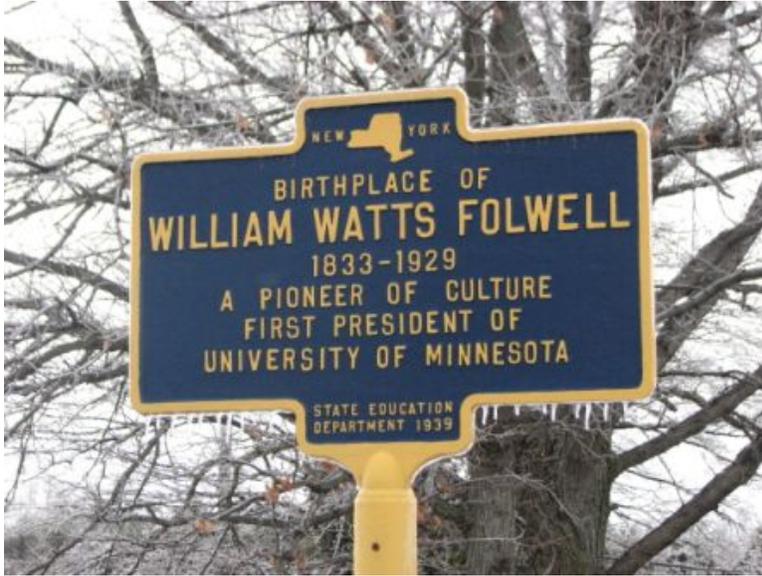


## William Watts Folwell

Near the Sampson State Park on Route 96A is an historic marker honoring William Watts Folwell. Folwell is famous for being the first president of the University of Minnesota and



writing an extensive history of the state of Minnesota. He is also credited, along with Henry Philip Tappan, the President of the University of Michigan, with popularizing the idea of junior colleges.<sup>1</sup> In this article, the focus is on describing his youth in the town of Romulus so that the reader has some insight into what farm life was like in the three decades prior to the Civil War.

William Watts Folwell was born February 2, 1833, the son of Thomas Jefferson and Joanna (Bainbridge) Folwell.<sup>2</sup> His birthplace and childhood home

was located on a 150-acre farm about two miles to the west of the village of Romulus. The house was a simple one, white, with one main room and two more small ones in a lean-to, with three rooms upstairs. The farm had the usual chickens, geese, turkeys, pigs, and many fruit trees.<sup>3</sup>

From his memoirs we get an idea of what his life was like growing up on that farm. He said that he did the work typical of boy on a farm at that time. This included carrying the mail some three miles to and from the Post Office, turning the grindstone handle or the handle of the fanning mill; cutting and carrying wood; and tending the garden. Three of his early childhood recollections bear special mention. First, he was caught up in the enthusiasm of the “Tippecanoe and Tyler, too” campaign slogan in the 1840 presidential election. Second, at the age of 10 he accompanied his uncle on horseback the sixty miles to Avon and then rode home alone.

His third childhood recollection is especially noteworthy. His first school attendance was going to a summer school session. At that time there was no general taxation for school support and each school district pretty much operated as it wished. William’s school house was fairly primitive. On three sides of the room there was a sloping shelf which took the place of desks. The younger children gathered nearer the center of the room, not far from the stove. There was one small blackboard. The emphasis was upon the three R’s and there were no real grades.

Demonstrating academic ability, William went to live with his uncle and aunt in Nunda, NY, so that he could attend the Nunda Literary Institute. To get there, he traveled on the railroad from Geneva to Rochester, then by packet boat on the Genesee Canal to Mt. Morris, and finally he rode eleven miles in a four-horse stage coach to Nunda. He went to this school for two years but spent his summers at his Romulus home.

Community life in Romulus at this time still had many of the “older customs” such as “raising of buildings,” the Singing School, the games of “one ole cat” and “two ole cat.” Because his family was Baptist, there were two services (one-half hour apart) on Sunday at the Baptist

Meeting House and congregational baptisms in nearby Seneca Lake. “The use of liquor was almost universal. Elder Caton, who preached at the Baptist Meeting House, would sometimes stop in his discourse to refresh himself with a small sip...Any caller at a home must be offered some liquor—the minister most surely of all.” William encountered the Washingtonian Temperance Movement while attending school at Nunda.

Up to this time, the clothing and other goods were produced right in the home from materials grown on the farm. Now came the opening of the factories, among them the Woolen Mills at Waterloo and Seneca Falls, which were opened in the 1840s. Now farm families would take wool to the factory and exchange it for finished cloth. The cloth was then taken to a tailor to be cut out, and then the sewing and finishing were done at home, often by “tailoresses” who went from house to house.

