

In Memoriam

Alexander G. McKnight

May 4, 1878 – June 18, 1950



**Referee in Bankruptcy
Fifth Division
District of Minnesota
1928-1933**

Born in Scotland in 1878, Alexander Galt McKnight came to the United States in 1893, settling in Pipestone. He never forgot the land of his birth and became an expert on Robert Burns and Scottish history. Like many lawyers, he taught school before beginning an apprenticeship at a local lawyer's office. Later he attended the University of Michigan Law School. He was admitted to the Minnesota bar on October 5, 1904, and moved to Duluth the next year.¹ He became the partner of G. W. C. Ross.

He was active in Republican politics and in 1907 decided to run in the party's primary for an open seat on the city council.² In the primary election on December 19, 1907, the *Duluth Herald* reported, "McKnight simply swept through the First ward like wildfire, winning by the vote of 410 to 73 [for Dr. Konkler]."³ In the general election

¹ October 5, 1904, 1 *Roll of Attorneys: Supreme Court, State of Minnesota, 1858-1970* 74 (State Law Library, Digital Library).

² *Duluth Evening Herald*, November 24, 1907, at 2:

Attorney A. G. McKnight of Lakeside filed today for the Republican nomination from the First ward, to fill the vacancy caused by the expiration of the term of Alderman Wilson. Mr. McKnight is a loyal Republican and has made many friends his three years' residence in this city. He is of Scotch ancestry and a member of Clan Stewart of this city. His friends feel confident that he will make a valuable member of the council if elected, and are promising him support which should result in his election. ...

Mr. McKnight had not given the subject any serious consideration previously to the call of the delegation, but upon their urging him to become a candidate, he finally consented and as stated, filed today. "I was somewhat surprised and very much disappointed that Alderman Wilson decided not to become a candidate and much more surprised at the call from my friends at Lakeside for me to make the run," he remarked to a Herald reporter today. "I certainly consider it a great compliment and shall try to prove worthy of their confidence if elected."

³ *Duluth Evening Herald*, December 19, 1907, at 16.

McKnight later left the Republican party and became a Democrat. In 1936 he was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia.

on February 5, 1908, he was elected and served one term.⁴ His work as an alderman was the subject of frequent articles in the *Herald*.

Meanwhile the firm of Ross & McKnight was busy.⁵ It was appointed to defend William Schreiber, who was charged with first degree murder, in a sensational trial. Schreiber was found guilty on December 11, 1908, and a motion for a new trial promptly filed by his attorneys. A year later, District Court Judge Homer Dibell denied the motion and sentenced Schreiber to imprisonment for life,⁶ a ruling affirmed by the Minnesota Supreme Court in 1910.⁷

In 1914 he ran for the state senate in District 57.⁸ He ran without party designation as the previous year the 38th Legislature adopted a law requiring nonpartisan ballots and elections.⁹ He lost, receiving about 40% of the votes in the election on November 3, 1914:

⁴ *Duluth Evening Herald*, February 6, 1908, at 10 (oddly the results of his contest were not given).

⁵ In 1907 he placed the following in *Little Sketches of Big Folks in Minnesota*:

McKnight Alexander Galt, Duluth. Res 822 E 3d, office 412-413 First Nat Bank bldg. Lawyer. Born May 4, 1878 in Ayrshire Scotland, son of Charles and Marion (McCreath) McKnight. Married Aug 30, 1902 to Grace May Wilson. Attended the public and high schools in Scotland; graduated from Pipestone High School 1897; attended U of M 1897-98; Univ of Chicago 1898-99 and Univ of Mich law dept 1904. Taught school in Pipestone Minn 1899; began the study of law with E E Roddis of Pipestone Minn 1900 and conducted a branch office for him in Jasper Minn until 1904. Admitted to the bar same year and moved to Duluth 1905 and formed a partnership with G W C Ross under the firm name of Ross & McKnight lawyers. Member Masonic fraternity, Order of Scottish Clans and Modern Samaritans.

⁶ *Duluth Evening Herald*, December 6, 1909, at 1.

⁷ *State v. William Schreiber*, 111 Minn. 138, 126 N.W. 536 (1910).

⁸ The Fifty-Seventh District included the First and Second Wards of the City of Duluth and all of the territory in St. Louis County east of the Range Line between Ranges 13 and 14, west; and south of the township line between townships 56 and 57 North, and the Counties of Lake and Cook.

