

ABNER LEWIS
(1801 – 1879)

FOREWORD
BY

DOUGLAS A. HEDIN
EDITOR, MLHP

The October term of the Winona County District Court opened on October 13, 1879. As reported in the local newspaper:

The October term of the District Court opened on Monday Morning at 10 o'clock. The usual call of the calendar was had....The business of the morning having been finished Judge Mitchell announced that there would be no session of the court in the afternoon in order that the court and members of the bar might attend the funeral of the late Judge Lewis.¹

Abner Lewis was a county court judge in New York for eight years but never sat on the bench in Minnesota. Like many who serve in such a position for even a few years, he apparently was reluctant to let go of the title.

Lewis grew up in Chautauqua County in southwestern New York, was educated and admitted to the bar there, held positions of prominence in that community, including been elected to the House of Representatives as a Whig in 1844;² but suddenly in 1856 at the age

¹ Winona Herald, October 17, 1879, at 2.

² The *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* has the following entry on him:

LEWIS, Abner, a Representative from New York; born in Panama, Chautauqua County, N.Y.; attended the public schools; member of the State assembly in 1838 and 1839; elected as a Whig to the

of 55, he moved to a small town in Minnesota Territory to practice law. The lingering question about Lewis is of why he abruptly pulled up roots that seemed so secure. Was it because of some local controversy, something related to his conversion to Methodism in 1855, the urgings of friends, or the pull of the West? We may never know, though his timing could not have been worse—the devastating Panic of 1857 struck in late August of the following year.³

For whatever reason, Lewis arrived in Winona in 1856 and practiced law there until 1867, when he was awarded a minor government post. Given the political culture of the day, this likely was a patronage appointment.

Abner Lewis died on October 11, 1879, in Winona. The *Winona Daily Republican* carried his obituary two days later:⁴

THE WINONA DAILY REPUBLICAN

MONDAY EVENING, OCTOBER 13, 1879.

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OBITUARY.

HON. ABNER LEWIS.

The low condition of Judge Abner Lewis on Saturday was evidence to the watching family and friends that life was nearly over. He lingered until Sunday morning, passing away very quietly and peacefully a little before

Twenty-ninth Congress (March 4, 1845-March 3, 1847); county judge 1847-1852.

³ For a study of this pivotal year, see Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁴ The *Republican's* obituary was reprinted verbatim by the *Winona Herald*, October 17, 1879, at 2.

ten o'clock. For several months past he had been in feeble health, but it was only within the last three weeks that his disease assumed the form of a serious brain difficulty, which finally terminated his life at the age of seventy-eight years.

Judge Lewis born in Rutland county, Vermont, August 7, 1801. He removed to Chautauqua county, New York, when a boy, went to school there and studied law with Abner Hazelton, in Jamestown. After being admitted to practice Judge Lewis occupied a high position as attorney and counselor. He was elected a member of the Legislature of that State for several terms, and in 1844 was elected to Congress. At the expiration of his term he was elected Judge of Chautauqua County Court in which office he served eight years. He became a communicant in the Methodist church in 1855. He removed to Winona in 1856 and was identified with the growth of this city from its early days. When he first came here he became a partner in the law firm of Lewis, Bierce & Bemis, which continued for about two years, when he entered the partnership of Lewis & Simpson, remaining in the active duties of the office until 1867, when he received the appointment of United States Assessor of Internal Revenue, which office he held for several years. Few words are needed to eulogize the deceased. His honest, upright life leaves a memory that speaks a eulogy in itself. A man of fine attainments, a gentleman of kind heart and genial manners, modest and unostentatious, he was universally beloved, and although he had passed the allotted period of man's existence he will be sincerely mourned. His wife and four children survive him. His brother, Rev. Almon Lewis, of Broadhead, Wisconsin, was here two weeks ago and paid him a farewell visit. The funeral was largely attended this afternoon from the Methodist church, Rev. Dr. Crook officiating.

In his chapter on the bench and bar of Winona County published in

1913, Arthur H. Snow, who knew Abner Lewis in the 1870s, wrote nothing about his accomplishments as a lawyer, taking note instead of the obituary in the *Republican* thirty-four years earlier:

Abner Lewis, born in Rutland county, Vermont, in 1801, came to Winona from Chautauqua county, New York, where he had spent most of his previous life, from where he had been elected to Congress in 1844, and in which he served many years as county judge. He died in Winona in October, 1879, at the ripe age of seventy-eight. The writer of his obituary notice truly said of him:—"His honest, upright life left a memory that speaks a eulogy in itself. A man of fine attainments, a gentleman of kind heart and genial manners, modest and unostentatious, he was universally beloved."⁵

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⁵ Arthur H. Snow, "Bench and Bar" in Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge & William Jay Whipple eds., I *The History of Winona County, Minnesota* 260, 271 (Chicago: H. C. Cooper Jr. & Co., 1913). There is no entry on Abner Lewis in Warren Upham and Rose Barteau Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1912).