

# William N. Davidson

November 7, 1833 – August 23, 1920

In 1878 William N. Davidson, a master millwright, who had practiced law over twenty years in Iowa, moved to Luverne, the seat of Rock County on Minnesota's southern border. There he resumed practice, and became active in public affairs. He served as city attorney, county attorney, probate judge and was the county surveyor for three decades.

In 1891 he placed his business card in the local newspaper, noting that he was the successor to the practice of Philip E. Brown, who had just been appointed judge on the Thirteenth Judicial District. <sup>1</sup>

PROFESSIONAL CARDS.	
<b>J</b>	C. GILBERTSON, Physician and Surgeon, Office over Post Office, Luverne, Minn.
<b>K</b>	W. JARGO, Veterinary Surgeon. All calls promptly attended to.
<b>R</b>	O. CRAWFORD, M. D. Office over Young & Son's store, Luverne.
<b>W</b>	N. DAVIDSON, ATTORNEY AT LAW Successor to P. E. Brown, Luverne, Minn
<b>A</b>	LBERT BARCK, Attorney at Law, Justice of the Peace. Collections promptly attend- ed to. Luverne, Minnesota.
<b>W</b>	T. BERRY, M. D., Homeopathic Physi- cian. Office at Berry's drug store, Bea- ver Creek, Rock County, Minnesota. Calls attended to promptly.
<b>A</b>	E. SPALDING, Physician and Surgeon, Luverne, Minnesota. Residence on Free- man Avenue, west of the school house. Of- fice on Main street, nearly opposite the Com- mercial House.
<b>A</b>	J. DALEY, Attorney at Law. Office over Post Office.
<b>A</b>	D. LADUE, ATTORNEY AT LAW, Office in rear of First National bank, Lu- verne, Minnesota.

<sup>1</sup> *Rock County Weekly* (Luverne), October 30, 1891, at 1. There seem to be more doctors in town than lawyers.

Philip E. Brown (1856-1915) was appointed to the Thirteenth Judicial District Court in 1891; he was elected in 1892, and reelected in 1898 and 1904; in 1910 he was elected to the Minnesota Supreme Court, where he served from 1911 to death on February 6, 1915.

The next year he became the Peoples Party candidate for Associate Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup> Its ticket was published in the *Rock County News*. Curiously no candidate for Attorney General is listed.

**Rock County News.**  
\$1.50 PER YEAR.  
FRED. N. VAN DUZEE, - EDITOR AND PUBLISHER.  
LIVERNE, MINN., SEPT. 29, 1892.

---

**Peoples Party Ticket.**

**NATIONAL.**  
For President;  
JAMES B. WEAVER, of Iowa.  
For Vice-President;  
J. G. FIELD, of Virginia.

**STATE.**  
For Governor:  
IGNATIUS DONNELLY.  
For Lieutenant Governor:  
SWAN NELSON.  
For Secretary of State:  
H. B. MARTIN.  
For State Treasurer:  
P. M. RINGDAL.  
For Judges Supreme Court:  
W. N. DAVIDSON  
DANIEL BUCK.  
THOMAS CANTY.

**CONGRESSIONAL.**  
For Congress:  
L. C. LONG.

**LEGISLATIVE.**  
For Representatives:  
PATRICK GILDEA.  
of Murray.  
J. H. MAXWELL,  
of Nobles.  
W. H. BUXTON,  
of Pipestone.

**COUNTY.**  
For Auditor,  
JOHN B. CROFT.  
For Treasurer,  
TH. O. OPSATA.  
For Sheriff,

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the emergence of the Peoples Party, see John D. Hicks, "The People's Party in Minnesota," 5 *Minnesota History* 531-560 (November 1924). The People's Party was also known as the Populist Party. Hicks mentions the Court contest once, in a footnote: "In state politics the Democrats and the Populists joined in the nomination of Daniel Buck and Thomas Canty, who were elected to the Minnesota Supreme Court." *Id.* at 545, n. 29.

The Peoples Party's ticket published in *The Daily Leader*, a Rochester newspaper, listed John L. McDonald, a St. Paul lawyer, as its candidate for Attorney General. In keeping with political parties' attempts to have geographically balanced tickets, the home counties of the candidates are listed:<sup>3</sup>

**PEOPLE'S PARTY TICKET.**

ST. PAUL, Special Telegram, July 15.  
—The People's party state convention completed its work in two days, convening Wednesday morning and adjourning last evening. It nominated the following ticket:

GOVERNOR—IGNATIUS DONNELLY, Dakota county.

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR—KITTEL HALVORSEN, Stearns.

SECRETARY OF STATE—H. B. MARTIN, Hennepin.

STATE TREASURER—P. M. RINGDAL, Polk.

ATTORNEY GENERAL—J. L. McDONALD, Ramsey.

SUPREME COURT JUSTICES—DANIEL E. EUCK, Blue Earth; THOMAS CANTY, Hennepin; W. N. DAVIDSON, Rock.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORS — WILLIAM MEIGHEN, SWAN NELSON, H. M. NORTON, F. M. CURRIER, C. P. CARPENTER, E. W. FISH, E. F. CLARK, C. F. BOHALL, J. H. HOLLOWAY.

