

EUGENE M. WILSON

(1833 - 1890)

ARTICLES

I. Arthur J. Snow, "Eugene M. Wilson" in Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge ed., *I History of Winona County, Minnesota* 269 (Chicago: H. C. Cooper, Jr. & Co., 1913) (Wilson's profile appeared in a section on "Territorial Lawyers" in a chapter on the history of the county bench and bar).

II. Isaac Atwater, "Honorable Eugene Wilson," 8 *Magazine of Western History* 369-372 (August, 1888)(the engraving of Wilson came before page 369 in the original publication).

III. Frank J. Mead, "Eugene M. Wilson" in Isaac Atwater ed., *I History of the City of Minneapolis, Minnesota* 456-460 (New York: Munsell & Co., Pub., 1893) (Wilson was profiled in a chapter on the history of the bench and bar of Minneapolis)(an engraving of Wilson is omitted).

IV. *II Proceedings and Report of the Annual Meetings of the Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, May 11, 1899 and 1900* 163-64 (St. Paul: The Pioneer Press Company, 1901)(an engraving of Wilson is omitted).

V. "Eugene McLanahan Wilson" in Warren Upham & Rose Barteau Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies: 1655-1912* 866 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1912)(Vol. 14, Minnesota Historical Society Collections).

VI. "Wilson, Eugene McLanahan" from *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* website.

I

(Excerpt from the chapter “Bench and Bar of Winona County” by Arthur J. Snow in the first volume of *History of Winona County, Minnesota*, edited by Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge and published in 1916)

Eugene M. Wilson came to Winona from Virginia just before the land sale in the fall of 1855, and during the year 1857 was the senior member of the law firm of Wilson & Mitchell. In 1858, he removed to Minneapolis, of which he became one of the most prominent citizens. His professional and political career is widely known.

II

(Isaac Atwater, “Honorable Eugene Wilson,” in the August, 1888, issue of *Magazine of Western History*)

EUGENE M. WILSON was born in Morgantown, Monongalia county, Virginia, December 25, 1833. Both his father’s and mother’s ancestry were Scotch-Irish, the former being among the first settlers of Augusta and Rock-bridge counties in Virginia, and the latter the first settlers of Fayette county, Pennsylvania.



Magazine of Western History

Eugene M. Wilson

For several generations the family has been prominent in public affairs in Virginia. His father, Edgar C. Wilson, was a representative in congress from Virginia from 1833 to 1835. His grandfather, Thomas Wilson, was a representative from Virginia from 1833 to 1813. Soon after the organization of the government his great grandfather, on his mother's side, William Griffin, represented in congress a district comprising the western part of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Wilson was educated at Jefferson college and took high rank in his class, not less as a student than speaker and writer. He graduated at the early age of eighteen. He immediately commenced the study of law in his father's office, and was admitted to practice at the age of twenty-one.

At that time Minnesota offered strong attractions to a young and ambitious professional man who relied on his own efforts to achieve fame and fortune. The territory received many of this class from Maryland and some from Virginia, among whom was Mr. Wilson. He came to the territory in the spring of 1856, and located and opened an office in Winona. He formed a partnership for the practice of law with William Mitchell, now associate justice of the supreme court of Minnesota. The firm name was Wilson & Mitchell. Among his associates and friends, who settled in Winona about the same time, were Honorable William Windom and Daniel Norton, both afterwards United States senators; Honorable Thomas Wilson, afterwards chief-justice of the state and now member of congress; Honorable Charles Berry, first attorney-general of the state, and many other young men who have since obtained prominence in the history of the state.

The ability of Mr. Wilson soon became widely known and he rapidly succeeded in building up a large practice. In 1857 he was appointed United States district attorney for Minnesota by President Buchanan, the duties of which office he most acceptably discharged for four years. After his appointment he found that the business connected with the office required a residence at the capital, or some place nearer than Winona. Having strong faith in the future of Minneapolis, then but a small village, he determined to make that his future home, and removed there in the fall of 1857.

