

MEMOIR OF JUDGE ANDREW G. CHATFIELD

BY

JOHN FLETCHER WILLIAMS

FOREWARD

BY

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J. Fletcher Williams arrived in Minnesota in 1855 and died there forty years later. He was a journalist by trade and a historian by avocation. In 1876, he published *A History of the City of Saint. Paul, and of the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*, an idiosyncratic chronicle of those jurisdictions to the year 1875. In her Introduction to a reissue of the book in 1983, Lucile M. Kane described it as follows:

It is a book from which authors narrating the city's early years still draw information found in no other source, but it is also an antiquarian chronicle, assembled with reverence for first things, a predilection for oddities, and an affinity for minutiae that is often without relevance to modern readers. To those who study Williams through his works, the book has still another dimension. It is a history, or chronicle, that to an unusual degree mirrors the man—with all his learning, passion for patient investigation,

interest in people, exuberance, dramatic sense, humor, and affection for his adopted city.¹

Williams's *History* is an accumulation of brief descriptions of events occurring yearly from the 1830s to 1875. Each chapter usually covers one year and, up close, the book resembles a diary of a news hound. Williams listed the deaths of prominent citizens in a section he called "Necrology"; he noted election results and the names of office holders; he devoted a section of most chapters to homicides and crimes under headlines such as "Wife Murder," "Brutal Murder of Two Men" or "The Supposed Murder of Dr. Henry Harcourt"; and he had a penchant for gossip and minutiae which fell under such headings as "Minor Topics," "Other Items" or "Brief Mention."

Although he was acquainted with members of the territorial bar and bench, Williams had little interest in the operation of the court system. In chapters in his *History* about the 1840s, he profiled several prominent lawyers, including William D. Phillips, Bushrod W. Lott, David Lambert, Alex. M. Mitchell, and Henry L. Moss, but only one judge, Chief Justice Aaron Goodrich. In these portraits, Williams sometimes excluded embarrassing information. For example, rather than admit that Goodrich was dismissed by President Fillmore, Williams wrote, "His term on the Supreme Bench closed in the fall of 1851, when he resumed the practice of law."² But, in others, he held nothing back, as in this description of David Lambert, a prominent lawyer:

Some domestic unpleasantness, at times, rendered him misanthropic and reckless, and, to forget care, he resorted to the bowl. On November 2d, 1849, while returning from Galena, on a steamboat, he leaped from the roof of the

¹ Lucile M. Kane, "Introduction" to J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1983). The book was first published in 1876 under the longer title given in the text.

² *Id.* at 219.

steamer, during a paroxysm of nervous excitement, and was drowned. He was only thirty years of age.³

Williams subsequently wrote “memoirs” of three other men who served on the territorial supreme court: Associate Justices David Cooper, Bradley B. Meeker and Andrew G. Chatfield. Curiously, he rarely mentioned these men in his *History*.⁴

Williams handwrote his “memoirs” of Cooper and Meeker in ink on three and a half pages of legal-size paper. He probably wrote them in the late 1870s because he notes the death of each subject.⁵ These memoirs are filed with Williams’s paper at the Minnesota Historical Society and are posted separately on the MLHP.

Williams also wrote the following profile of Andrew Chatfield, but it is not among his papers at the Historical Society. At some point, it came into the possession of the Chatfield family and one member, Frank Chatfield, provided a copy to *The Chatfield News*, which published it on Thursday, March 13, 1947, under the headline “Chatfield Named in Honor of Famous Judge.” Although longer than Williams’s memoirs of Cooper and Meeker, this profile is written in the same style and tone and, for that reason, it is posted on the MLHP as Williams’s “Memoir of Andrew G. Chatfield.”

In 1886, Thomas M. Newson self-published *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota*: His sketch of Chatfield is an abbreviated version of Williams’s memoir:

A. G. CHATFIELD.

Judge Chatfield, a name by which he was best known, was born in Butternuts, Otsego County, New York, June 27,

³ Id. at 197.

⁴ According to the Index prepared by Lucile M. Kane for her edition of the *History*, Cooper is mentioned only six times, Meeker three times, and Chatfield once.

⁵ The original manuscripts can be found in Box 2, Folder 4, of the “John Fletcher Williams Papers” at the Minnesota Historical Society.

