

# **Perry Fuller: Indian Agent, Self-Made Man and White-Collar Criminal**

Presented By

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## **Early Life in Illinois**

Perry Fuller was born in 1826 to a family whose parents both died of cholera, leaving him and three sisters orphaned in Cass County, Illinois, near Springfield. He was adopted by a Dr. Chandler who had many children himself and many adoptees in his family. The doctor also founded a little town called Chandlersville. This presages Perry Fuller's interest in town founding. Buying land "wholesale" in acres and selling it "retail" in town lots was a dream widely shared during the nineteenth century. But the most interesting thing about Dr. Chandler's town project is the man who helped him plat Chandlersville--Abraham Lincoln, a young area lawyer. Perry Fuller would later say that he couldn't remember a day when he did not know Lincoln. Whether he used his connection with Lincoln to achieve advancement in life is unknown, but he always had before him the example of a young man without formal education who rose to the national stage from similar roots.

Fuller's family origins are uncertain. We don't even know his father's first name. We know that Dr. Chandler gave Perry an education and a "start in life" that we assume was money to purchase land. He married Sarah Keithley in May of 1846. Later he, his wife, and his inlaws took off from central Illinois for new horizons. They went to Missouri and lived for a time in Atchison County, the northwestern-most county in the state. At one point Perry left his wife with her sister and family while he went down to Westport (Kansas City as it would become) in Jackson County. There he got a job with the traders Northrup and Chick. He was assigned to check in the goods as they arrived on the steamboats. These supplies were then warehoused, repackaged and shipped out to Indian tribes or sold to pioneers outfitting for trips further west on the trails. He would be involved with trading for most of his life.

## **Kansas Territory**

Fuller worked for Northrup and Chick in Westport from about 1849 until 1854 when the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed and land became available in Kansas Territory. He came over to Franklin County from Westport and claimed land on Eight Mile Creek in northern Franklin County. When he got back to work in Westport, Mr. Chick told him that he would have to live on that land for a time to "prove it up." And so Northrup and Chick offered to help him set up a store. They gave Fuller goods on credit. Being located near three major Indian tribes, the store would prove to be very profitable. Perry famously cleared over \$40,000 the first year. This period, around 1854, was the end of the first big push of trail outfitting. Northrup and Chick, with their Indian connections and early arrival in the area, had already made their money. At this point, they were in the process of quitting the trading business and moving the bank they had founded to New York to flee the Border War.

There were many Westport trading companies besides Northrup and Chick--Boone and Bernard and West and James were two prominent ones--who had connections with the little towns in Kansas Territory. Close to where Perry settled on the west bank of Eight Mile Creek in Franklin County, Joab Bernard, representing Boone and Bernard, settled on the east bank, founding the town of St. Bernard that only amounted to Joab's house. Despite its size, it was designated the first county seat by the federal government.

### Town Builder, Indian Trader

Perry Fuller's settlement was the little town that he first named Springfield after his old haunt, and then renamed Centropolis. He hoped, by its name, that it would become the "central metropolis" of Kansas. There is vague mention of a town called Perrysville, too, but its exact location is unknown. And Fuller also continued his trading with the Indians. On the one hand, we have records of his participation in Kansas territorial history. He was elected a territorial Senator as well as a territorial Representative. His letters to the governors can be found in territorial records. He played these roles competently as far as is known. On the other hand, his commercial ventures were more unsavory. In William E. Unrau's **White Man's Wicked Water** we find him mentioned in different terms:

