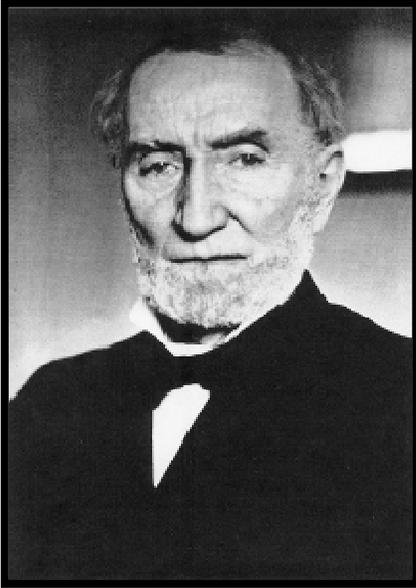


## THE HONORABLE JOSEPH G. CANNON



There is no doubt about it: Joseph Cannon was Tuscola's most "illustrious son." He was not only a guiding light in the city's early history, but in later years became one of the most powerful political leaders in the nation. He was affectionately known to all as "Uncle Joe."

He was born to Dr. Horace and Gulielma Cannon on May 7, 1836, in Garden City, North Carolina. His parents named him John Joseph Gurney for a great English Quaker. It is said, but not corroborated, that Gurney visited Dr. Cannon's home in New Garden and looked at young Joseph in his cradle.

As Quakers they had been taught to believe in the equality of man in the sight of God and to them slavery was abhorrent. As the institution spread closer and closer to the "Friends" at New Garden, they became dissatisfied. In 1840, Dr. Cannon, his wife and children left their home, traveled west, and settled in Bloomingdale, Indiana.

Dr. Cannon participated in the Underground Railroad operating in Parke County, Indiana and harbored fugitive slaves. He was once fined heavily because he defied the law and prejudices of his non-Quaker neighbors by letting young Joseph work in a field with a freed

slave. He had to sell his livestock and part of his equipment to pay the fine. Joe said in later year that seeing his father's horses being taken by the sheriff was one of the most painful incidents in his early life.

One stormy spring day in 1851, as Dr. Cannon was making medical rounds on his horse in Parke County, he had to cross a rain-swollen Sugar Creek to visit a sick patient. An hour or so later his horse returned home without him. The swirling current of the creek swept Dr. Cannon away. His body was never found. Joseph was 14 and became the head of the family because his older brother was in school and it was agreed he must remain there to graduate in medicine to take his father place. The family managed to get by and keep the farm together.

As the family breadwinner, Joseph worked as a clerk in a general store selling everything from thread and calico to seed and plowshares, earning \$200.00 a year. He was even considering a partnership with the owner until he was called as a witness in a lawsuit. He became fascinated with the legal battle and especially with the success of the prosecutor.

John P. Usher was the lawyer in which Joseph was so impressed. Mr. Usher was senior member of the law firm Usher and Patterson, famous lawyers of that day. Years later Mr. Usher became a member of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet, a connection that proved to be valuable to young Joseph in later years.

After the trial, Mr. Usher was a speaker at a political meeting in the area. Joseph attended and hung on his every word. After the speeches, Joseph introduced himself to Mr. Usher and told of his ambition. Usher was impressed by the young man and invited him to Terre Haute to work in his office and have access to his law library.

At 20 years of age and with \$500.00 savings, he went to Terre Haute. With determination and reading everything he could get his hands on, he

was prepared to enter Cincinnati Law School. Using up the remainder of his money, it took him six months to finish his education.

In 1858, with no money, and sheepskin in hand, he went back to Terre Haute to practice law and to do any work Mr. Usher would give him. Usher advised Joseph to stand on his own now that he was a lawyer and not work for any man. He told Joseph to go to Illinois, find a town where there were not too many lawyers and hang his shingle there.

Joseph followed Mr. Usher's advice and moved to Shelbyville, which is as far as his funds would take him. He rented a little room on the main street of town for an office, hung his diploma, found a boarding house and settled down to wait for clients who didn't come. As the weeks went by his savings diminished and disappeared. As a lawyer in Shelbyville, he was not a success.