In 1861 he formed a legal partnership with the Honorable W. W. McNair, who [370] afterwards married Mr. Wilson's sister. The name of the firm was Wilson & McNair. This firm continued in business until 1869, when Mr. Wilson was elected to congress, and his place was taken by the Honorable William Lochren, now, and for several years past, judge of the district court of Hennepin county. The firm was always recognized as a strong and leading one, and enjoyed a large and profitable practice.

In 1862 Mr. Wilson enlisted and served as captain of the First Minnesota cavalry. His line of operations was principally in the Indian country, fighting the Sioux, which afforded little field for distinction. He performed his duties faithfully, and when the Indians were subdued and at the close of his term, returned with credit to the practice of his profession.

In 1868 Mr. Wilson was elected a representative on the Democratic ticket to the Forty-first congress from the Third congressional district. The district was strongly Republican, but there were two Republican candidates running—Ignatius Donnelly and C. C. Andrews. Mr. Wilson received 13,506 votes, Donnelly 11,229, and Andrews 8,595.

Mr. Wilson took a more active and prominent part, on many questions pertaining to the interests of the state, than is usual for a member during his first term. Uniting to a high order of natural ability, untiring industry, with genial and popular manners and a long acquaintance among southern members, he was more successful in carrying his measures than usually falls to the lot of new members.

Mr. Wilson served on two of the most important committees in congress (so far as the state of Minnesota was concerned), viz., on that of the Pacific railroad and public lands. He was largely instrumental in the passage of the Northern Pacific Railroad bill. The passage of this bill was vital to the interests of the state, and Mr. Wilson labored strenuously in its aid and had the satisfaction to see his efforts crowned with success. He was also largely instrumental in securing the passage of a bill granting lands to the state in aid of the State university, and other measures, while of not so much National interest, were of great importance to his constituents and the state at large.

But Mr. Wilson is a man of too broad views to confine his mind to the interests of his own state solely, while acting as a representative not only for his district but the Nation at large. Accordingly, in his first speech in the house, April 2, 1869, he was successful in securing the passage of a joint

resolution granting the right of way for the construction of a railroad from a point at or near Portland, Oregon, to a point west of the Cascade mountains in Washington territory. Moreover, even at that early day, he perceived the evils of the system of government policy towards the Indians, and in substance outlined a policy in regard to our treatment of the Indian tribes which subsequent experience has demonstrated to be the only wise and humane one—of allotting to [371] the Indians their individual lands. On several other important measures of national concern, as the Tariff bill, Georgia Reconstruction bill, the M'Garrahan case and other measures of general interest, he made able speeches which demonstrated that only time and experience were needed to make him one of the leaders of the house.

Mr. Wilson also took a deep interest all measures tending to foster and develop the agricultural interests of the state and Nation. He urged liberal appropriations for the promotion of this industry, and his efforts in this behalf were successful and highly appreciated by his constituents.

Every passing year serves to emphasize wisdom of these views, and of his action in congress in urging more liberal appropriations in behalf of the greatest and most important industry of the Nation. Representing, as he did, the largest manufacturing and least agricultural district of the state, his views were broad enough to embrace not only the interests of the whole state but of the country at large, and his best efforts given to promote them, and with gratifying success.

At the close of his term Mr. Wilson returned to Minneapolis to engage in his profession, poorer than when he entered congress. He was not one of who accepted office for the sake of its emoluments or of any chances of pecuniary gain which it might afford. His services were never for sale in the promotion of any measure on which it might become his duty to vote; nor did he ever refuse to meet any issue on account of any real or supposed odium his vote might entail. And so poorer in purse, but richer in the esteem of his fellow-citizens, he resumed the arduous duties of his profession, which had been largely intermitted during his service of the state.

He formed a partnership with James W. Lawrence, a rising young attorney, and grandson of General Lawrence of Syracuse, New York, in his day one of the most distinguished lawyers in the Empire state. The father of young Lawrence was also a lawyer of marked ability, who practiced a few years in St. Anthony, but entered the army at the beginning of the late war, and lost his life in the service of his country. The firm still continues under the name of Wilson & Lawrence. It has always been regarded as one of the leading firms of the city, and has enjoyed a large and lucrative practice. Mainly through his success at the bar, coupled to some extent with fortunate real estate investments, Mr. Wilson has secured a fortune which renders him independent of his profession, though perhaps there are few, if any, lawyers in the state who perform harder professional work than he.