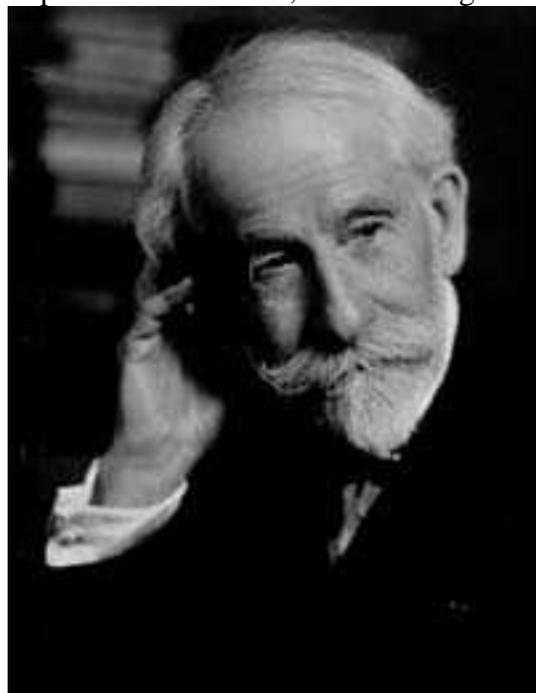
A similar transformation was taking place in terms of tools on the farm. For years the farm tools were of a crude, home-made variety. They were replaced by manufactured ones of far better design and finish. The first harvesting machines came in 1850. Improvements in plows and harvest machinery made the farm work much less burdensome and more efficient.

After his two years at the Nunda school, William went to the Geneva Union School. Feeling that the teaching there was so poor, William was transferred to a private Latin School in Geneva. Following a small crop harvest, however, there was not enough cash for the family to pay for William’s continued study. William became a teacher at a district school in Middlesex. “He needed little in the way of special preparation for this work, but his father, who held on to some old ideas strongly, insisted that William must have a silk hat to support the dignity of a schoolmaster, and so presented him with one—at the expense of four dollars.” William earned \$56 for three months of teaching.

The next step in William’s education was his becoming a student at the Ovid Academy. Here he had thorough training in Greek and other subjects and began his study of German. In his second year of study there, the family rented the Purdy house in Ovid so that William’s brother, two sisters, and some cousins could attend the Academy.

William went to Hobart Free College in Geneva because it offered him free tuition. Much to his surprise, he entered as a sophomore. In his last year at this college, he was also teaching Greek and Latin at the Ovid Academy and tutoring his brother two hours a day. Despite this most strenuous work load, he graduated as valedictorian of his class at Hobart in 1857. Following his college graduation, he taught at the Seneca Collegiate Institute, the new name for the former Ovid Academy, in 1857-58. Then he became an adjunct professor at Hobart, first teaching math and then foreign languages. He was traveling in Europe in 1860 and 1861, but returned home to serve in the 50<sup>th</sup> Engineers in the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Following stints in business and then teaching math at Kenyon College, William became, at the age of 36, the first president of the University of Minnesota. At that time, there was only one building and only 16 volumes in the college library. He built up this college, serving as president until 1884. He had a visionary “Minnesota Plan” encompassing all levels of education from elementary and secondary through higher education with the University of Minnesota offering college



courses as well as graduate and professional programs.<sup>5</sup> His vision also had the University as the cultural center with museums and a library. He was president of the Minneapolis Park Commission from 1895 to 1903. After that he wrote an extensive history of the state of Minnesota.<sup>6</sup>

William Watts Folwell died in 1929 at the age of 96. In his life we see a Seneca County person who went on to greatness outside of this state. We also see in his memoirs what it was like to grow up on a farm in Seneca County in the 1830's and 1840's.

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard Hobbs, "Fresno Junior College Imperative," June 1, 1989 (<http://www.builldognews.net/fresno-junior-college.html>)

<sup>2</sup> John Howard Brown, *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Biographical Dictionary of Notable Americans*, NY: The Biographical Society, 1904.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Robert D. Merrill, "William Watts Folwell," 1906 Centennial Papers of the Seneca Falls Historical Society.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Robert D. Merrill, "William Watts Folwell," 1906 Centennial Papers of the Seneca Falls Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www1.umn.edu/press/05\\_history\\_folwell.html](http://www1.umn.edu/press/05_history_folwell.html)

<sup>6</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Watts\\_Folwell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Watts_Folwell)