in Massachusetts who served as sheriff and as a representative in the state legislature.

Black began his business career at the remarkably young age of thirteen as a clerk in a country store. Seeking greater opportunities, he traveled west and arrived in Chicago in 1836, where he spent approximately five years engaged in the auction and commission trade. In November 1841, he settled in Hampton, Illinois, where he spent the rest of his long life. His arrival coincided with the community's early development, and he became one of the area's most important merchants and civic leaders. Throughout his life, residents recognized him as a champion of community advancement and a supporter of educational, industrial, social, and moral improvement.

Black remained active in business and public affairs well into old age. He lived to be ninety-five, dying in Hampton in November 1910 after nearly seven decades of residence in the

community. Contemporary accounts described him as a respected citizen whose contributions helped shape the growth and prosperity of Hampton and the surrounding region.

Family and Career

Upon arriving in Hampton, Black quickly established himself in the mercantile business. He opened a general store in 1841 and later partnered with S. L. Bretton. Together, they built a substantial two-story brick store at the corner of River and Oak Streets in 1846. Their enterprise became one of the area's leading commercial establishments. After subsequent partnership changes involving Milton Crapster, Black eventually became sole proprietor and continued operating the business independently for decades. His reputation for honesty, fairness, and sound business practices earned widespread confidence and patronage from customers throughout northern Illinois and eastern Iowa.

The business expanded beyond retail merchandising. Black became involved in transportation, grain purchasing, pork packing, and river commerce. His warehouse and wharf facilities facilitated trade with steamboats operating on the Mississippi River. Customers traveled from neighboring counties and Iowa to conduct business at his store, which carried a remarkably diverse inventory ranging from household goods and clothing to farm implements and livestock-related products. Black's financial stability allowed him to survive economic downturns that forced some competitors out of business. He continued operating actively until after the age of ninety and officially retired in 1903, turning operations over to his son Walter.

Black's family life included two marriages. In 1847 he married Charlotte C. Burton, a native of Maine. Their marriage produced two sons: Charles C. Black, who later became a successful attorney, and Archibald L. Black, who died in infancy. Charlotte died in 1861. In October 1862, Black married Philena Luce, also from Maine. Their marriage produced four children: Sophia, Theodosia, Walter L., and Francis C., although Francis C. died in infancy. Sophia later married William Conant of Iowa City, while Theodosia married Morris Hoay of Rock Island. Walter eventually succeeded his father in managing the family store.

Political Contributions

Although Francis Black never actively sought political office, he became one of Hampton's most trusted public servants. Politically, he first affiliated with the Whig Party and later became a dedicated Republican after the party's formation. His civic influence stemmed less from partisan activity than from his willingness to serve the public interest whenever called upon.

Black held several important local offices throughout his lifetime. He served multiple terms as postmaster of Hampton, beginning when mail service was limited to only two deliveries each week by wagon. His service helped maintain communication networks that were essential to the growth of the frontier community. He also served as treasurer of the village board and the school board for many years, carefully managing public funds and helping support local government and education. Sources repeatedly note that Black fulfilled every public responsibility faithfully and conscientiously.

Beyond formal officeholding, Black contributed significantly to community development projects. He played a role in Hampton's commercial expansion, supported improvements to public transportation facilities such as the community wharf, and aided various educational and civic initiatives. He also surveyed and platted Block 36 for cemetery purposes in 1855 and later conveyed his interest to the Hampton Cemetery Association. His actions consistently reflected a commitment to long-term community welfare rather than personal gain. Contemporary accounts noted that office often sought him rather than the reverse, highlighting the high regard in which fellow citizens held him.

Community

No military service by Francis Black is documented in the available biographical record. Instead, the historical sources emphasize his extraordinary community involvement and public leadership throughout nearly seventy years of residence in Hampton.

Black and his family actively supported the Congregational Church and various charitable and civic causes intended to improve community life. Although not strongly affiliated with a particular denomination, he consistently supported institutions that promoted education, morality, and public welfare. The biographical record describes him as a champion of every worthwhile movement intended to benefit Hampton and Rock Island County. His influence extended across commercial, educational, social, and civic spheres.

By the time of his death in 1910, Francis Black had become one of Hampton's most respected pioneers. Historians credited him with helping transform a small frontier settlement into a thriving river town and commercial center. Later accounts described him as an ideal citizen who left a blameless record and earned the respect and affection of all who knew him. His legacy remains closely tied to Hampton's development and the broader history of Rock Island County.