Still he has found time to devote no small amount of labor to public interests. In 1872, when what was the city of St. Anthony was consolidated with Minneapolis, Mr. Wilson was elected first mayor. He was again elected mayor in 1874. He was elected to the state senate for the years 1878 and 1879, and served on some of the most important committees in that body. [372]

Since the establishment of the park commission, he has been a member of the board, and has devoted much time and attention to the establishment of the park system of Minneapolis, which is doing so much to beautify the city. His fine taste in landscape, progressive ideas and broad views of the future of the city render his advice and services on the board most valuable, and almost indispensable to the work of the commission. Mr. Wilson owns and occupies one of the most charming and beautiful residences in the city, opposite Hawthorne park, and by his own example shows what taste and a wise expenditure of comparatively moderate means can do to make a desirable and lovely home.

In still other directions Mr. Wilson has interested himself in the welfare of his adopted city. He is a member of the Masonic organization, a Knight Templar, also a member of the Grand Army and the "Loyal Legion."

On the sixth of October, 1865, Mr. Wilson was married to Miss Elizabeth Kimball, daughter of Colonel William M. Kimball of Minneapolis. The issue of this marriage was four children, of whom three daughters are now living.

The many genial, social qualities of Mr. Wilson, and his characteristic southern hospitality, have him to a large circle of friends, to whom his charming home is ever open. He is a fluent and happy extemporaneous speaker, and his services are always in demand at public dinners and other occasions where an audience instructed or entertained. As before remarked, Mr. Wilson is a Democrat, not only from education but principle, and never has lacked the courage of his convictions in advocating Democratic principles.

Mr. Wilson is still in the prime of life, with physical and mental powers unimpaired, and may reasonably look forward to many years of hard work which, it is to be hoped, may be largely devoted to the service of the state.

III

(Frank J. Mead, "Eugene M. Wilson" in the first volume of *History of the City of Minneapolis, Minnesota*, edited by Isaac Atwater and published in 1893)

EUGENE M. WILSON. At the age of twenty-four years, or in the fall of 1857, Eugene M. Wilson cast his fortunes with those of the people of the comparatively new village of Minneapolis. From that time until the day of his death he ranked as one of the most notably influential citizens of this community.

Mr. Wilson sprang from Scotch-Irish stock, the same blood that gave Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun to American statecraft. His father was

Edgar C. Wilson, prominent in Virginia politics, and his grandfather, Thomas Wilson. Both father and grandfather were members of Congress from Virginia, the father serving in the National house from 1833 to 1835, and his grandfather from 1811 to 1813. His ancestry on both the maternal and paternal side were patriots and soldiers during the Revolutionary struggle, and also during the war of 1812.

Mr. Wilson was born in Morgantown, Va., Dec. 25, 1833, and began his education at home and in the schools of his native village. Before he was fifteen years of age he entered Jefferson College, graduating from that institution at the early age of eighteen. After completing his academic studies he entered his father's law office as a student, and at the [457] age of twenty-one was admitted to the practice. In the year 1856 he left Virginia and came to Minnesota, first settling in the practice of law at Winona, where he formed a partnership with William Mitchell, afterwards Judge of the State Supreme Court, the firm name being Wilson & Mitchell. Here he soon demonstrated his ability as a lawyer in legal contests with such shining lights of the bar as William Windom, afterwards member of Congress, United States Senator, and twice Secretary of the Treasury; D. S. Norton, afterward United States Senator; Thomas Wilson, afterward Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Charles Berry, afterward Attorney General.

In 1857 President Buchanan appointed Mr. Wilson to the office of United States District Attorney, a position he filled with marked credit and ability until the admission of the State into the Union in 1858. On receiving his commission as District Attorney he removed from Winona to Minneapolis, thereafter finding his home in this city for the remainder of his life.

