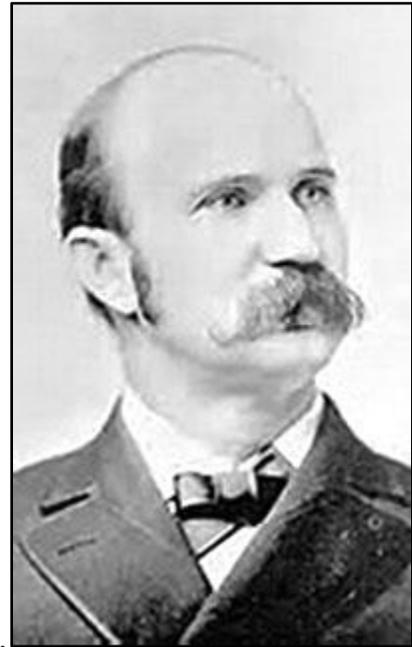


# The Schuyler life and political times of David Bennett Hill

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**By Gary Emerson, Schuyler County Historian**

A cold rain fell on the morning of October 25, 1910, as the crowd waited at the railroad station clutching their umbrellas. It was nearly 11 a.m. as they watched and listened for the train due to arrive with the remains of one of the most famous former residents of Montour Falls. He grew up in a modest house on Genesee Street near the falls, and went on to become the mayor of Elmira, Governor of New York State, a U.S. Senator, and even ran for President of the United States. Now David Bennett Hill was to be buried in his hometown.



David Hill was born on August 29, 1843, the sixth child of Caleb and Eunice Hill. Caleb was a carpenter who built canal boats and constructed buildings in the village, while Eunice kept their home, raised the children, and grew flowers that were the envy of many.

As a boy, David was often seen running about the village barefooted. He was bright and did well in school. As a teenager, he and a friend, Joseph Dolph, tended a lock on the Chemung Canal during the summer. Havana, the early name of Montour Falls, was a growing town, and benefactor Charles Cook was politically well connected in state politics. Young David had the chance to meet and see many important political figures when they visited the town, such as Governor Washington Hunt, President Millard Fillmore, Secretary of State Daniel Webster, and U.S. Senators William Seward and Stephen A. Douglas. Little did anyone know that David Hill's future would rival the accomplishments of these famous visitors that he so admired.

David graduated from the Havana Academy in 1860. Both he and Joe Dolph shared an interest in the law, and the two young men pursued law studies. David studied in the office of a lawyer in Havana, but in 1863 Elmira lawyer Erastus Hart, who had taken an interest in David, invited him to move to Elmira to complete his studies. He passed the bar exam in 1864, and opened a law office in Elmira with an older partner,

Gabriel Lewis Smith. But even as he practiced law, David indulged in another burning interest: politics. He quickly became involved with local politics in Elmira, often staying late in his office talking politics with many visitors.

In 1870, the 27-year-old Hill was elected to the New York State Assembly, where he served two one-year terms. In the Assembly he worked with the infamous Boss Tweed, and together the two men bought the *Elmira Gazette* to use the newspaper as a Democratic Party forum. When Tweed's corrupt practices were exposed, Hill quickly sought a new mentor, Samuel J. Tilden. Tilden and Hill worked together on the Judiciary Committee in the Assembly, and Tilden admired the young Hill. When Tilden ran for Governor, Hill worked diligently in Elmira to promote the Tilden campaign.

After serving in the Assembly, Hill returned to his law practice in Elmira. His yearning for the political arena soon led him to a successful run for mayor of Elmira in 1882. That same year, New York Democrats were looking for candidates for governor, and Hill's name was one on the minds of many, along with Grover Cleveland. Hill settled for the Lieutenant Governor slot on the ticket, and in November, Cleveland and Hill won their elections easily. Neither man was to languish in their office for long, as other political laurels beckoned.

Cleveland's three-year term as governor was cut short when he resigned in January, 1885 to assume the office of President of the United States. Hill became the Governor of New York, finishing out Cleveland's last year as governor and then won election to two terms of his own. As governor, Hill enacted several important pieces of legislation. Hill signed legislation to create the Adirondack Park, which preserved vast acres of land as a forest preserve. He ended executions by hanging and replaced them with the electric chair, which Hill considered more humane. Hill also sought to curb child labor, signing legislation prohibiting the use of children under the age of 13 in industry, as well as placing limits on the hours of employment for minors and women under age 21.