Why did Joseph Cannon come to Tuscola? According to one story, Cannon boarded a train for Chicago, however, when the conductor discovered he had no ticket beyond Mattoon, he threw Joseph off at the next station, which was Tuscola. He later told friends that he walked from Shelbyville to Tuscola. He may have been joking about that, but a more reliable account was told in his "autobiography" actually written by his private secretary, L. White Busbey. It states: "Douglas County was cut off from Coles County about that time and named after Stephen A. Douglas, and Tuscola was made the county seat. I conducted to cast my lot with the new county and moved to Tuscola, still owing my boarding bill, but with the encouragement of the woman to whom I owed it, and after a year, I was able to pay her, to bring my mother and younger brother Will to Tuscola, and start a home again." At some point, his older brother finished medical school and joined the rest of his family in Tuscola to practice medicine.

As head of the household, Joseph assumed he would always have to take care of his younger brother William. He was near-sighted, with white hair and eyebrows and very light

eyes, a typical albino. Mrs. Cannon taught Will at home as a child rather than send him to public school where children and teachers alike thought that under pale hair lay a weak brain. However, Will had a talent for making money. While Joseph was sitting in his office waiting for clients to come, Will was hustling for a living. He started in the real estate business in a small way and made enough to keep going. He made Joseph a partner and more or less kept his brother solvent until he became more firmly established.

Tuscola in 1859 was just the beginning of a town. A raw, wild little spot on the prairie where mud was hip deep on Sale Street during the spring rains. Nevertheless, it was a town of opportunities, founded by men and women whose principal asset was courage and resourcefulness. The perfect setting for young Joseph to begin his career.

Joseph quickly began making a mark for himself in his new hometown. On October 11, 1859, Cannon voted in the election for the incorporation of Tuscola. In the same year, ground was set aside for the Tuscola Cemetery. Joseph was one of the first cemetery officials. He was a charter member of the local chapter of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons #332, the oldest organization in Tuscola, having been organized in October, 1860. He was also manager of Wamsley and Cannon Addition.

In 1858, Joseph attended the Lincoln-Douglas debate in Charleston. This was not the only time that Cannon and Lincoln's path would cross. His first actual meeting of Lincoln came in June, 1860, when the Republican State Convention was held in Decatur. Joseph traveled there with a few other men from Tuscola. They spoke briefly with Lincoln at the train station. Later in the day, the group of Tuscolians heard Abe speak to the convention and they were greatly impressed. Cannon was elected Douglas County's first State's Attorney on the same ticket in 1860 that elevated Lincoln to the Presidency.



Joseph Cannon as he looked when he ran for State's Attorney in 1860.

In 1862, Joseph Gurney Cannon and Miss Mary Reed, a rural schoolteacher from Canton, Ohio were married in Tuscola. Their first home was at 501 East Scott Street. Joseph had built the original place for his bride. Two daughters, Helen and Mabel and a son, Harry, were born to them in Tuscola. Harry E. Cannon died in childhood and was buried in Tuscola Cemetery.

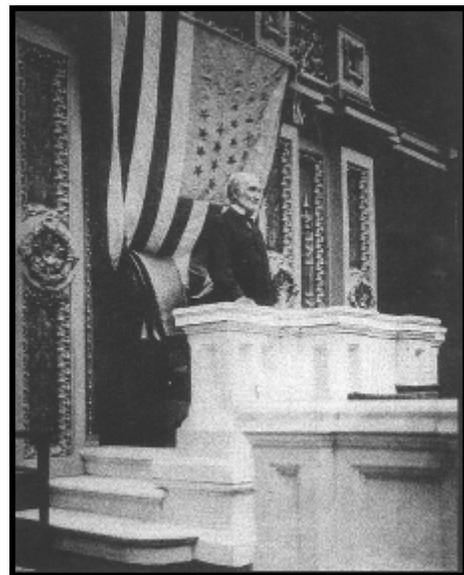
One day in 1866 when Joseph was out on the circuit, his brother Will met him at the railroad station upon his return with the news that they were partners in a new business. They both had \$5,000 in stock and they were bankers. The business was established as a private banking house under the name Wyeth, Cannon and Co. located on West South Central Avenue. It was a little shack with a big iron safe. Later they moved to North Central Avenue on part of the ground where the Community Building now stands. September, 1870 the bank was incorporated to become the First National Bank under the Federal Reserve System.

Cannon was first elected to a seat in Congress from the old 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, which included Douglas County in 1872. Tuscola remained home for Joseph

Cannon for his first two terms in office as a U.S. Representative. In 1878, after almost twenty years in Tuscola, Joseph moved his family to Danville, Illinois.