After the admission of the State into the Union Mr. Wilson continued the practice of his profession in this city. In 1861 he formed a law partnership with W. W. McNair, a gentleman who later became his brother-in-law. In 1862 he entered the military service of the nation, being commissioned captain of Company "A" of the First Minnesota Regiment of Cavalry, or the "Mounted Rangers," as it was locally known. In this position he served for one year, being mustered out at the close of his term of service. His military

experience did not extend to the battlefields of the South, as the organization to which he belonged was retained in the State for service on the frontier against the Indians. On entering again into civil life he resumed the practice of his profession, taking position in the ranks there of among the foremost lawyers of the Northwest.

On the 6th day of September, 1865, Mr. Wilson was married to Elizabeth Kimball, only daughter of Col. William M. Kimball, of St. Anthony (East Minneapolis). There were born of this union five children, three daughters still surviving.

In 1868, after one of the most heated campaigns ever known in the political history of the State, Mr. Wilson was elected on the Democratic ticket to a seat in the Forty-first Congress from the Third Congressional District. The district was overwhelmingly Republican, and had been represented by Hon. Ignatius Donnelly. During the campaign of that year occurred the historical split in the Republican party; Mr. Donnelly receiving a nomination from one faction and Hon. C. C. Andrews that of the other. Mr. Wilson was the unanimous choice of the Democratic convention, and was elected, receiving 13,506 votes to 11,229 for Mr. Donnelly and 8,595 for Mr. Andrews. His service in Congress was of the most useful and brilliant character, notwithstanding the fact that his party was everywhere in the minority. Mr. Wilson was especially fitted, both by inherent qualities and education, for success in public life. He was of the most genial temperament, and without effort could draw men to him. Possessed of a handsome and magnetic personality and fine social qualities, he was wherever known a universal favorite. Only to the fact that his party was hopelessly in the minority in the district represented by him is to be attributed his retirement in 1870. To his honor be it said that he returned to his profession, after a two years term in Congress, poorer than he left it.

It was during his term in Congress that the Northern Pacific railway land [458] grant was secured. Mr. Wilson was member of both the Pacific Railroad and Public Lands committees of the House, and was thus in a position to wield a most potent influence on the fortunes of the struggling

corporation. At the time of Mr. Wilson's advent on the floor of Congress it was regarded as a matter of most vital importance to the State that the Northern Pacific railroad should be chartered and endowed. Both on the floor and in committee, by public speech and tireless industry he strove to compass this great work, and was successful. To his eternal honor be it said, that in the midst of the most unblushing corruption Mr. Wilson kept his hands and his conscience clear, and that his most malignant political enemy (he never had a personal one) never dared to hint that he had supported any public measure from unworthy motives. During his congressional career he also secured the passage of a bill granting lands to the University of Minnesota; advocated the policy (since then adopted as the settled policy of the government) of allotment of lands in severalty to Indians; championed liberal appropriations for the advancement of agricultural interests, and gave cheerfully of his time and energies for the passage of every just bill before Congress.

Returning to Minneapolis after the close of his congressional term, he formed a partnership with James W. Lawrence, a business connection which remained unbroken down to the day of his death. The firm of which he was the senior member at once took a leading position at the bar of the county and state, and there were few important cases tried in Minneapolis during the ensuing twenty years with which the firm of Wilson & Lawrence was not in some way connected. Mr. Wilson was the leading counsel of Col. W. S. King in the famous King-Remington suit, which involved real estate in Minneapolis valued at over \$2,000,000. He prepared the case for trial, personally drew all the papers during its trial and the briefs in appeal, and finally fought it to a successful issue for his client—the most noted case and involving larger interests than any ever before brought before the courts of the Northwest.

In 1872 the two cities of St. Anthony and Minneapolis were united under one municipal government, and notwithstanding the fact that the city was at that time Republican by an overwhelming majority, Mr. Wilson was elected the first mayor of the new city. Of his career as the chief executive officer of this large and growing city, it is scarcely necessary to give more than a

