



Edwards Was Early State Educational Leader

by Tom Emery
October 23 2023 11:11 AM



Over 115 years after his death, Richard Edwards remains among the titans of nineteenth-century education in Illinois. A devoted champion of racial equality, he was never afraid to take a strong stand.

Edwards is best known as the second President of Illinois State University in Normal, where he was at the forefront of racial progression during his time at the school from 1862-76.

Born on Dec. 23, 1822 in Wales, Edwards emigrated to America with his family in 1833, eventually landing in Ohio. There, he attended a school taught by a farmer.

Young Edwards was apprenticed as a carpenter at age sixteen and taught school near Ravenna Ohio for one term. Choosing to further his education, he left for Massachusetts in October 1844 before enrolling in July 1845 at what is today Bridgewater State in Massachusetts.

He graduated in 1847 and became part of a long line of educational leaders that hailed from Bridgewater State, teaching there from 1848-53. Edwards also studied at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., where he enrolled in a course in civil engineering, later working for a time in that field.

On July 5, 1849, Edwards married the former Betsey Samson. The union would produce nine children.

He spent the 1853-54 academic year as head of a boys' high school in Salem, Mass. before three years as principal of the State Normal School at Salem. From 1857-61, he was a headmaster at schools in St. Louis.

In 1862, he became the second President of Illinois State Normal University (now Illinois State University), arriving with a sterling reputation.

An Illinois State historian assessed Edwards as “arguably the foremost American schoolmaster in the 1860s and 1870s.” In 1863, Harvard awarded an honorary master's degree to Edwards.

During Edwards' administration, Illinois State was in its fledgling years, boasting an enrollment of 327 students in 1870 – a far cry from the student body of over 20,000 today. In 1872, Edwards reported that the university's reference library held 1,021 volumes – a tiny fraction of the holdings of today's Milner Library. The school had a total of six faculty members, including Edwards, in 1863.

Like many early Illinois State presidents, Edwards was a dominant figure in the university, though he was faced with a myriad of financial challenges. He stressed the need for professional credentials for teachers and implemented a university practice of involvement in off-campus workshops for both faculty and the university president.

Some credit Edwards with coining the phrase “the grandest of enterprises” to describe the teaching profession.

Edwards fought strenuously for racial equality, particularly in educational opportunity. His views earned the wrath of both opponents and an often-hostile press, but he inspired many university graduates to push for racial equality in their own educational careers.

A peer wrote of Edwards’ “magnetism and personality that created and maintained enthusiasm in his pupils.”

Edwards also recognized the value of physical education in urging the construction of a gymnasium facility at Illinois State. The aforementioned university historian wrote that Edwards “was in the vanguard in his promotion of physical education” in the era.

A vocal promoter of both the university and higher education, Edwards is credited with visiting 58 of Illinois’ 102 counties in 1872 to deliver some 300 speeches and preside at 138 educational institutes.

Illinois State faculty were equally well-traveled statewide, as Edwards introduced a culture that, in his own words, “solemnly resolved that whatever could be done for the general advancement of education in Illinois should not fail of being done.”

Edwards was ordained in 1873 and frequently preached at various local churches in Normal. He resigned from ISU in 1876 and settled in Princeton, Ill., where he served as Congregational pastor.

After eight years, Edwards left to become financial agent for Knox College in Galesburg. In 1886, he was elected Illinois Superintendent of Public Instruction as a Republican. With his health in decline, he served a nondescript term as President of Blackburn College in Carlinville from 1891-93.

He eventually retired to Bloomington, and was a member of both the Illinois Natural History Society and the Illinois State Teachers Association. Edwards died on March 7, 1908 and is buried in Bloomington’s Evergreen Cemetery.

Today on the Illinois State campus, the Mennonite College of Nursing is housed in Edwards Hall, a memorial to one of the nation's foremost educators of the nineteenth century.

Tom Emery is a freelance writer and historical researcher from Carlinville, Ill. He may be reached at 217-710-8392 or ilcivilwar@yahoo.com.