1810; studied law in New York; was admitted to the bar in 1837, was a member of the New York Legislature in 1839, 1840, 1841, and 1846; removed to Wisconsin in 1848, and came to St. Paul in the year 1853, as Associate Justice of the Territory. He was a straight, splendidly-built man, with a florid complexion and an elegant address; very genial in his manners; indeed one might say he was “a fine American gentleman all of the olden time.” He was a judge of the finest purity of character, very careful, and very honest, and very sincere, and very conscientious in his convictions of right. He removed to Belle Plaine many years ago, where his duties called him, and there he died universally mourned by the whole bar of the State.⁶

The following newspaper story is complete, though reformatted. Spelling and punctuation have not been changed. A photo of Judge Chatfield that accompanied the article has been omitted.

It may be read together with “Judge Chatfield’s First Court Session in Winona County,” an article posted separately on the MLHP, in which Chatfield’s obituary in the October 9, 1875, issue of the *Chatfield Democrat* is reprinted.

⁶ Thomas McLean Newson, *I Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers: From the Earliest Settlement of the City, Up to and Including the Year 1857* 386 (St. Paul: 1886), reprinted by BiblioLife in 2009.

The Chatfield News

CHATFIELD, MINNESOTA

THURSDAY, MAY 13, 1947

Chatfield Named in Honor of Famous Judge

EDITOR'S NOTE — Have you ever wondered how Chatfield got its name? As some of you may know, it was named in honor of Judge Andrew Gould Chatfield. The following fascinating account of his life was written by a Mr. Williams of the Minnesota Historical society and came to this paper from Frank Chatfield, a violin maker at Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, who is a descendant of the Chatfield family.

Andrew Gould Chatfield was born in "Butternuts" Ostego county New York on January 27th, 1810. His parents were natives of Connecticut. His maternal grandfather, Jonathan Starr, was a soldier in the Revolutionary war and was taken prisoner by the British while defending his native town, Danbury, which was burned at that time. His maternal grandmother was of the Ruggles family, whose descendants number some of the most distinguished jurists and public men in New York.

Mr. Chatfield's father, Enos Chatfield, removed from Connecticut to New York, while a young man. He was a farmer and a plasterer by occupation and after accumulating some property, unfortunately, lost it by a defective title, so that he was able to give his children, four in number, but little aid in obtaining an education. The two younger brothers, Andrew G. and Levi S., pursued their studies mostly at home, working in the day times and studying at night, often with no more light than that afforded by pine knots, which they gathered for that purpose.

After acquiring the rudiments of an education in this manner, Andrew

managed by teaching part of the time to accomplish a course of study at Hamilton Academy, and thus prepared himself for the study of law, which he resolved to do. At the age of twenty-one, he removed to Steuben county, New York, and commenced reading law in the office of Henry T. Cotton, at Painted Post, New York. In those days the rules of the court in New York, regarding the admission to the bar, were very stringent, three years of study were necessary to entitle them to practice in the County Courts, and seven to gain admission to the Supreme Court. In 1833, Mr. Chatfield was admitted to the County Court, and removed to Addison, Steuben county, where he founded a law partnership with James Birdwell Esq., and soon secured a good practice.

On June 27th, 1836, Mr. Chatfield was married to Eunice Beeman of Addison, New York. In November 1836 he was elected a member of the New York Assembly, from Steuben county, and as a singular coincidence, it may be mentioned that his brother, Levi S. Chatfield, a lawyer of Otsago county, was elected a member of the same house from that county.

The Whigs having carried the state that year, Mr. Chatfield's party, the Democratic, was a minority in the house. He nevertheless took a prominent part in the legislation of that year, and was soon regarded as one of the leaders of the party in the house. For three years in succession Mr. Chatfield (and his brother) were elected members of the Assembly from their respective counties. In 1841, he was appointed chairman of a committee to investigate the affairs of the Erie railroad company, that corporation having borrowed of the state \$3,000,000 in aid of the building of the road.

At the completion of his duties on that committee, Mr. Chatfield returned to the practice of his profession, and in some measure escaped anymore summons to public life, until 1845, when he was again elected to the Assembly really against his wishes. This session (1846) was a very important one. The anti-rent troubles were at their height, and a committee was appointed, of which the governor of New

York, Samuel J. Tilden was chairman and Mr. Chatfield a member, to arrange some plan for the relief of both landlord and tenant. The report of the committee was regarded as an able one, and forms an important part of the history of the anti-rent troubles. During the session, the Speaker, Col. Wm. C. Crain, having obtained leave of absence for several weeks, Mr. Chatfield was chosen to fill the vacancy. He was also chairman of the Judiciary committee during the session. At its close he was appointed one of the committee to investigate the frauds allegedly to have been perpetrated in the enlargement of the Erie Canal, and the repairs of all the canals in the state. The duties of the committee were arduous and protracted, occupying a year, indeed, with very inadequate compensation to the members for such labor. He was also a member of the New York constitution convention of 1846, one of the ablest bodies ever assembled in that state.

