

Looking Back

Banta responsible for picking IU site

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It was an act of God or the weatherman, depending on how you look at it. On July 13, 1883, during a thunderstorm the Science Building on the old Indiana University campus at the foot of College Avenue was struck by lightning and destroyed by fire.

NO DOUBT THE IU Board of Trustees members could have cried, but they met as quickly as possible to discuss the situation. Gone were the 12,000 books of the budding University library and Professor Richard Owens' collection of prehistoric fossils and skeletons.

The president of the IU Board of Trustees was a David Demaree Banta. Born in Johnson County, Banta lost his father while he was still a baby. His mother re-married and took him to Iowa. Tired of doing farm chores, Banta read the law with a Fairfield attorney. He had gotten a good common school education, but realized he didn't really know enough to be a good lawyer.

INCREDIBLE AS IT may seem, Banta walked from Iowa to Peru, Indiana, and caught the train to Franklin, where he studied for a time. Transferring to IU he took the BS and LLB degrees. While in Bloomington he worked his way through college by giving singing lessons and as principal of the Monroe County Female Seminary.

Returning to Franklin in 1857, Banta practiced law and tried his hand at newspaper editing and serving as a judge.

His term on the IU Board of Trustees lasted from 1887 to 1889, when he resigned to become dean of the newly revived Law School.

It was while he was president of the Board of Trustees that the disastrous fire occurred on the South College campus. There had been agitation among some of the state legislators to move the state university to Indianapolis. The fire only

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