

“Memoir of Judge B. B. Meeker”

By

John Fletcher Williams

Foreword

By

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In 1886, Thomas M. Newson self-published *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota*, in which he drew the following sketch of J. Fletcher Williams:

**JOHN FLETCHER WILLIAMS —
WELL-FITTED — AS HE APPEARS.**

Mr. Williams is a descendant of the Welsh in the person of John Williams, away back in the seventh generation, but J. Fletcher was born in Ohio in 1834, where he attended Woodward College in Cincinnati, then the Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, graduated in 1852, and came to ST. PAUL in 1855. Here he engaged in journalism for about twelve years, being at one time connected with the *Daily Pioneer Press*, *Minnesotian* and *Dispatch*, when in 1867 he was elected secretary and librarian of the Historical Society, which position he still holds. In addition to this he is corresponding secretary of the Old Settlers' Association, and also of the Ramsey County Pioneer Society, and has been secretary of the Minnesota Editorial Association. Besides, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Rhode Island, Maine, Buffalo, Montana and the New England Genealogical Society have made him a member of their associations. He is also the author of the History of St. Paul and Ramsey County, and of many interesting papers and valuable sketches; is an active Odd-Fellow, having held almost every prominent office in the Grand Lodge and Grand Encampment of the State; is at present grand scribe of the later. He was a member of the United States Centennial Commission of Minnesota for 1871, and served as such up

to 1876; was a member of the School Board from 1864-7, 1868-71.

Very few men are better fitted for the position than Mr. Williams. When a reporter on the press he was constantly writing historical and biographical sketches, and his mind naturally turned to researches in the past. When he entered his duties as secretary of the Historical Society, he found it in a dilapidated condition and went earnestly to work to build it up, and has done so in the most gratifying manner. Of course the State has furnished the means.

Mr. Williams is a somewhat peculiar character, polite, obliging, industrious, and is a walking encyclopedia of the dead past. He is like a singed cat, a good deal better than he looks, especially so in his line of duty as secretary. When gazing at or conversing with you his mind seems to be wandering amid the pyramids of Egypt, and yet he responds with alacrity to the requests made upon him. He is exceedingly cautious, politic, and on certain subjects though he may talk a great deal, says but very little, while upon other subjects he becomes quite loquacious and quite frank. He is a man of ability, unpretentious, steady, upright, studious, and is valuable as secretary of the Historical Society.¹

As Newson noted, Williams was a joiner. He surely derived enjoyment and social prominence from his membership in many social and fraternal organizations, but he also must have made practical use of these connections to learn some of the facts and stories that made up his histories. He wrote history as a journalist.² Patterns of behavior and currents of intellectual thought did not interest him. Facts did: when, where, how, who, etc. He described, he did not interpret. This is the style he employed in his major work, *A History of the City of Saint Paul*

¹ 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* 513-4 (St. Paul: 1886) (reprinted by BiblioLife in 2009).

² Lucile M. Kane provided the most insightful biographical profile of Williams in her Introduction to the 1983 reissue of *A History of Saint Paul to 1875* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1983)(first published in 1876 by the Society under the title *A History of the City of Saint Paul, and the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*). Kane noted his concern with accumulating facts, many of them trivial such as a “pioneer’s arrival date,” and his inability “to assess the external forces shaping the city.” Id. at xiv-xv. Attentive readers will notice that the only sentence left incomplete in Williams’s “memoir” is the date Meeker arrived in Saint Paul.

and of the County of Ramsey Minnesota, published in 1876. It is also the style of his unpublished writings.

Williams wrote “memoirs” of three members of the territorial supreme court: Associate Justices Bradley B. Meeker, David Cooper and Andrew G. Chatfield. It appears that his memoir of Chatfield is the only one to be published, and that did not happen until *The Chatfield News* carried it on the front page of its May 13, 1947, issue.



B. B. Meeker

Williams wrote his “Memoir of Judge B. B. Meeker” in longhand on four legal sized pages. The manuscript contains corrections and crossed-out words. He obviously was still working on it when he set it aside for some

other project. It was written sometime after Meeker's death on February 19, 1873.

The memoir that follows contains the author's handwritten changes. His punctuation and spelling have not been 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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J. Fletcher Williams

Judge Bradley B. Meeker, one of the old settlers of Minnesota, died at the "Plankinton House" in Milwaukee, where he was sojourning on business, Feb 19, 1873.