"Less congenial but certainly no less committed to supplying Indians with alcohol was Perry Fuller, field agent for the Kansas City firm of Northrup and Chick. Orphaned at an early age and determined to make his mark in Indian country, Fuller followed [*that champion of westward expansion, Missouri Senator Thomas Hart*] Benton's advice and in the mid-1850s established himself at Centropolis, a few miles north of the Sauk [also known as Sac] and Fox reservation. In one year alone he sold forty thousand dollars worth of goods from his consignment store there, underwritten by Northrup and Chick and patronized by tribal leaders fearful that taking their business elsewhere would lead to cancellation of their annuities. Sauk and Fox agent Francis Tymany complained of being "terrorized" by Fuller, whose principal business at Centropolis was whiskey and who hired ruffians to threaten him at annuity payment times. When several Sauks and Foxes died with symptoms of bleeding from the mouth, Agent Tymany reported to territorial officials that the alcohol dispensed at Centropolis was laced with strychnine—which, if administered sparingly could enhance the inebriating force of alcohol dramatically and, in excess, cause fatality. Territorial Governor James W. Denver's response was that to obtain convictions in such instances was difficult at best, and in any case, legal responsibility for such matters rested not with him but with the Indian Office in Washington."

### Sac and Fox Indian Agent

Soon after Tymany's firing, Perry Fuller himself was named the Sac and Fox agent. The importance of such a position in territorial Kansas cannot be overemphasized. There weren't many opportunities for making a salary since the towns weren't up and going yet, and one of the sure routes to financial gain was to be hired by the Indian bureaucracy, the Office of Indian Affairs, as an agent who did the paperwork for maintaining the tribe, or as an interpreter who was also a government employee. Usually they would also hire blacksmiths and farmers to help the Indians learn to farm.

Fuller became the agent in 1859 and was the first free-state Kansan to hold that position, the previous ones all being proslavery Missourians. His first goal was to sell two-thirds of the land comprising the Sac and Fox Reserve. Perry convinced his superiors in the Indian office and SOME of the Sac and Fox Indians that they didn't need all that land, which was just a burden to them. The negative reaction of one Indian leader, Shaw-Pah-Kaw-Kah, translated by interpreter John Goodell, is as follows:

"I submit to the commissioners and the Great Father that this whole arrangement, from the commencement to the end, is to consume our treasury and to give into the hands of the speculators our money and our lands, to make us poor and dependent, and to degrade us; and finally to take our lands from us that we own here. We will eventually have to surrender this diminished reservation. We will have to give up the graves of our fathers and mothers, and their bones will be dug up, and the sacred emblems that are buried with them will be made a show of by the same men that call us heathen, and are trying to teach us a new religion. Even now we have to hide our dead ones. Their graves have been polluted. We find their bones on the roadside and in the windows of offices in our midst.

You will waste \$5000 a year on the mixed-blood children, whose fathers are the very worst of the white race and the refuse of the earth. They brought to the agency whisky and tobacco, and taught the Indians to swear, and their children have proved universally bad.

Of course I will be compelled to sign these papers, but I sign them under protest, knowing in my own heart that there is no good in it for the Indians.”

Ida M. Ferris, “The Sauks and Foxes in Franklin and Osage Counties, Kansas”

So a great quantity of land was to be sold. Much of it ended up in the possession of nascent railroads.

“...the bulk of the land went in 1870 either directly or indirectly through dummy bidders to five parties or groups, chief of which was John McManus, of Reading, PA, who was a director of the Kansas Pacific Railroad (the old Leavenworth, Pawnee and Western.) McManus conveyed the 142,929 acres he had acquired at various prices. . .to Seyfert, McManus and Co., an iron manufacturing company, which had secured amendments to its charter permitting it to colonize and hold land in other states. 27,677 acres went *[via William McKean]* to the Union Pacific, Eastern Division, at a cost of \$1.00/acre; 39,414 acres were acquired by various buyers *[Fuller & McDonald]* and transferred to Northrup and Chick, a real estate and banking group in Kansas City and Brooklyn. In this and in other deals relating to the Sac and Fox lands, Hugh McCullough and J.P. Usher, respectively Comptroller of the Currency and Secretary of the Interior, were major participants.”

