

# **“Memoir of Judge David Cooper”**

**By**

**John Fletcher Williams**

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**Foreword**

**BY**

**Douglas A. Hedin**  
**Editor, MLHP**

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In a long article on journalism during Minnesota’s territorial period, published in 1905 by the Historical Society, Daniel S. B. Johnson profiled John Fletcher Williams, an early journalist, as follows:

## **J. FLETCHER WILLIAMS.**

John Fletcher Williams was born September 25th, 1834. He was educated in Woodward College and the Ohio Wesleyan University; came to St. Paul in 1855; and was reporter and city editor of different St. Paul dailies during the following twelve years. For a short time he was private secretary of Governor Miller, and from 1864 to, 1871 he was a member of the Board of Education of St. Paul. From 1871 to 1876 he was a member of the United States Centennial Commission from Minnesota. He also held many responsible offices among the Odd Fellows. In 1876 he wrote a history of St. Paul, which in chronicling leading events is very useful. In 1867 he was elected secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, in which office he continued until September 11th, 1893, when he resigned on account of ill health. He died April 28th, 1895

Mr. Williams never learned the meaning of the little word “rest” Work wore him out at sixty-one, when he ought to have lived till eighty. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “J. Fletcher Williams,” in Daniel S. B. Johnson, “Minnesota Journalism in the Territorial Period,” 10 *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* (Pt. I) 247, 265-66 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1905).

If journalism is the first draft of history, Williams's chronicle, *A History of the City of Saint Paul, and of the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*, is the early afternoon edition.<sup>2</sup> He reported historical events as a journalist would. When the stories that he had gathered and facts and statistics that he had compiled were published in 1876, the result looks like a year-by-year almanac. Nevertheless, despite its superficiality, and though long supplanted by more scholarly works, Williams's *History* remains "useful."

After their deaths, Williams wrote "memoirs" of several men who had played prominent roles in the state's formative years, including three judges: David Cooper, Bradley B. Meeker, and Andrew G. Chatfield. It does not appear that these "memoirs" were published during his lifetime. His profile of Judge Chatfield was published in *The Chatfield News* on May 13, 1947. All three are now posted on the MLHP.

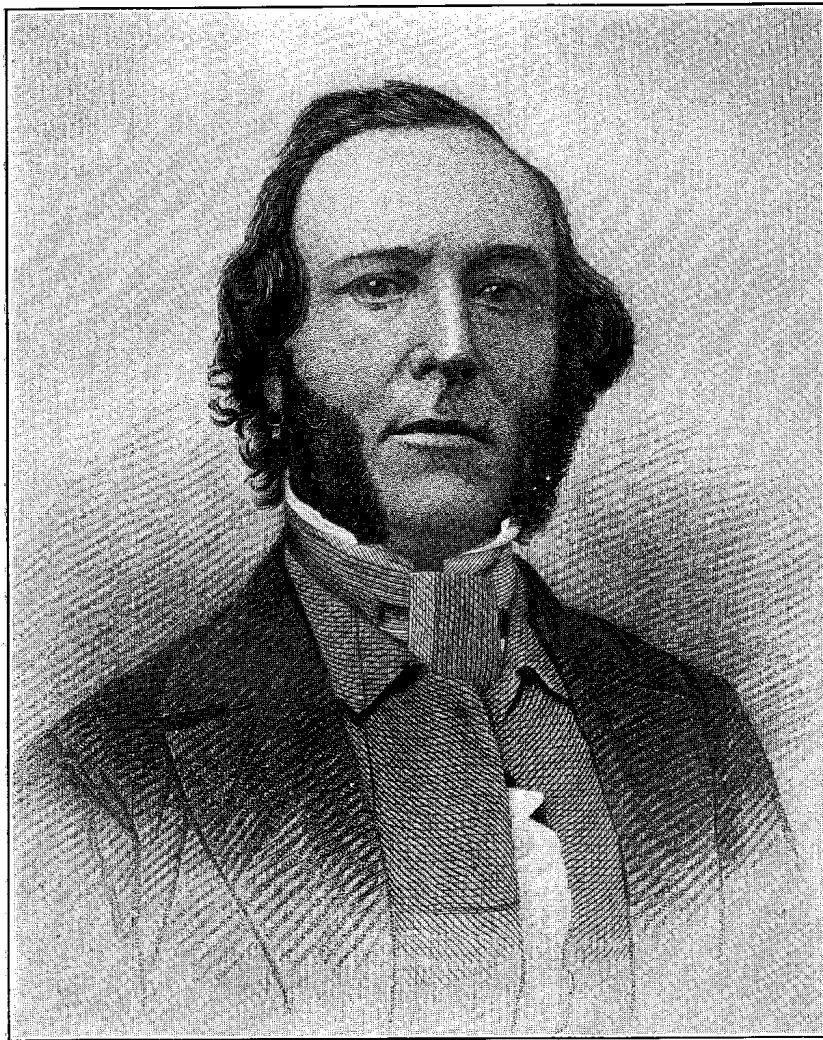
Williams's "Memoir of Judge David Cooper" was handwritten in ink on four legal-sized pages. The manuscript contains crossed-out words. It was written sometime after Cooper's death in 1878. Some comments at the end suggest that Williams was still gathering material about Cooper. It appears unfinished.