Such is a brief sketch of Judge Chatfield's public life in New York. At the period to which we refer, perhaps no young man in political life in that state stood higher in the esteem and confidence of the public as a man of probity and talent. Yet while the repeated evidence of this respect in the election and appointment to responsible and delicate trusts was gratifying to him, and brought him into contact with people, enlarging his experience and information regarding public affairs, nevertheless he came to the conclusion it was the worst possible pursuit for a young man of limited means who was obliged to rely on his profession for a living for his family and a competence for old age.

At the end of ten years hard labor he was little better off than when he commenced life. Yet he could not altogether ignore the claim of party on him, although he endeavored to do so. So the only course that seemed open to him was to make a home for himself in a new state. Accordingly, in July 1848, he removed with his family to Southport (now Kenosha) Wisconsin. Here he entered into partnership with Volney French, Esq. and soon built up a prosperous business. In 1850 he was elected county judge of Racine, but resigned after holding office a short time.

In 1853, a circumstance occurred that led him to his removal to Minnesota. Being in attendance on the Supreme Court of the United States, in Washington, D. C. he formed the acquaintance of Hon. Henry H. Sibley, then delegate from Minnesota, he became much interested in the advantages and prospects of Minnesota, which were so much praised by Mr. Sibley, and expressed a wish to remove hither. As the federal offices in this territory were just at this time being distributed, this led the way to the appointment by President Pierce, of Judge Chatfield, as associate Judge of the Supreme Court, on the recommendation of Mr. Sibley. His commission was dated April 7th and in June of that year he removed to Minnesota and began the active duties of his office.

Judge Chatfield's district was very large. He held the first court in nearly every county organized west of the Mississippi River, namely Winona, Scott, Carver, Sibley, LeSueur, Nicollet, Blue Earth, Rice and Steele. He made his first journey through the Minnesota Valley on horseback following an Indian Trail, part of the way. Being particularly struck with the beautiful prairie lying on Robert's creek, adjoining the "Big Woods," he resolved to make this spot his home. He consequently made a claim there in the spring of 1854 and when the township was surveyed he called it Belle Plaine as illustrative of its natural beauties.

He soon after laid out the town of that name and in conjunction with William Smith and Major Robert H. Rose, commenced improvements. Their enterprise seemed in a fair way to be successful, when the terrible speculation mania of 1857 swept over Minnesota. The rapid rise in the value of property at that time induced them to form a stock company, lay out their land, about a section, in lots, and make extensive improvements. The latter somewhat put an end to the sale of lots on which they had relied to meet indebtedness, and the company was compelled to make an assignment. The result was, that Judge Chatfield found all his property and means swept away. His term as associate justice having closed, he again resumed the practice of his profession, about as poor as when he recommenced it, nearly a century previous.

During his term in Minnesota, he had become widely acquainted with the people of the territory, and was much respected by them, as an upright citizen, a learned jurist and a gentlemen of high honor and cultivated mind. One instance of his popularity was the naming, as a compliment to him, of the flourishing town of “Chatfield,” in Fillmore County. As the years rolled by, it brought him increasing honor from a widening circle of friends.

In the fall of 1870, Judge Chatfield was elected Judge of the eighth judicial district, and in January following entered on his duties. In February 1873, he sat on the bench of Ramsey county for several weeks, hearing some railroad cases. At that time he showed every indication of mental and physical vigor. His eye was clear, his memory acute, his perception quick and every movement showed his nerve and force unabated. His friends hoped he might enjoy many years of hale old age. But soon after his health failed rapidly, causing grounds for apprehension. In the spring of the year he visited Hot Spring, Arkansas, but he experienced no relief and declined constantly until his death. He left a wife and a married daughter, Mrs. Robert A. Irwin. His death occurred on October 3rd, 1875 and he was buried in the Episcopal cemetery at Belle Plaine, Minnesota. ■



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