

# Thomas B. Bullene

Merchant and Mayor  
1828-1894

---

by Daniel Coleman

In his diary entry of April 14, 1874, Thomas Bullene exulted over the success of his new store's grand opening: "An immense concourse of people have all day thronged the retail store and in the evening the crowd became a jam and thronged through the illuminated rooms until 10 o'clock." The event, described no less spectacularly in the next day's headlines, "Twenty-five Thousand People Gazing Upon Sights Unequaled in Dream-land," was a milestone in the career of Bullene, a successful merchant whose civic enthusiasm involved him in most of the wonders of Kansas City's early metropolitan period.

Thomas Brockway Bullene was born in Oswego County, New York, on August 10, 1828, the youngest of John and Susan Bullene's six children. The family moved to Wisconsin before Thomas was 10. After a pioneer childhood on the prosperous farm his parents established, Bullene went into business with his older brother, Lathrop, opening a country store in the town of Lyons around 1849. On December 29, 1851, he married fellow New Yorker Amarett Hickock, with whom he would raise four children.

Bullene struggled to make a living as a storeowner in Lyons and Independence, Iowa, where he moved in 1856. Hoping to improve his prospects, Bullene followed brother Lathrop to the frontier town of Lawrence, Kansas, in 1863. Although Civil War strife in the Kansas-Missouri border area made Lawrence a risky business environment, opportunity knocked within weeks of Bullene's arrival.

He was invited to buy out the stock of William Gillis, a partner in the Kansas City outfitter Gillis and Coates, after Gillis was banned from doing business for openly endorsing the Confederate cause. Bullene and his family survived these tumultuous years, later to tell harrowing tales of visiting Lawrence in the aftermath of William Quantrill's devastating raid. (Bullene's brother luckily was away in New York during the bloody attack on the town's citizens by guerillas.) Bullene shipped most of his merchandise up the



Missouri River by steamboat in fear of a similar sacking of Kansas City.

His store, initially located at the intersection of Main Street and Missouri Avenue, specialized in supplying Santa Fe Trail travelers, and the addition and subtraction of partners over the years dictated the firm's name: Coates & Bullene; Bullene Brothers and Emery; Bullenes, Moore, & Emery, etc. The company's location and trade also evolved; a second store at 7<sup>th</sup> and Main replaced lines of covered wagons outside with interior marvels like steam-powered elevators and gas lighting, by which customers shopped for household necessities. By the time its next location opened in 1890 on 11<sup>th</sup> Street between Walnut and Grand, Bullene was known as the "Merchant Prince of the Missouri Valley," and the store's success was such that it survived well into the twentieth century under its final and most famous name—Emery, Bird, Thayer.

Bullene participated in numerous projects aimed to improve Kansas City, joining its first volunteer fire brigade and serving as the first president of the Kansas City Humane Society. He occupied a seat on the city council during the late 1870s and was elected Kansas City's 22<sup>nd</sup> mayor in 1882. Highlights of his tenure included the appointment of legendary Fire Chief George C. Hale and dedication of the "Fat Stock Show"—the less regally named predecessor of American Royal. He also ran unsuccessfully for U.S. Congress in 1888.

Bullene's leadership extended to the literary realm: a fairy story he wrote for his daughter appeared in the *Journal of Commerce* on Christmas morning in 1877, and he was recruited to introduce a production of Dickens reenactments by reading verses of his own creation. His public offices and proprietorship of a store "unrivaled between St. Louis and San Francisco" allowed him to meet most of the great figures who visited his booming city, including President Ulysses S. Grant and fallen Confederate leader Jefferson Davis. Bullene died December 4, 1894, at age 66, having presided over a golden age in Kansas City's history.

### Sources

Conard, Howard Louis. *Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri*. New York, Louisville: The Southern History Co., 1901.

Stevenson, Charles S. "Thomas B. Bullene, Kansas City's 22nd Mayor." *Jackson County Historical Society Journal* 25 (July-August-September 1983): 7.

Whitney, Carrie Westlake. *Kansas City, Missouri: Its History and Its People*. Kansas City, MO: S. J. Clarke Publishers, 1908.

Wilson, William H., ed. "A Missouri Merchant Recalls the Civil War: Reminiscences of Thomas B. Bullene of Kansas City." *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 18 (July 1962): 305-309.

Wilson, William H., ed. "Diary of a Kansas City Merchant, 1874-1880." *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 19 (April 1963): 247-259.

© 2008