Although political parties had endorsed judicial candidates since the first election in 1857, this was the first in which candidates' political party endorsements were listed on the ballot.<sup>4</sup> The four political parties were Republican (R), Democratic (D), Prohibition (Pro) and

<sup>3</sup> *The Daily Leader* (Rochester), July 15, 1892, at 1 (enlarged).

<sup>4</sup> 1891 Laws, c. 5, §33, at 39 (effective June 1, 1891).

Peoples. The following sample ballot was published in the *St. Paul Daily Globe*, a Democratic paper, on October 21, 1892:

Associate Judge Supreme Court—WM. N. DAVIDSON—Peoples Party		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—DANIEL BUCK—Peoples Party —Democrat	X	VOTE FOR THREE.
Associate Judge Supreme Court—THOS CANTY—Peoples Party —Democrat.	X	
Associate Judge Supreme Court—WM. MITCHELL—Democrat —Republican —Prohibition	X	
Associate Judge Supreme Court—DANIEL A. DICKINSON—Rep. —Proh.		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—C. E. VANDERBURG—Rep. —Proh.		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—		

Here is a sample ballot in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, a Republican newspaper, November 5, 1892:

Associate Judge Supreme Court—WM. N. DAVIDSON—People's Party.		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—DANIEL BUCK—People's Party. —Democrat.		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—THOMAS CANTY—People's Party. —Democrat.		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—WM. MITCHELL—Democrat. —Republican. —Prohibition.	X	Vote for Three.
Associate Judge Supreme Court—DANIEL A. DICKINSON—Republican. —Prohibition.	X	
Associate Judge Supreme Court—C. E. VANDERBURGH—Republican. —Prohibition.	X	
Associate Judge Supreme Court—		
Associate Judge Supreme Court—		

As these ballots demonstrate, "fusion politics" was accepted by all parties — that is, a candidate could receive endorsements from than one party (usually a major and a minor). Justice Mitchell, an

incumbent, was endorsed by the two major parties and one minor.<sup>5</sup> Davidson was the only candidate with the endorsement of one party. He came in last in a field of six in a “top three” election on November 8, 1892, the results of which were:

**Associate Justice  
(For terms beginning January 1894)**

William Mitchell (R, D & Pro, inc).....	165,541
Daniel Buck (D & Peoples).....	113,194
Thomas Canty (D & Peoples).....	109,166
Daniel A. Dickinson (R & Pro, inc).....	101,148
Charles E. Vanderburgh (R & Pro, inc.).....	100,064
William N. Davidson (Peoples).....	42,084 <sup>6</sup>

He continued practicing law. In late 1899 he placed the following sketch in the “Souvenir Edition” of the *Rock County News*:

**W. N. DAVIDSON.** In writing of Luverne's successful attorneys at law, we should certainly be doing an injustice to the profession were we to omit the name of this gentleman from the list, as he is one of Rock county's pioneer practitioners. Attorney Davidson came to Rock county from Iowa twenty-two years ago, locating in this city at that time, and was probate judge of the county for several terms. He has been following the law profession for forty-three years—nearly half of a century—and is one of the oldest attorneys in south-western Minnesota. He has a fine library and office in the Security Bank of Luverne block and in addition to his law practice he gives special

---

<sup>5</sup> “Fusion tickets” were outlawed in 1905. For an account of the last “fusion election” for the Supreme Court in 1904, see Douglas A. Hedin, “Now on the Ballot for Candidate for the Minnesota Supreme Court: ‘Calvin L. Brown (Republican-Democrat)’ –The Story of *In Re Day* (1904)” (MLHP, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> SAM66, Roll 2, Image 432, and 1893 *Blue Book* at 466-7.

This was a top three election for a six year term beginning January 1894, and expiring January 1900. The incumbents had to run for reelection in 1898. For an explanation of these odd terms, see Douglas A. Hedin, “The Puzzle of the Elections of 1892, 1898, 1904 and 1910” (MLHP, 2010).

attention to collections and equity business. Mr. Davidson was prosecuting attorney for two terms and is now holding the office of county surveyor, a position which he is thoroughly qualified to hold.<sup>7</sup>

A dozen years later, as a subscriber to Arnold Rose's Rock County history, he was entitled to have it include his profile—what amounts to an autobiographical sketch. It is much longer and more detailed than the advertisement in the News's "Souvenir Edition":

**WILLIAM N. DAVIDSON (1878), attorney at law of Luverne, is an early day settler of Rock county and a man who has taken an important part in the affairs of his county and village. He was born in Sardinia, Erie county, New York, November 7, 1833, the youngest of a family of seven children, all of whom except himself are dead. His father was Nathaniel N. Davidson, a native of Troy, New York. His mother was Amira (Edwards) Davidson, who was born at Northampton, Massachusetts.**

Our subject was taken when a baby from his native county to Cleveland, Ohio, and from that time until the year 1851 lived in ten different counties in Ohio, his father being an itinerant millwright, working at his trade in different places. During this period of his life young Davidson secured his education, after which he engaged in the millwright business with his father and brothers. In 1851 he moved to Iowa, worked at his trade awhile, and then began the study of law. He was admitted to the bar September 15, 1856, in Clinton county, Iowa, and has been practising his profession ever since—a continuous period of fifty-five years.