While he did accomplish some good, the shadier side of his past and present continued to haunt him. Hill continued to support Tammany Hall, which left him open to criticism of being a "machine" politician. Many recalled Hill's venture with Boss Tweed in buying the *Elmira Gazette*, and suggested that Hill had been under the control of Tammany Hall. A Thomas Nast cartoon depicted Hill trying to close the door of a closet with the skeleton Boss Tweed inside. Hill staunchly opposed proposals for secret ballots, preferring the continued use of party printed ballots, which encouraged straight party ticket voting. It also allowed employers and political machine leaders to see how constituents were voting, thus enabling influence over

their choices. Hill also used patronage to keep loyal Democrats appointed to state offices.

Although Hill abstained from alcohol, he strongly supported the liquor interests in the state. Hill opposed raising excise taxes on alcohol and licensing fees on establishments to the frustration of prohibition forces. Hill realized that there were a lot of men who did drink, and they were voters.

A scandal that seemed to reveal how Hill used his influence was the “Steal of the Senate” in 1891. During his terms as governor, Hill had to deal with a legislature controlled by Republicans. As his last term as governor was ending, the New York Assembly finally had a Democratic majority, but the Senate did not. A change of only three seats in the Senate could give the Democrats a majority, and Hill devised a way to make that happen. As governor, Hill controlled the patronage allowing him to choose the county canvassers who certified the election results. In the Senate election, the Republican victors of the 15th, 25th, and 27th Senate districts suddenly found themselves disqualified due to improper ballots or ineligibility. The Democrats took control of the Senate, as Hill pulled off one last party coup before leaving the governor’s chair. With Democrats in control of the legislature, Hill was named a U.S. Senator (at that time, state legislators chose U.S. Senators), but his sights were set on a higher office.

The year 1892 was a presidential election year, and many Democrats thought David Hill would be the logical nominee, and so did David Hill. Yet, there were some in the party who preferred Grover Cleveland. Although Hill had served as Lieutenant Governor under Cleveland, the two men had experienced a falling out. Cleveland had not supported Hill’s elections as governor, and Hill had only reluctantly campaigned for Cleveland in his presidential campaign. Cleveland had distanced himself from Hill, fearing Hill’s reputation would tarnish his presidential campaign.

To solidify his hold on getting Democrats in New York to nominate him and to build momentum, Hill called for an early meeting of the Democratic convention in his state in February, 1892. Hill got the New York nomination, but it was costly. Many Democrats across the nation resented this “snap convention,” and they disliked how Hill “stole” the Senate in New York. Both tactics smacked of Tammany politics. When the party gathered in Chicago for the national convention, Hill saw his dream of national glory evaporate in disappointment as the delegates once again turned to Grover Cleveland. Cleveland went on to win the election, leaving Hill to imagine that if not for a few mistakes, he could have been President. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

Hill now turned his attention to a term in the U.S. Senate, where he found a familiar face that reminded him of good times from the past. Joe Dolph had earned his law degree and moved to Binghamton, New York to open a practice. There he joined the Oregon Guard in 1862 that protected a wagon train headed to Oregon. Dolph settled in Oregon, where he was elected to the state legislature, and in 1882 was chosen to represent Oregon in the U.S. Senate. Now, the two old friends who once tended a canal lock, now tended to the laws of the nation in the upper house of Congress.

After serving one term, Hill left the Senate in 1897 and returned to practicing law in Albany. He still kept his hand in politics, giving counsel to fellow Democrats, and even managed the presidential campaign of Alton Parker against Teddy Roosevelt in 1904. After losing that campaign, Hill decided to retire from politics for good. He sold the *Elmira Gazette* to Frank Gannett, and spent his remaining days at his magnificent estate he purchased in 1892 known as Wolfert's Roost. The home, located near Albany, included a swimming pool, a small lake, and an impressive library.

In 1906, Hill, complaining of impaired vision, was diagnosed with Bright's disease, a kidney ailment. He periodically suffered from bouts of debilitating symptoms that sometimes lasted for weeks. By 1910, his condition worsened, and his older brother, Alonzo, a Missouri physician, was summoned to come to his aid, but he was unable to arrive in time. The Sage of Wolfert's Roost died on October 20, 1910.

Alonzo escorted his brother's body back to Montour Falls for burial. The village closed schools and businesses, and flags were flown at half-mast. The casket was escorted from the train station to the cemetery, passing his childhood home along the way. The man, who once ran as a bare-footed boy through the streets and had risen to national prominence, had come home.

For 30 years, David Hill was a force in New York State and national politics. Today, a small park in Montour Falls honors his memory, and his boyhood home still rests under the shade of the trees lining Genesee Street.