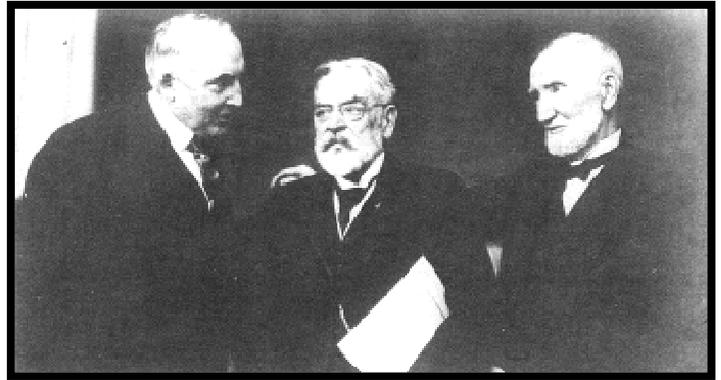
L. White Busbey describes Joe's character:

"To the world Mr. Cannon was "Uncle Joe." It was the world's tribute of affection. It betokened both respect and intimacy. There have been few men in public life who have been so universally liked; even his opponents liked him after their broken heads were mended and that horrible moment when the club laid them low was forgotten. Men disagreed with him, but they admired him for his honesty, his integrity, his adherence to a code from which he never swerved. They brought many accusations against him; he was a "czar," autocratic in his rule of the House, in the hands of a small group of favorites, narrow, parsimonious in the expenditure of the public funds. However, no one, even when passion ran highest, ever accused him of being governed by an unworthy motive or using public position to advance his private position, or his private interests. He was stubborn, it was often said, but it was because he was honest and guided by principle."



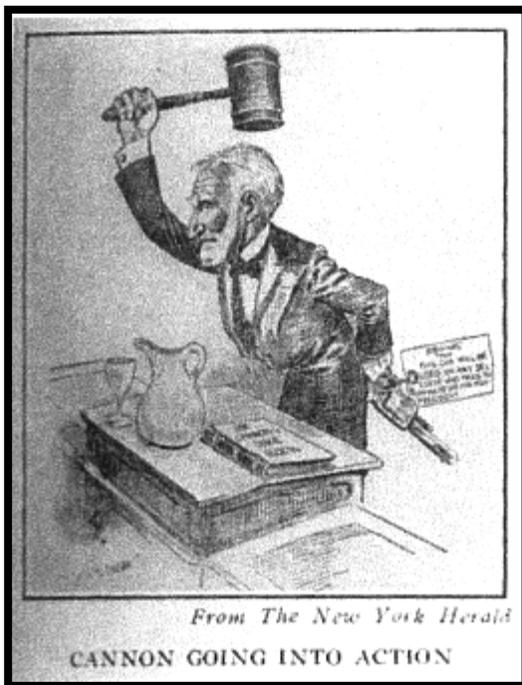
Joseph Gurney Cannon  
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Cannon's tenure in the House of Representatives spans fifty years. Failing to win only two elections during that time – 1890 and 1912. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1903 – 1911. In 1907, he was being boomed as Illinois' favorite son for the presidency. To kick off this campaign, it was arranged for Uncle Joe to speak at Tuscola's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration. The Speaker's presence on that day, September 21, 1907 made the celebration a memorable one. Cannon received 58 votes at the National Republican Convention for President of the United States.



**Great Moment In History**

In 1922, Uncle Joe Cannon, at right accepted an invitation to go to Washington, D.C., and take part in a momentous event-the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial. While there, he was caught in a candid camera shot with two other prominent Americans-President Warren G. Harding, left, and Robert Todd Lincoln, only surviving child of the Great Emancipator.



Political cartoon while Cannon was Speaker of the House.

On his seventieth birthday, Uncle Joe's colleagues in the House of Representatives gave a reception in his honor at the Arlington Hotel in Washington D.C. President Roosevelt, members of Cabinet, members of the Supreme Court, foreign diplomats and members of both houses of Congress gathered to honor him. He retired March 1921 at the age of 85.

On November 12, 1926, his spirit took its flight, leaving the world richer for his service. His wife, Mary preceded him in death, December 16, 1889 in Danville, and he was buried beside her in the Springhill Cemetery, Danville.



**Saying Farewell to "Uncle Joe"**

Attending the funeral were Vice President Charles G. Dawes, U.S. Senator James Watson of Indiana and Illinois Governor Len Small.