⁹ 1913 Laws, c. 389, at 542-550 (approved April 19, 1913). For an account of the background of the law and the twists and turns in the legislature, see Charles R. Adrian, "The Origin of Minnesota's Nonpartisan Legislature," 33 *Minnesota History* 155-163 (Winter 1952).

Counties	Cook	Lake	St. Louis	Total
Alex G. McKnight.....	133	520	307	1,969
Charles E. Adams.....	168	451	2,387	3,006 ¹⁰

He continued practicing law in Duluth, growing his practice and reputation. He was a fervent supporter of Woodrow Wilson. In 1924 the *Duluth Herald* published his essay “Wilson, The Covenanter.” ¹¹ He was a member of the Duluth Charter Commission from 1922 to 1928 when he was appointed Referee in Bankruptcy. This was a part-time post and he continued private practice¹² He served for over five years, resigning in July 1933, as reported in the *Journal of the National Association of Referees in Bankruptcy*. ¹³



ALEX G. Mc KNIGHT
Duluth, Minnesota

His resignation as a Referee in Bankruptcy by Alexander G. McKnight, Duluth, was effective July 31st, after a relatively brief service in that office. He was appointed in 1928 by the late U. S. District Judge William A. Cant. Mr. McKnight was born in Scotland, May 4, 1878, but was educated in the University of Minnesota, Chicago and Michigan and was admitted to practice in 1894 (sic). He is an active Mason and a member of the Scottish Clans, Modern Samaritans, Royal Arcanum, the A.O.U.W. and other organizations, serving in the

¹⁰ 1915 Blue Book, at 549.

¹¹ *Duluth Herald*, February 7, 1924. It is posted in the Appendix, at 9-12.

¹² Under the Bankruptcy Act of 1898 referees were considered “government officials” but not employees, and their compensation depended on the size of the assets recovered in the case. The money collected from the estate went into the Referees Salary and Expense Fund. So, really, the fees were paid by the creditors because it reduced what they received.

¹³ 8 *Journal of the National Association of Referees in Bankruptcy* 65 (October 1933).

Masonic Grand Lodge and as state president, Modern Samaritans, 1906–1927. He has been an alder-man in Duluth and a member of its Charter Commission. He is a member of his State Bar Association and served one year as director of this organization. He addressed the Chicago, 1930, conference on “A Federal Bankruptcy Commissioner,” published in the October, 1930, *Journal*, and the Atlantic, City, 1931, conference, on “Extending the Power and Authority of Referees,” published in the October, 1931, issue.

His successor is William A. Watts, who joined this organization promptly. Referee Watts is a son of state District Judge William Watts, Clarkston, who has served in his present judicial capacity since 1898. Mr. Watts was admitted to practice in 1909, and is a graduate of the University of Minnesota.

He resigned to accept appointment as Director of Litigation for the National Recovery Administration. This required him to move to Washington, D. C. In 1935 he was promoted to be Special Assistant General Counsel but that year the United States Supreme Court declared the N.R.A. unconstitutional.¹⁴

He returned to Duluth, resumed practice and again became active in community affairs. He was a founder, director and attorney for the St. Louis County Federal Savings and Loan Association, and a director of the Samarian Life Insurance Company. He was also a Director of the Board of Trustees of Miller Memorial Hospital, 1937 – 1943; a Director of the Community Chest; secretary of the YMCA in France during World War I, and a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1936. During these decades his interest in Scottish history and traditions never flagged: he was honorary president of the Robert Burns Club, World Federation in 1936;

¹⁴ *A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States*, 295 U.S. 495 (1935),

National Royal Chief of the Order of Scottish Clans, Chief of Clan Stewart, Duluth, and a member of Scottish Rite bodies. Besides being a contributor to the works of Robert Burns, he became an authority on the life of Abraham Lincoln.¹⁵ In 1939 he became Chief of the Order of Scottish Clans, as reported by the *Duluth Herald*.¹⁶

A. G. McKnight Is Scotts' Chief

Alexander G. McKnight, one of the world's best-known authorities on Robert Burns and a Scotsman who is known throughout the country for his knowledge of Scotland and its history, yesterday was elected by unanimous vote, to the post of royal chief of the Order of Scottish Clans.

The Duluthian is attending the annual convention of the clan in New York city. Saturday he will deliver the principal address at the annual meeting of the Robert Burns Association of America at a festival to be held in Central park.

Mr. McKnight has been royal tanist, the second highest office of the international order, for about 10 years, and prior to that was the royal counselor for several years. He is a second Duluthian to serve as chief of the Scots, the late Simon Clark having held that post in the early 1890s.

