

JOHN N. MURDOCH

(September 23, 1831 – January 21, 1898)

John and Cynthia Murdoch settled in the village of Wabasha in 1857, eight years after Wabasha County was formed. For the next forty years, the name Murdoch was associated with law, journalism and the Republican party in Wabasha County. Excepting five years after the Civil War, John Murdoch practiced law in Wabasha until 1896, when he retired. He was the first city attorney and later served on the school board, a demonstration of the strong belief he and his wife had in education, especially higher education. He was an editorial writer for the *Wabasha Herald* in the 1870s and 1880s.¹ He also was one of the founders of the Republican Party in Minnesota Territory, and was an elector for Lincoln and Johnson in 1864—a feat he likely recounted countless times to family and friends over the years.²

In late 1893, he formed a partnership with his son John W., who had just graduated the University of Michigan Law School. While he retired in mid-1896, those three years must have given him great joy and his son a sound, practical education in trial practice for in the

¹ It was not unusual for lawyers to own, publish, edit and write for newspapers in the Nineteenth Century. For a list of lawyers who were also editors and journalists in the 1850s, see Douglas A. Hedin, "Lawyers and 'Booster Literature' in the Early Territorial Period" 16-9 (MLHP, 2008).

² Curiously John N. Murdoch's contributions were not recognized in Eugene Virgil Smalley's *A History of the Republican Party from Its Organization to the Present Time to Which is Added A Political History of Minnesota from a Republican Point of View and Biographical Sketches of Leading Minnesota Republicans* (1896).

next half century, son John became a titan of the bar of the Third Judicial District.

John N. Murdoch died on Friday, January 21, 1898, at age sixty-seven. Fittingly the *Herald* carried the story on its editorial page:

WABASHA HERALD

WABASHA, MINN., THURSDAY, JANUARY 27, 1898

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Death of Hon. John N. Murdoch

With the dawn of Friday morning came the summons from on high, and peacefully the life of John N. Murdoch went out, life's book closing in his 67th year. Death was almost an unexpected visitor, as he was comparatively strong, physically, up to the day before the end. A slight cold progressed into pneumonia which terminated fatally.

Mr. Murdoch was a man who possessed ability of a very high order. His education was thorough, his researches great and his experiences varied and valuable. He was born in Winchendon, Mass., on September 23, 1831. After graduating from Brown University, of Providence, Rhode Island, he took his degree in Albany Law School. Attracted by the west and its coming greatness he decided to locate in Minnesota, and accordingly he opened an office in St. Paul, in 1854. Shortly afterwards he removed to Wabasha and made it his permanent home. He practiced his profession with marked success,

and, through his suggestions, many new and valuable laws were placed on our statutes, and his legal arguments many times made it easy for the supreme court to construe new and untried sections of our then crude law. For three years he was in Kansas as attorney for a large railway corporation. Mr. Murdoch continued in the active practice of his profession until August 1, 1896, when he retired to enjoy rest and recreation. He early became a member of the republican party and remained in close relation with it until 1892, when he voted for Cleveland for the president, and became an independent in politics, supporting from time to time such platforms and candidates as most nearly represented his convictions. Mr. Murdoch took an active part in the organization of the republican party in the territory of Minnesota, and for many years there-after he was a prominent personage in its conventions. He was a Lincoln and Johnson elector in 1864, and was postmaster of this city from 1869 to 1873. He filled many local positions of trust and importance, among them city attorney and member of the board of education. He possessed a leaning towards literature and made many valuable contributions to the press, besides having had charge of the editorial department of this paper from 1881 to 1886. In order to thoroughly appreciate Mr. Murdoch and to reach his best and finest nature, an intimate acquaintance was necessary. He was chary of giving his confidence or bestowing his friendship, but the man who succeeded in gaining them found in him ever a fast friend, and discovered in him a gentle disposition, a warm heart, and a social nature, which would prove a revelation to those whose acquaintance with him was confined to the ordinary meetings of business life.

Mr. Murdoch was married in 1857, to Miss Cynthia A. Baldwin of Auburn, N. Y. She survives him as do two sons and two daughters, Wm. L. Murdoch, of Birmingham, Ala., Miss Mary Murdoch, of Duluth, Mrs. D. L. Dawley, of Northfield and John W. Murdoch, Esq., of Wabasha.

The funeral was held on Sunday afternoon and was conducted in strict accordance with the wishes of the deceased, as reduced to writing ten years ago and sealed up, with instructions that they be read and followed when the time arrived. A simple but beautiful service was held at the residence, consisting of singing by the Congregational church choir, and scriptural reading and prayer by Rev. W. B. Medlar. This service was public and was attended by many friends. None but the relatives and pall bearers accompanied the remains to the cemetery. Mr. Murdoch, when making the final directions, preserving his love and desire for simplicity in all things to the end.

His four children and his only surviving sister, Mrs. A. O. Tylor, of Cincinnati, were present at the interment, and they in company with the pall bearers, chosen from his oldest and trusted friends, laid him down for final rest, their hearts saddened by the final rest, their hearts saddened by the parting and yet cheered, even in that hour of pain and sorrow, by the knowledge that after death comes life, and that another meeting is promised in another land in which parting is no more.