Mr. Davidson practiced law in Hampton, Iowa, seventeen years, in Ackley, Iowa, two years, lived in Bloomington, Illinois, one year, in Denver, Colorado, one year, and since 1878 in Luverne. Mr. Davidson has been in official life many years. In Franklin county, Iowa, he served as county judge and as prosecuting attorney. In

---

<sup>7</sup> *Rock County News* (Souvenir Edition), December 20, 1899 (Supplement).

Rock county he has been county attorney and judge of the probate court, was city attorney for Luverne nine years, and for the past thirty years has been county surveyor. He is a literary man and a poet of considerable local note, many of his writings having been published in public journals. Mr. Davidson is a Mason, holding membership in the Blue Lodge and Chapter.

At Ackley, Iowa, on August 13, 1875, Mr. Davidson was united in marriage to Thais DeLaurier, a native of Beekmantown, New Ycrk. Mr. Davidson has three daughters: Vivian (Mrs. Fred Dewey), of St. Cloud, Minnesota; Zillah M., of Minneapolis; Wildavine, who resides at home.<sup>8</sup>

Though he continued to practice law, declining health took its toll. He died on August 23, 1920, at age eighty-six. His obituary was published in the *Rock County Herald*. Curiously it does not mention his run for the Supreme Court in 1892.

## **JUDGE DAVIDSON DIES AFTER LONG ILLNESS**

---

**Had Been Resident of Luverne  
for forty-Two Years and  
Practiced Law Much of  
That Time.**

---

Judge W. N. Davidson, for forty-two years a resident of Luverne and for more than thirty-five years actively identified with the professional and business life of Rock County, died Monday morning at 4 o'clock at the state hospital at St. Peter, where he had been receiving treatment for two months.

---

<sup>8</sup> Arthur P. Rose, *An Illustrated History of the Counties of Rock and Pipestone, Minnesota* 481-82 (1911).

The body was brought here Tuesday morning over the Omaha, accompanied by the deceased's daughter, Miss Zillah Davidson, of this city, and funeral services were held Wednesday afternoon at two o'clock from the Davidson home.

....

Coming here in 1878, Mr. Davidson took up the practice of law and from that time until about six years ago was actively engaged in this profession, and was widely recognized as a lawyer of exceptional ability.

This was especially true of him as an interpreter of law, for he was an unusually deep student and possessed a marvelous memory, and his judgment on points of law was frequently sought and greatly valued by members of the profession over a wide area.

He was truly a lawyer of the old-school, conservative and sound in his judgment, with a generosity of heart that seldom permitted him to exact for services rendered anywhere near their actual worth. And there still are in Rock County today many persons who can readily recall innumerable instances of Judge Davidson's willingness to aid and advise those needing his services without thought to remuneration, in the day when money was extremely difficult to obtain. There is no record of Mr. Davidson ever having declined to take a case or cause worthy of attention because of the inability of a prospective client to pay him for his services.

Shortly after locating here Mr. Davidson was appointed to fill an unexpired term as county attorney, and was then



**elected for one term. A few years later he was elected judge of probate for one term, and for approximate thirty years was county surveyor. For a number of years he also served as city attorney.**

**Mr. Davidson had been in failing health for about ten years and his decline had been most rapid during the last two years, and was directly due to his advanced age.**

**The deceased was born November 7, 1833, Sardinia, Erie County, New York, and when still a small child accompanied his parents to Cleveland Ohio. The following seventeen years were spent in ten different counties, Mr. Davidson's father being an itinerant millwright.**

**During this period Mr. Davidson acquired his education, and also mastered the trade of the millwright, and in 1851 located with his father and brothers in Iowa, where they engaged in business as millwright.**

**Five years later William N. Davidson was admitted to the bar and began the practice of law in Clinton county, Iowa. After being thus engaged for seventeen years at Hampton Ia., he opened a law office at Ackley Ia., where he remained for two years, then moved to Bloomington Ill. A year later he moved to Denver Colo., and in 1878 came to Luverne.**

**On August 13, 1875, Mr. Davidson was married to Miss Thais DeLaurier, at Ackley, Ia., who survives together with three daughters: Vivian, Zillah and Wildavine. One son of the deceased, Jerome, died years ago at Sioux Falls.**

**Mr. Davidson was a member of the Masonic order.<sup>9</sup>**

oo:oo  
:

## **Related Articles**

**“Edwin H. Canfield (1855-1936)” (MLHP, 2013).**

**“Andrew J. Daley (1857-1918)” (MLHP, 2016).**

**“Lawyers of Luverne” (MLHP, 2019) (published first, 1899).**

oo:oo:oo:oo  
: : : :

**Posted MLHP: October 3, 2019**

---

<sup>9</sup> *Rock County Herald*, August 27, 1920, at 1 (funeral service omitted).