Judge Meeker was born in Fairfield, Conn, March 13, 1813. On his parental side he descended from Chobert Meeker, who in 1650, settled in Fairfield, at which place the father, two brothers, and we believe a sister of deceased, still reside. His parents (who had seven children) were in humble circumstances, and their sons mingled farm labor with the little common school education they were able to secure, until 12 years of age, when they seem to have left school altogether.

At the age of 16 years, he obtained the use of Rollin's Ancient History, and Pope's Iliad, both of which he read with (?), and to the end of his life referred to the pleasure they gave him. His attachment to books and study dates from this period, and he was soon enabled to secure an opportunity to attend school, paying for his board, etc, by labor, making the most of these opportunities, so soon after secured the patronage of Gov. Tomlinson, and was sent to Chester Academy and ultimately to Yale College.

On leaving Yale, he went west, then, as always, the land of promise to young men, and settled in Richmond, Madison County, Ky. Where he commenced the study of law, and meantime employed himself in the profession of teaching. He was admitted to the bar in 1838, and practiced law in Richmond until 1845, when he removed to Flemingsburg, Ky. There he rapidly acquired a good practice, and was soon known as a zealous advocate of Constitutional Reform, writing a number of able articles on the subject for the press. These helped to awaken attention to the subject and lead the way for a convention which made radical changes in the Constitution of the State.

Taking an active part in the campaign of 1848, resulting in the election of his favorite "Honest Old Zach Taylor", as Judge Meeker used to call him, he became in a fair way to receive some of the patronage of the administration. Through Hon. John Bell of Tenn, a warm friend of his, the appointment of associate Judge of the new Territory of Minnesota was offered him, and concluding to accept it, his nomination was made to the senate and confirmed on March 19, 1849. He arrived in Saint Paul on _____.

Three temporary Judicial Districts were laid out by Gov. Ramsey. The second district fell to the charge of Judge Meeker, the seat of justice being at St Anthony Falls. Court met on July 1, in the old Government Mill, built for the purpose of grinding grain for Fort Snelling. Franklin Stulo was foreman of the straw jury. This body found no indictment during the term, but remained in session until the Judge actually prorogued them, so palatable was the per diem paid by the U. S. Marshall in gold! After the organization of the County of Hennepin in 1852, Judge M also held the first Court in & for the same, at the house of Anson Northrup. The Grand Jury found three bills of indictment this term, which Judge M quashed for various defects.

Judge Meeker remained on the bench of Minnesota four years, and during that time became widely known to the pioneers of the Territory, and was respected by all of them. His deportment to the law was courteous and dignified — as indeed, it was to all, in every station of society. His charges were always plain and devoid of technical phrases and terms which are often unintelligible to juries. Our old settlers will long remember Judge Meeker's deliberate, measured, distinct way of talking. It was characteristic of the man. He was one never ruffled by passion.

On the 7th of April, 1853, he retired for his successor, Judge Sherburne. He resumed in some measure the practice of law, but was mostly engaged real estate operations. While not avaricious in the

pursuit of gain, being rather indifferent to it, we should infer, he made some good investments as they ultimately proved. The Meeker Island and water front property is one instance of this.

After the Whig Party ceased to exist, Judge Meeker cast his political fortunes with the Democracy. In 1857 he was elected a member of the Constitutional Convention, and (in the “Democratic Wing”) bore a leading part. He was also one of the first Board of Regents of the State University, being elected March 7, 1857.

At the time of his death he was engaged in forwarding a project known as the “Air and House Line” Railroad, from Minneapolis to St. Paul.

It was while traveling on business for this enterprise that Judge Meeker met his end. He was at the Plankinton House, Milwaukee, in usual health and spirit, when he was suddenly taken ill, and though medical aid was procured immediately, he died in a few minutes. His disease was probably apoplexy.

Judge Meeker was a gentleman of fine physical appearance, and easy, dignified manners, such as are sometimes termed “old school”. He was never, — so far as the knowledge of the writer goes — married. He was fond of reading and study, and was nearly always investigating some out of the way subject of law, history or philosophy. In thought and opinion he was independent and free — perhaps eccentric, but honest, manly and “squano”. His death will/was sincerely mourned by a large circle of friends. ■

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