Paul Wallace Gates, **Fifty Million Acres**

When the bids were opened, 263,000 acres of Sac and Fox lands were sold. Would-be settlers had also bid on these lands, and they had offered only \$5-\$7 an acre. While they lost out on the lands in the auction, the speculator/winners sold land to the settlers, financing it for them. After a few years the farmers who hadn't produced enough grain to make the payments lost their lands in foreclosure. When the farmers wouldn't leave after being evicted, the government sent Gen. Phil Sheridan and his troops to be sure they did. Thus the speculators ended up with the land itself and all the money the farmers had paid for it so far. The whole transaction, according to Governor Samuel Crawford was “a transparent fraud.” And you begin to see something of Fuller's new bent in life, which is making lots and lots of money based on his connections with the Indian agencies and the government and in some cases railroads.

### **The Minneola Scheme**

Fuller wanted Centropolis to be the capital of Kansas. However, Centropolis had a really bad name due to the liquor trade that Perry carried on there. So he crossed Eight Mile Creek to the east and founded a new town called Minneola. And to publicize Minneola, he first had a handsome map produced which showed the proposed capital building, which looked quite impressive. The paper town was shown connected to every railroad in the Midwest, real or projected, and was touted as the hub of all communication and transportation in Kansas. Then, gathering up blank deeds for the lots in Minneola, Fuller took them up to Lawrence, where the territorial legislature was meeting. He handed them out, so that two-thirds of the legislature of Kansas Territory became landowners in Minneola. By this Perry hoped to assure that Minneola would become the capital of Kansas, and for about twenty-four hours, it was.

When the town company learned, in 1858, that within six weeks Minneola was to be the site of the territory's third constitutional convention, they threw up a hotel and a capital building—a frame building rather more modest than the marble edifice pictured on the map. When the legislators came, many of them had to camp on the open prairie because there wasn't enough shelter for them all. But they didn't have to stay long because political leader James Lane, who would be the first senator from Kansas, didn't support Minneola. Perhaps he didn't own enough of it. The legislature debated all through the night of March 26-27, 1858. They dissolved the meeting and adjourned to Leavenworth, and that was the end of the Minneola dream. Minneola continued to exist as a town for another ten or fifteen years. But it is so far gone now that no trace of it can be found. That was Fuller's second effort at town building.

## The Civil War as Profitable Enterprise

When the Civil War broke out, Perry Fuller's Indian trading empire had extended south and west and grown exponentially. He was selling food and supplies beyond the Central Superintendency that includes Kansas to the Southern Superintendency which extends to the southwest into Navaho country. Fuller and his new partner, Benjamin P. McDonald from Fort Scott, shared the bad reputation that Perry had created alone. Reports of substandard food and supplies begin to accumulate. Perry & McDonald also developed a large business of supplying the troops with food and supplies. One of their wagon trains heading for Fort Gibson in the Indian Territory was overtaken by Confederates and stolen—a \$60,000 loss for the company.

### Refugee Indian Bureaucrat

In Kansas at the time of the Civil War there were **native** Indians on reserves—Osages and Kansas—and there were **emigrant** Indians removed in the 1830s from the Great Lakes and East Coast. A new factor was the **refugee** Indians, Union-supporting factions of the Five Civilized Tribes—Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole and Creek--who fled to Kansas during the Civil War from the Indian Territory in Oklahoma. Confederate Indian forces ran many of the pro-Union Indians off of their Oklahoma lands. Opothleyahola, a pro-Union Creek chief fled the Indian Territory with his nearly-decimated band of followers up into Kansas to avoid being massacred by the Confederate Creeks and Cherokees.

This situation provided an opportunity for Perry Fuller. He proposed that Opothleyahola's band be brought to the existing Indian reserves in Kansas, where their safety was assured and they could be easily supplied with food and medicine. So tens of thousands of pro-Union Indians were deposited in the existing Indian reserves, which became internment camps for these unfortunates.

Around four thousand Indians were brought up to the Sac and Fox Reserve, now located in Osage County. Fuller had resigned as agent, but undertaking the Indians' maintenance were Fuller & McDonald who supplied food that was always complained about because of its poor quality. One of the side benefits of this whole operation for Fuller & McDonald was cattle theft. The Indian Territory (Oklahoma) reserves had contained large and successful livestock operations. The tribes had developed large herds of cattle. When the Union Indians abandoned their stock to flee to Kansas, enterprising groups of soldiers and civilians rode down and drove the cattle up into Kansas. It is estimated that over 300,000 cattle were taken from Oklahoma and sold to the very refugee Indians who had owned them previously. The Indians would recognize their cattle by the brands. It must have been dispiriting to the Indians to realize what was happening.