Over two decades later, a history of Wabasha County was published by subscription. By funding a local history such as this, the subscriber had the privilege of having a personal profile included. Usually these profiles included references to the subscriber's

parents and grandparents. Rarely did a subscriber pay for a separate profile of a deceased relative. But this is what John W. Murdoch did — the 1920 county history carried this profile of his father followed by his own:

John N. Murdoch, the first city attorney of Wabasha, for many years one of the leading members of the bar of the county, and one of this city's early journalists, was a native of New England, having been born in Winchendon, Mass., September 23, 1831. He was graduated from Brown University, at Providence, R. I., in the class of 1852, being then in his twenty-first year, and soon afterwards cast his first presidential vote, which was for John P. Hale, of Massachusetts, the freesoil candidate in 1852. In 1854 he was graduated from the Albany Law School, at Albany, N. Y. Having decided to seek his fortune in the Northwest, he came immediately to St. Paul, Minn. Though he resided there but a year, his ability and the strength of his character were recognized by his fellow citizens, and in March, 1855, he was sent as a delegate to the convention that was held at St. Anthony (now Minneapolis) to organize the Republican party in the then territory of Minnesota, and took an active part in its proceedings. To that party he maintained his allegiance to the end of his life. On Sept. 17, 1855, Mr. Murdoch was married to Cynthia A. Baldwin, of Auburn, N. Y., and in the following year he removed with his wife to Red Wing, where their first child, Mary E., was born December 20, 1856. With this child they came in 1857 to Wabasha, where Mr. Murdoch began law practice, establishing an office on Main street. In the following year the city of Wabasha was incorporated and he became the first city attorney. In 1864 Mr. Murdoch headed the electoral ticket, as elector at large, for Lincoln

and Johnson. From 1865 to 1867 he traveled in the South, and from 1869 to 1873 was postmaster of Wabasha. He then went to Kansas, where he resided with his family until 1876; but with the two exceptions mentioned his life subsequent to 1857 was spent in Wabasha. In the fall of 1893 Mr. Murdoch took his son, John W. into partnership, and they practiced law together until his retirement in July, 1896. For several years while engaged in his law practice he was more or less connected with the press of the city, having charge of the editorial columns of the Wabasha Herald, under Sharpe and Palmer, from 1871 to 1873, and resuming similar duties in April, 1881. His death, which occurred January 21, 1898, deprived the city of Wabasha of one of its leading and most respected citizens whose activities had been closely connected with its progress and development up to that time. Though not a member, he attended with his family the Congregational church of this city. His wife passed away January 16, 1904. To Mr. and Mrs. John N. Murdoch were born four children, Mary E., December 20, 1856; William L., August 12, 1858; Emily T., April 1, 1861; and John W., June 22, 1869. Mary E., who is unmarried, is now teaching in the public schools of Duluth. William L. in 1875 entered the employ of the Samuel Cupples Woodenware Co. of St. Louis, Mo., and was with them for many years. He subsequently went to Birmingham, Ala., where he engaged in the brokerage business, which business he is still conducting. Emily T. graduated from Wellesley College, Mass., in the class of 1883, being the first native of Wabasha County to complete a collegiate course. She married D. L. Dawley, superintendent of the Wabasha public schools, and afterwards of the public schools of St. Paul, in which city he took up the practice of law and for years was law editor with the West

Publishing Co. there. He died in St. Paul, where his widow is still residing. John Wales Murdoch is now a member of the well known law firm of Murdoch and Lothrop of Wabasha. ³

In a brief description of his current law firm in his own profile, John W. Murdoch revealed the extent to which he still practiced under his father's influence:

[On] May 1, 1916, [John W. Murdoch] associated as a law partner with Hugh L. Lothrop of Mazeppa, and they have since carried on business under the style of Murdoch & Lothrop, occupying the same offices that Mr. Murdoch's father occupied many years ago. ⁴



Related Articles

Memorials to the following members of the Wabasha Bar are posted on the MLHP: "Harold J. Alton (1903-1937)" (MLHP, 2012); "Charles E. Callaghan (1863-1926)" (MLHP, 2012); "Samuel L. Campbell (1824-1910)" (MLHP, 2012); "E. N. Card (1828-1910)" (MLHP, 2012); "James A. Carley (1869-1952)" (MLHP, 2012); Terry Walters, "Remembering Judge [Daniel F.] Foley" (MLHP, 2010); "John R. Foley (1890-1953)" (MLHP, 2012); "Allen J. Greer (1854-1905)" (MLHP, 2012); "Hugh L. Lothrop (1888-1931)" (MLHP, 2012); "Michael L. Marx (1871-1922)" (MLHP, 2012); "John F. McGovern (1860-1905)" (MLHP, 2012); "Henry W. Morgan (1850-1918)" (MLHP, 2011); "John H. Mullin (1842-1907)" (MLHP, 2012); "John W. Murdoch (1869-1962)" (MLHP, 2012); and "James E. Phillips (1866-1935)" (MLHP, 2012).

Also: "Bench and Bar of Wabasha County (1884) and Early Courts and Lawyers of Wabasha County (1920)" (MLHP, 2008). ■

³ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Wabasha County, Minnesota* 561-2 (H. C. Cooper Jr., & Co, 1920).

⁴ *Id.*, at 563.

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