passing word. Here, as everywhere, his course was guided and marked by the strictest integrity and the most tireless energy in the upbuilding of the public interest. Again in 1874 he was chosen mayor and served with honor and credit for another term, refusing a re-nomination by his party equivalent to an election. In 1878 and again in 1890 he was elected State Senator and served the people of Hennepin County faithfully in the State Legislature. On the establishment of the park system for the city Mr. Wilson was appointed a member of the Park Board—his last public position, and one he held until his death. The last ten years of his life were devoted to the active discharge of the duties of his profession and to social and domestic enjoyment. Possessed of a beautiful home and abundant wealth, surrounded by a most charming family, he was the centre of a most select circle of friends who were always welcome to the hospitalities of his fireside. He continued in the discharge of the duties of his profession until the early winter of 1889, when his health began to fail. His condition was not [459] considered at all dangerous, but his physician advised a cessation of work and the enjoyment of a period of perfect rest. Accompanied by his wife and daughters and by Hon. Thomas Wilson and wife, of Winona, he sailed for Nassau, New Providence, in the Bahamas, hoping that the genial climate of that locality would restore him to health and vigor. But such was not to be. Afflicted by no particular disease, it seemed that the vital forces were simply worn out. He died at Nassau on the 10th day of April, 1890.* Almost, if not quite, his last labor was one of love, in preparing a history of the Mounted Rangers, for publication in the military history of the State.

Mr. Wilson was a man of unimpeachable integrity, perfectly honest in every motive, the last person to suspect a wrong in others, and this unswerving confidence in mankind was returned to him by all classes in a marked degree. Springing from old and distinguished colonial stock, he was the most democratic of men. His best friends, and those whose loyalty never failed

* MLHP: Perhaps because Wilson died in a foreign country, we have found no obituaries of him in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, *Minneapolis Tribune* or *Minneapolis Star* in April, 1890.

him, were the working classes—the men and women of the city who toiled with their hands. To these he was guide, philosopher, counsellor and friend, and to their interests and for their advancement he gave without money and without price the best days of his manly and useful life. His friends of every station in life did not fully appreciate the value of this man until death had removed him. In the midst of the daily struggle for wealth and social position his perfect self-poise, entire unselfishness and inherent sense of all that was gentle, quietly courageous and manly, were overlooked. To speak of the public services rendered and high positions held by a man like Eugene M. Wilson, seems only a mockery to those who were acquainted with the man, and could measure the strength of the quiet, unseen forces which made every hour of his sincere and ingenuous life a benediction to his fellows. Of no one in all the range of the writer's acquaintance could the words applied to Bayard—"Sans peur et sans reproche"—"without fear and without reproach," be more honestly and truthfully applied. In the midst of corruption he was incorruptible; surrounded by selfishness and greed he was forever generous, liberal, magnanimous.

In 1888 he was duly nominated by the Democratic party as their Gubernatorial leader. There were three candidates, receiving the following vote: Merriam, 134,355; Wilson, 110,251; Harrison, 17,026.

Mr. Wilson would probably under no accident of environment have been recorded a great statesman. His undoubted ability was supplemented by industry and energy, while his fine social qualities gave assurance always of personal popularity. If his fortunes had been cast in a community controlled by the Democratic party, he would doubtless have spent the major portion of his life in public employment, and he would doubtless have been more widely known. But, after all, the chief strength and charm of Mr. Wilson was found rather in his heart than his head. His intellectual qualities, though strong and pronounced, were not of that overshadowing character which constitute a Cromwell or force to the front a Webster or Lincoln.

His influence on Minneapolis and its development was great and lasting—and always beneficent. The force of his good works will persist when his

monument is dust and his name forgotten. His chief element of strength was found in that mightiest bulwark against wrong everywhere—a high and beneficent character. Other men might stoop [460] to do unclean or unworthy things, but what Eugene Wilson did was always in accord with his conception of the strictest principles of entire justice and the most perfect rectitude. He never for one moment laid aside the safeguard of right thought; and so when temptations came to him he was armed against vice. His life bore constant testimony to his birth and breeding. Behind him was an ancestry—not overwhelmingly great or exalted, perhaps, but one that had always consisted of men of high sense of honor. The shades of his ancestors were never stained by any act of his.

Probably no man that ever was called away from his place by death was more universally missed and mourned than Mr. Wilson. The numerous testimonials offered by his fellow citizens at the shrine of his grave all bear witness to the exalted esteem of his fellow citizens. All classes and conditions of men and women joined to do honor to the perfect citizen, the constant friend, the tireless advocate, the honest man.