Because Perry Fuller had "diminished" the Franklin County reserve lands, the location of the agency was moved to Quenemo in Osage County. It had been in Franklin County near where the Greenwood Church still stands. Fuller once again attempted to found a town on the former agency site, calling this one Greenwood. It was a failure.

By the end of the Civil War, Fuller had amassed so much money that he was too big for Franklin and Osage counties. He moved to Baldwin and opened a large three-story wholesale store in Lawrence at the north end of Massachusetts Street. By the late 1870s he had homes in both New York and Washington.

### Military Efforts to Curtail Fuller & McDonald

If there is a hero in this story, it is Col. William Addison Phillips, commander of the Union Indian Brigade, who tried repeatedly to bring Fuller & McDonald to justice and insure that their hammerlock on suppliers and quartermasters in the army was broken. He compiled many reports which he submitted to his superiors providing evidence of theft, corruption and shoddy merchandise. Despite his efforts, the end of the war brought the investigations to a halt.

### **Fuller's Connections with Senator James Henry Lane**

After the war, Fuller's businesses had a silent partner in Senator James Lane—who had opposed Fuller's Minneola boondoggle. Lane and Fuller had engaged in several schemes involving real estate, Indian trading and railroads, but Lane's political influence in Washington had waned after the death of Lincoln, whose support for him had never wavered. He began attempting to establish influence with the new President, Andrew Johnson, to the disgust of his Kansas constituents. At a certain point in 1866 *The Chicago Tribune* and other newspapers published documents that connected James Lane to the infamous Perry Fuller. Lane was supposedly so dejected by these revelations (and his other political reverses) that it contributed to his suicide in July of 1866.

### **Fuller's Connections with Senator Edmund G. Ross**

Thus Perry Fuller was involved peripherally with Lane's demise and directly in the appointment of his successor. He was seen on the floor of the Kansas Senate, handing out \$40,000 worth of checks to assure that Edmund G. Ross, a previously little-known newspaper editor, would be appointed U.S. Senator for Lane's unexpired term. At this point Perry Fuller's story begins to parallel John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book on statesmanship in the Senate, **Profiles in Courage**. Kennedy selected Edmund G. Ross as one of eight Senators whose actions exhibited statesmanship by voting against his constituents' desires, but for a noble cause. President Johnson was impeached for alleged misbehavior, but Ross' vote acquitted him. He knew that the vote would end his short political career, as it did. And Perry Fuller is involved for several different reasons.

One was that Fuller's first wife, Sarah Keithley, had died and his second wife, Mary Ream, was the daughter of a man very involved with Kansas territorial government as a clerk to Kansas' Surveyor General John Calhoun. Ream had moved from LeCompton to Washington, that font of government jobs. And when Edmund Ross was appointed Senator, he moved to Washington and roomed with the Reams. Mary Ream's sister, Vinnie, was a famous sculptor who had been allowed to draw Lincoln from life while he was working in the White House, and was creating a life-sized statue of him for the Capitol after the war. She was a beautiful, highly visible and talked-about person in Washington and she and her sister-in-law were rumored to have plotted to influence Ross' vote against conviction of Johnson. Perry Fuller appeared at Ross' door to lobby for an acquittal the morning of the vote.

Soon after Johnson was acquitted, Ross was in the President's office, requesting that Perry Fuller be appointed the Collector of the Internal Revenue Service, the plum of patronage jobs. When the request went from the President to the Senate, they refused to do it, knowing of the notorious Fuller's character. Ross submitted a new request for Fuller to be appointed the Collector of the port of New Orleans. That port was one of the most famously corrupt government agencies, and it would seem that the Senate decided that New Orleans and Perry Fuller deserved one other. They approved the request in 1868.