The newly-elected royal chief becomes the leading Scotsman in the country as a result of his election. An authority on Burns, he has spoken in many sections of the country on the poetry of the Ayrshire bard.

His election yesterday marked the second time he has been head of a fraternal order. He served as president of

¹⁵ These memberships and offices are listed in an article on the date of McKnight's funeral in *the Duluth Herald*, June 19, 1950. Additional biographical information can be found in his entry in the 1937 edition of *Who's Who in Law*, posted in the Appendix, at 12.

¹⁶ *Duluth Herald*, June 23, 1939.

the Samaritan Life association from 1925 to 1926 and now is a member of the Samaritans' supreme council.

Besides being active in fraternal affairs, Mr. McKnight has been a leader in civic activities for many years. He is a member of the city board of trusts, the board which operates the Miller Memorial hospital.

Last spring, when an effort was made to change the form of government to the council-manager plan, he led the fight against the charter change and was given principal credit for defeating the plan.

When the NRA went into effect he went to Washington to serve as chief of the litigation department, as an assistant to Donald Richberg, NRA chief.

For a time he served as United States referee in bankruptcy in the Duluth district.

A past chief of Clan Stewart here, he is largely responsible for organizing the 50th anniversary celebration of the Clan last year.

Donald Fraser, a past chief of Clan Stewart, is in New York with him attending the convention.

He died on June 18, 1950. The *Duluth News Tribune* carried his obituary:¹⁷

**A. G. McKnight, 72,
Civic Leader, Dies**

Alexander Gault McKnight, noted Duluth community leader, attorney and authority on Scottish poet Robert Burns, died yesterday in his home here.

Mr. McKnight, 72, of 431 North Seventeenth avenue east, was born in Corwar, Ayrshire, Scotland, May 4, 1878. He came to the United States in 1893. He attended schools of

¹⁷ *Duluth News Tribune*, June 19, 1950.

Luverne and Pipestone counties, Minn., and later the Universities of Minnesota, Chicago and Michigan.

McKnight was admitted to the Minnesota bar in 1904. He was referee in bankruptcy for the fifth division, Minnesota district, and from 1928 to 1933, and was director of litigation for an NRA in Washington in 1934.

He was attorney and director of the St. Louis County Federal Savings and Loan association and was one of its founders. He was a city alderman, 1908–1910, and a member of the city charter commission, 1922–28.

LED ACTIVE LIFE

McKnight also was a director of the board of trustees of Miller Memorial Hospital, 1937–43; a director of the Community Chest; secretary of the YMCA in France during World War I; a delegate to the Democratic national convention in 1936; was elected honorary president of the Robert Burns club, World federation, in 1936; a member of the Minnesota State and 11th District Bar associations; a past national royal chief of the Order of Scottish Clans; a past chief of Clan Stewart, Duluth; a director of the Samaritan Life association; a member of the Lakeside Masonic Lodge, and Scottish Rite bodies.

EXPERT ON LINCOLN

McKnight was a contributor to the works of Robert Burns, his poetic idol, their birthplace being only 30 miles apart. He was also an authority on the life of Abraham Lincoln. He was listed in the *Who's Who in America* for number of years.

Surviving are his widow, Grace, three sons, Malcolm and Paul, both of Duluth, and Kenneth, Lynwood, California; one daughter, Mrs. Glenn Weld, Duluth; nine grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.¹⁸

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Appendix

The following tribute to former President Wilson, who died February 3, 1924, was first published in the *Duluth Herald* on February 7, 1924, and republished in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on February 23, 1924.

Wilson, The Covenanter

by

A. G. McKnight,
Duluth, Minn.

* * *

Woodrow Wilson said in a speech at Kansas City: "The blood of the Scottish Covenanters flows in my veins. I am for the Covenant".

It was Woodrow Wilson who first used the word "Covenant" as descriptive of the written instrument which brought the League of Nations into being.

It is a far cry from the lonely Scottish Covenanter lassie being drowned at the stake by the incoming tide in

¹⁸ *Duluth Herald*, June 19, 1950.

Wigtown bay in the south of Scotland on May 11, 1685, to the mighty defender of the Covenant of the League being mortally wounded in his struggle with a provincial and partisan Senate in the United States in 1919, but the spirit which animated these two covenanters was very similar, and as the name of Margaret Wilson has been honored by Scotland in the centuries that have passed, because of her devotion to her principles even unto death, so shall the name of Woodrow Wilson be honored by all the nations of the earth for his steadfastness until time itself shall wax old as does a garment and the heavens be rolled together as a scroll.