Williams's text, posted below, has been retyped and reformatted but reflects his handwritten changes and corrections; his punctuation and spelling are not altered. It is posted as written.

The original manuscript can be found in Box 2, Folder 4, of the "John Fletcher Williams Papers" at the Minnesota Historical Society. It is posted on the MLHP with the written permission of the Historical Society.

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<sup>2</sup> *A History of the City of Saint Paul, and the County of Ramsey, Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1876), reissued by the Society in 1983 under the title, *A History of Saint Paul to 1875*. It also has been republished in the Michigan Historical Reprint Series.



**David Cooper**  
**(1821-1878)**

# Memoir of Judge David Cooper

By J. F. Williams.

David Cooper was born July 2, 1821, at a place known as "Brooks Reserve", in Frederick Co., Md. In his boyhood he required a good common school education, and having naturally a very retentive memory, acquired learning rapidly and with but little labor. At the age of 10 years, his father removed to Gettysburg, Pa, where he further advanced in his studies, and he to some extent in classical branches. In 1855 his father again removed to Maryland, where young Cooper worked on his farm until 1837, when his father died. As soon as he could secure his share of the patrimony, he devoted it to the purpose of securing a legal education. He secured as tutor, a clergyman of the M. E. Church, named Brooks, under whose care he acquired a valuable and thorough classical and scientific training. In 1839, aged 18 years, he left the tutelage of Mr Brooks, and returned to Gettysburg, Pa, where he entered the Freshman class of Pennsylvania College, although in some studies he ranked even higher. He remained in college three years, during which time he was known as a close student, and in the literary society of which he was a member, as a good debater. Ill health towards the close of the course greatly interfered with his studies, and he left college in 1841, without graduating, though having quite completed the course.

After leaving college, he entered the law office of his brother, Hon. James Cooper, at Gettysburg, Pa. who was subsequently a member of Congress four years, and U. S. Senator from 1849 to 1855. In 1845, at the age of 24, David Cooper was admitted to practice, before the Court of Adams Co, and passed a credibly examination. He then removed to Lewistown, Mifflin Co. where he began the practice of law, and soon had a good practice in that and adjoining counties, both in civil and criminal law.

Having taken an active part in politics ever since coming to manhood, and having been an ardent Whig, in 1848 he was appointed a member of the State Central Committee, and did good service in the Campaign. The result of the active part he bore, was his appointment in the March following by the victorious candidate whom he had sustained, to the office of Associate Justice of the new Territory of Minnesota. He soon after closed up his business in Pennsylvania, and in May, 1849 arrived at Saint Paul, to enter on his duties of his station. He first took up his residence at Stillwater, being assigned by Gov. Ramsey to that District. Soon after he opened the first Term of Court held in Minnesota, at

**Mendota. On that occasion he delivered an elaborate address to the Grand Jury on the principles of law and their duties, etc. of which Gen. Sibley, who was foreman on that July says scarcely a man beside himself understood a word, all being Frenchmen!**

**He also, at the same term, made an elaborate address to the Bar, which was published in the Journals of the Territory at that time, and was much praised. On the bench, and indeed off of it, Judge Cooper had a very dignified and precise demeanor. His manners were, however, courteous and urbane, and he became much liked among the people of the Territory. His dress, even, partook of the "old school" style, and his ruffled shirt and gold headed cane were sometimes as object of pleantry among his associates and with journalists.**

**He continued to take an active part in politics, and as political animosities ran high and bitter among the factions of the Territory, of course Judge Cooper did not fail to make enemies, and some very active ones, too. Goodhue, editor of the Pioneer, was one of those, and in his paper he attacked Judge Cooper unsparingly. On Jan 16, 1851, he made a terribly savage onslaught on him, accusing him of immoral and disgraceful conduct. Judge Cooper was absent from the city at the time, but a nephew of his assumed to answer for him, and attacked Goodhue on the street, stabbing him severely.**

**Judge Cooper's term expired on Apr 7, 1853. After leaving the bench, he resumed the practice of law in St. Paul, and soon had an ample professional income. He was for some time in partnership with Hon. S. J. R. McMillan, and at a later date with S. P. Jennison. To all his cases he gave careful and faithful attention and was very exact and precise, even to his manuscript, which was a model of neatness and regularity.**

**About 1859 he removed from the Territory, and went to Nevada and ultimately to California, where he seems to have resided most of the time until his death. Concerning this portion of his life, I have not been able as yet, to get any very reliable data, nor indeed as to the exact date or circumstances of his death.**

**The latter occurred in a hospital at Salt Lake City, during the early part of 1870.**

**Of his domestic life the writer has no facts which are full enough to enable him to write anything. ■**

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