### **Collector of the Port of New Orleans**

Within six months Fuller had criminal charges against him for trying to steal the port blind. In one case, a special Treasury investigator pursuing him discovered that he had taken several boatloads of freight that had come to the port and had shipped the goods to his cronies around the country without paying the duties. Some of the goods came to William Hays, a merchant from Ottawa, Kansas. This was, in the end, determined to be a three million dollar scam. He was investigated by the Senate and relieved of his position. Charges against him were in process at the time of his death three years later.

### **The Thomas Ewing-Perry Fuller Scandal**

The newspapers were crowing around this time about a letter that Fuller supposedly wrote to a crony named Thomas Ewing, Jr. Ewing's family had generations of activity in the Indian trade and bureaucracy. Thomas, Jr. was the Union army officer who issued General Order No. 11, the draconian reaction to Quantrill's Raid on Lawrence, Kansas in

August of 1863. Order No. 11 decreed that four counties on the Missouri border be vacated by their whole population in punishment for assisting the bushwhackers. The area became known as the Burnt District because no buildings were left standing nor crops growing. Only a few forlorn chimneys spoke of former farms and towns. Fuller never denied writing the following letter but stated that the copy quoted below from the New York Times was “garbled.”

“New Orleans, Jan. 20, 1869

Dear General—I am in receipt of yours of the 18<sup>th</sup> inst. I wrote H that C[harles] Ewing had large interests in the contracts and vouchers, and all would be right as soon as the appropriations were made. I shall come to Washington just as soon as I am relieved, or before if not relieved by the 15<sup>th</sup> of February. I shall come on and we can fix all up. . . Now, General, **I am after a bigger and more profitable enterprise than Indian business can be.** I can place you and H in it. It costs nothing, only to get a bill endorsed by Congress to pay interest on State bonds for levee purposes. This will work, and cost nothing. Why did you not get appointment as I wrote you by Solicitor, to appear in the wine cases? You let a good thing slip. I wish you would do all you can for Colonel Casey’s appointment in my place. I am anxious to have him appointed for several reasons. If he is appointed I will remain in New Orleans and the South and forward business to you for I could then have a “bank” for fine business, and all claims and suits coming through the Custom House I could place in your hands, and it is all cash and but little delay. Write me soon all of the news, and believe me truly your friend, P. Fuller”

**The New York Times**, 28 April 1869  
[emphasis is mine-DB]

### The “White Cherokee” and the End

Perry Fuller appears twice in the 1870 census. Once he is recorded living in Washington with his wife Mary. His other appearance was in Chetopa, Kansas, on the border of the Cherokee Nation. Fuller was staying with a friend and fellow scamp, Elias Cornelius Boudinot. Half Cherokee and the son of one of the “Treaty Party” who signed the treaty forcing the Cherokees to take the Trail of Tears to Indian Territory, Boudinot was a lawyer, a newspaper editor, and a schemer after Perry’s heart. Boudinot had been frustrated by James Lane’s untimely death in 1866, as he thought that he had prevailed in negotiating the separation of the Union and Confederate Cherokees into two nations. However, the agreement vanished when Lane and his support for the plan died. Both felt the need in 1870 to retreat to an isolated cabin for a few months to avoid creditors and enemies.

Perry Fuller’s unexpected death in January of 1871 brought his ambitions to an end. He died of a heart attack on the day of the unveiling of his sister-in-law Vinnie’s statue of Lincoln. Believed by all to be extremely wealthy, everyone was shocked to learn, when his estate was probated, that he was penniless. His wife and sister-in-law were forced to take government jobs to support themselves. “White Cherokee” Cornelius Boudinot, a friend of both Perry and Vinnie, labored to untangle Fuller’s financial affairs and stabilize his widow’s income.

Fuller was never convicted of a crime. He never spent a day in prison. Most of the Washington establishment was probably pleased to hear of his demise. Though he was an orphan who grew up with Kansas Territory in its most violent era, he can also be thought of as a perfect representative of the Gilded Age in which he matured. That boom time of unregulated capitalism and corruption saw many men who gamed the system like Perry Fuller.

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