Margaret Wilson, a young girl of 18, lived in Glenvernoch, not ten miles south of my own boyhood home in Scotland, had joined the Covenanters, refused to take the oath of abjuration, and was sentenced “to be tied to stakes fixed within the floodmark, in the water of Blednoch near Wigtown, where the sea flows at high water, there to be drowned”. Sentenced with her was a an old woman, Margaret McLachlin, and in order to terrify the younger woman so she would comply with such oaths and conditions as the king’s representative might require, the executioners placed her stake nearer the tide so that she could witness the other’s death.

After the death of the older woman, Margaret’s friends and her executioners alike urged her to abjure the Covenant and say “God save the king”. But Margaret was steadfast and refused to abjure, and to the latter suggestion she replied: “I wish the salvation of all men and the damnation of none”, and then, as the ancient record says, “she was thrust into the water, where she finished her course with joy”.

Now, of course, Margaret might not have been so obstinate and thus have saved her life. Her executioners had become mild reservationists and were willing to compromise with her, but she felt that to say “God save the king” under these circumstances might be construed to recognize him as the head of the church rather than her Lord, Christ, and as this was the to her “the heart of the Covenant”, she refused to weaken and went to a Martyr’s death.

Had she recanted she would probably have lived an ordinary life and gone to her grave as millions of other Scottish women have gone, “unhonored and unsung”, but, having stood fast in the evil day, she is held in the warm remembrance by every loyal son and daughter of Auld Scotia and has been one of the inspirers of that devotion to Scotland, for which Scotsmen and Scotswomen are famous.

Robert Burns knew the value of such self-sacrificing devotion to the cause of freedom, for he said:

“The Solomon League and Covenant
Cost Scotland blood, cost Scotland tears
But it sealed Freedom’s sacred cause
If thou’rt a knave, indulge thy sneers.”

Woodrow Wilson also refused to compromise with the reservationists. To him “the heart of the Covenant” was sacred, and while to many it seemed he could have yielded a little and thus gained some temporary advantage and transient glory for himself, that day is not far distant when his steadfastness and devotion, his obstinate fidelity to the great principle for which he stood, will be the chief inspiration of the lovers of peace everywhere

and will draw all men towards the ideals for which he gave his life.

All honor to the Scottish Covenanter of the twentieth century!

May his martyrdom seal the sacred cause of peace, despite the sneers of provincialists and isolationists.

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The following is his biographical sketch in the 1937 edition of *Who's Who in Law*.¹⁹

McKNIGHT, ALEXANDER GALT:

Lawyer; b. May 4, 1878, Corwar, Ayrshire, Scotland, s. Charles and Marion (McCreath) McKnight; came to U.S. 1893; ed.: U. of Minnesota, 1898; U. of Chicago, 1899; U. of Michigan Law Sch., 1904; m. Grace May Wilson, Aug. 30, 1902. Admitted to practice, Supm. Ct. of Minn. 1904. Referee in Bankruptcy, 5th Div., Dist. of Minn. 1928-33. Dir. litigation N.R.A. 1934, Spec. Asst. Gen. Counsel, 1935. Atty. and Dir. St. Louis Co. Bldg. and Loan Assn., since 1922. Alderman, City of Duluth, 1908-10. Mem. Charter Comn. Duluth, 1922-28. Dir. Bd. of Trusts, Duluth, 1933-35. Mem. 11th Dist., Minn. State and Amer. Bar Assns. Mem. Masons (Grand Orator, Grand Lodge, Minn. 1912). Del. to Dem. Conv. 1936. Y.M.C.A. Sec. in France, with A.E.F., 1918-19. Contr. of articles to Law Week and The Commercial Law Jour. on N.R.A. Office: Providence Bldg., Duluth, Minn.

¹⁹ J. S. Schwarz, ed., 1 *Who's Who In Law* 625 (1937).

Credit

The photograph of Alexander McKnight on the first page is from *Men of Minnesota* (1915).

Acknowledgment

For newspaper clippings about Alexander McKnight and his tribute to Woodrow Wilson, I am indebted to Stacy LaVres, Librarian 1—Reference and Interlibrary Loan, at the Duluth Public Library.

Related Articles

This portrait of Alexander McKnight is another in a series of biographical sketches of Bankruptcy Referees and Judges who served in Minnesota that are posted on this website.

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