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# Robert Campbell R. & W. Campbell

By M. Karen Hubbard

Robert Campbell was born on February 12, 1804 in Plumbridge, County Tyrone in present day Northern Ireland. He was the youngest child of his father's second marriage. This meant he would inherit very little or no property. It is felt this factor led to Robert's decision to follow his older brother, Hugh, to America to seek a better life.

In August 1822, Campbell sailed from Ireland to America. He stayed with his brother in North Carolina and then Virginia. This climate was bad for his health so he moved west where the air was better for his lungs. He settled in St. Louis where his career was progressing well, but his health was not. A doctor advised him to go to the Rocky Mountains. Robert spent much of the next ten years living and working in the west for many different partnerships and fur companies. In 1832 he partnered with William Sublette to form Sublette and Campbell. The company traded with Indians along the Missouri and built many forts as trading posts. His fur trading business earned him a good reputation and was the stepping stone to becoming a successful businessman.

Campbell and Sublette opened a wholesale and retail dry goods business in St. Louis in September 1836. It was located at 7 North Main Street where the St. Louis Arch grounds are located today. In 1842, Robert and Sublette were not selling as many goods as they needed to keep their store open, so they ended their partnership. Robert bought the goods and furnishings from Sublette.

When the economy got better, Campbell opened the 'R. Campbell and Company' which sold dry goods and Indian goods. His business got better in 1848 and at this time, a relative, William Campbell, became a junior partner. The company was named 'R. & W. Campbell'. They supplied people going West with goods they would need for the trip. They also sent goods to new stores which were opening in the frontier. By 1843, Robert's reputation as an excellent businessman was recognized by others in the community and he was named president of the Merchants National Bank and the First Bank of Missouri.

In addition to the supply company and banks, Robert earned a good amount of money in his real estate investments. In the early 1840's, he developed large amounts of rental property and was one of the people responsible for the creation of Kansas City, Missouri. He later sold his Kansas City property to his nephew, John Campbell.

Robert Campbell and Virginia Jane Kyle were married on February 25, 1841. She played a key role in Campbell's business and social life. Between 1842 and 1864, they had 13 children. However, ten of their children died from disease and health problems.

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Campbell saw how important steamboats were to the transportation of goods up and down the river. In the 1840's, he bought steamboats and began to send his goods upriver to sell and bring the western goods, such as buffalo hides, down to St. Louis. His steamboats also carried passengers and goods between St. Louis and New Orleans on the Mississippi River. (The first job of author Mark Twain was as a riverboat pilot on Mr. Campbell's steamboat, 'A. B. Chambers', in 1859.)

Campbell played a key role in raising funds and troops for the United States war with Mexico. He also supplied goods and transportation to the Union army in the Mississippi valley during the Civil War.

As Campbell grew older, his investments in different businesses continued. By 1860's/70's, he paid people to take cattle from the pastures in the southern plains to the trains for transport to the slaughter house. He also owned goldmines in New Mexico as well as the largest hotel in St. Louis, the Southern Hotel, which burned down in 1877.

Robert Campbell died at home on October 10, 1879. When he died, he was thought to be one of the wealthiest men in Missouri, leaving an estate of \$2 million (worth \$35 million today) in cash alone. Today Campbell's home is a museum in St. Louis. Campbell's biography is one of an Irishman who came to America to make his fortune, and in so doing, helped to build the economic base of St. Louis and Kansas City.