IV

(Profile of Wilson from the second volume of the
Proceedings and Report of the Annual Meetings of the
Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, published in 1901)

EUGENE M. WILSON was born in Morgantown, Va., Dec. 25, 1833. His father, Edgar C. Wilson, and his grandfather, Thomas Wilson, were members of congress from Virginia, and his ancestry on both maternal and paternal sides were patriots and soldiers of the Revolutionary War. Mr. Wilson graduated from Jefferson College at the age of eighteen, and was

admitted to the bar when twenty-one years of age. In 1856 he came to Minnesota, first settling at Winona, where he formed a law partnership with William Mitchell, afterwards justice of state supreme court. In 1857 he was appointed United States district attorney for Minnesota by President Buchanan, and moved to Minneapolis.

In 1861 he formed a law partnership with W. W. McNair, who afterwards became his brother-in-law. In 1862 he was commissioned captain of Company A, of the First Minnesota Cavalry, serving for one year on the northern frontier. While in this service he made the acquaintance of Elizabeth Kimball, only daughter of Col. William Kimball of St. Anthony, then quartermaster for northwestern military posts, to whom he was married Sept. 6, 1865.

In 1868 Captain Wilson, who was always a staunch Democrat, was elected to congress in a strong Republican district, owing to the split in the Republican party, and his own popularity, Ignatius Donnelly and C. C. Andrews being the two Republican candidates. At the end of his term in congress he returned to the law practice, and was for many years one of the foremost lawyers of the state. In 1872, when the cities of St. Anthony and Minneapolis were united, he was elected the first mayor of the new municipality, being re-elected in 1874 for another term of two years. In 1878 and again in 1880 he was elected state senator from Hennepin County. In 1888 he was the candidate of his party for governor, being defeated by W. R. Merriam. When the park system of Minneapolis was established he became a member of the park commission, a position he held until his death. For many years Captain Wilson was interested as a partner in the ownership of pine lands and in the lumber business in Northern Minnesota. In 1889, owing to failing health, accompanied by his wife and daughters, he started for Nassau, in the Bahamas, hoping the change of climate would restore him to health. It was at this place he died, on April 10, 1890, leaving a widow and three daughters. The family have since occupied the elegant home he built for them on Hawthorne avenue a few years before his death.

V

(Warren Upham & Rose Barteau Dunlap,
Minnesota Biographies: 1655-1912, published in 1912)

WILSON, EUGENE McLANAHAN, congressman, b. in Morgantown, Va. [later W. Va.], Dec. 25, 1833; d. in Nassau, Bahama Islands, April 10, 1890. He was graduated at Jefferson college, Canonsburg, Pa., in 1852; was admitted to the bar in 1855; came to Winona, Minn., in 1856, and the next year settled in Minneapolis; served as captain in the First Minnesota Mounted Rangers, 1862-3; was a representative in Congress, 1869-71, and a state senator in 1879.

VI

(From the *Biographical Directory of the United States* Website)

WILSON, Eugene McLanahan, (1833 - 1890)

WILSON, Eugene McLanahan, (son of Edgar Campbell Wilson, grandson of Thomas Wilson of Virginia, and great-grandson of Isaac Griffin), a Representative from Minnesota; born in Morgantown, Monongalia County, Va. (now West Virginia), December 25, 1833; attended the common schools and Morgantown Academy; was graduated from Jefferson College, Canonsburg, Pa., in 1852; studied law; was admitted to the bar in 1855 and commenced practice in Winona, Minn.; United States attorney for the district of Minnesota with residence in Minneapolis 1857-1861; continued the practice of law in Minneapolis; served in the Union Army during the

Civil War as captain of Company A, First Minnesota Mounted Rangers; elected as a Democrat to the Forty-first Congress (March 4, 1869-March 3, 1871); was not a candidate for renomination in 1870; resumed the practice of law; elected mayor of Minneapolis in 1872 and 1874; unsuccessful candidate for election in 1874 to the Forty-fourth Congress; delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1876; member of the State senate in 1878 and 1879; unsuccessful candidate for Governor in 1888; died while on a visit to regain his health in Nassau, New Providence Island, British West Indies, April 10, 1890; interment in Lakewood Cemetery, Minneapolis, Minn.



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