

# JOHN W. MASON

(1846 – 1927)

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JOHN W. MASON was an early settler of Otter Tail County, a pioneer lawyer, the first mayor of Fergus Falls, the first president of the city's board of education, public speaker, civic leader, state legislator, a successful railroad lawyer, and county historian. In 1916, a mammoth, two volume history of the county edited by him was published. His "Reminiscences" form one chapter,<sup>1</sup> which is "prefixed" by the following profile by Ernest V. Shockley:<sup>2</sup>

## JOHN WINTERMUTE MASON.

By Ernest V. Shockley.

In every community there are certain men who are looked upon as leaders in their profession and it is surprising how accurate an estimate is placed upon them by their fellowmen. Go into the average city of less than ten thousand and ask anyone of a score of men who the best physician is and they will nearly all agree on the best one of the dozen or more the city happens to have; the same unanimity of choice may be found in any one of several professions. There is probably no profession where the attainments of its members vary so widely as in the members of the bar. Every city in the state of Minnesota has its full quota of lawyers and Fergus Falls is no exception to this rule. This appreciative study concerns the career of the oldest member of the bar of

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<sup>1</sup> "Reminiscences by John W. Mason" in John W. Mason, ed., *History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota* 575-647 (B. F. Bowen & Co., 1916). It is Chapter 32.

<sup>2</sup> Shockley was the "general editor" of a series of local histories published by the B. F. Bowen Company of Chicago. His introductory tribute appears on pages 575-582.

this city — a man who has ranked at the top of his profession for forty years.

The city of Fergus Falls was conceived in the fall of 1870, born in the spring of 1871 and christened by the Legislature in 1872. Shortly after its birth and before its name had been officially applied, there came driving into it one hot afternoon in the summer of 1871 a lawyer. The village was still in its swaddling clothes, it would have all the ills and ailments incidents to the toothless stage of human kind, it would, to continue the metaphor, cause its progenitor trouble, as its teeth began to appear, but, like unto the puerile stage of the man who conceived it, there would come days when it would need a strong guiding hand to keep its citizens in the straight and narrow path of civic rectitude; but it was sure to grow. All this and more flitted through the head of the young man who came driving a heavily-loaded wagon into the village on June 7, 1871. Just such a place — a place where men would not always observe the Ten Commandments of their own free will and accord — was the one for which this young man was seeking. In other words he was a lawyer. His name was John Wintermute Mason.

The years have come and gone since the eventful day; forty-five times has the earth made its annual pilgrimage around the sun in its orbit; the village of a hundred or two has grown to a city of eight thousand; the dreams of its founder have been realized; two generations of men and women have come and gone. And the young man, poor in purse but rich in ambition, who climbed down from his dusty perch on the top of his wagon on that hot afternoon in the summer of 1871, has lived to see all this transformation take place.

He has been a part and parcel of its very life from the

beginning. The children of the village who learned their alphabet in the first school he helped to organize in the spring of 1872 are now men and women with gray hair — grandfathers and grandmothers — many of them. Of the business and professional men who saw his tall figure for the first time in 1871, scarcely a one is left to tell the tale. Truly may it be said that the life of the Hon. John W. Mason is coincident with the life of Fergus Falls. Future generations of dwellers in this city on the Red river of the North may read of the men who have helped to make it; they will recall the names of some score of worthy men who helped to guide the struggling village and direct its growth to the end that it has become the city it is today. High on this list of men, occupying a prominent niche in the hall of fame of Fergus Falls, may be read for all time to come the name of John W. Mason.

A century hence, people of this city will be reading the history of the Otter Tail county which bears his name, and will wonder what sort of a man he was and what he did that entitles him to an honored place in its annals. Therefore, it becomes the duty of the chronicler to set forth briefly at this point certain genealogical facts of the man. Although a lawyer, his entry into this world was not unlike that of other men. His natal day, October 6, 1846, found his father and mother, Harley Carpenter and Clarissa (Hazen) Mason, then living at Lapeer, Michigan.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened to him in his boyhood. He passed through the trials and pleasures of his childish days just as have countless millions of boys; he went to school in the winter, worked on the farm in the summer and played the rest of the time. . The opening of the Civil War found him just fourteen years of age and too young to gratify his martial desires.

However, as soon as he was old enough to enlist he volunteered and his name may be found as a member of Battery B, First Minnesota Heavy Artillery. The war closed, however, before he saw any active service. Immediately after he was mustered out of the service, he returned to the school room to complete his education. He spent three years in Groveland Seminary, Dodge county, Minnesota, and one year at Carlton College, Northfield, Minnesota. He was twenty-two years of age; his boyhood days were over, and it behooved him to think seriously of finding, some vocation in life.

He did not want to be a farmer; he had no desire to enter the ministry or the medical profession. He finally came to the conclusion, after an introspective study of himself, that the legal profession offered the best opportunities for him. To this end he entered the law office of G. B. Cooley, of Mantorville, Minnesota, in 1869, to prepare himself for his life work. Being of a studious bent and analytical turn of mind, and having an able preceptor, it was not long before he was ready to be admitted to the bar. Thus the year 1871 found him prepared to engage in the profession to which he has since devoted his entire attention.

The next question to decide was the place where he should locate. Many a man, the lawyer as well as men in every calling in life, has gone to his grave unhonored and unsung for the reason that he failed to locate in the place best suited to his own individuality. Many a lawyer has hung out his shingle in the wrong town. The Bible says that young men have dreams and old men see visions. Whether young Mason was a biblical student the biographer does not undertake to state, but, judging from his future career, history must record that he had both dreams and visions.

In the early spring of 1871 he started to Independence, Kansas, a boom town of eighteen hundred at the time, with a friend, George Smith, a brother lawyer. Young Mason had nearly one hundred dollars when he left home, but so high was the cost of living in Independence that within ten days he saw that he had just enough left to pay his fare home. Since there were already twenty-seven lawyers in Independence, he decided that he would not be the twenty-eighth — and left the city. On his return home to Minnesota, he met Major Whallon, stepfather of the Lowry brothers, later residents of Fergus Falls, who suggested to him that he go to Rochester, Minnesota, to see one George Head, who was on the point of settling in a new town in the northern part of the state by the name of Fergus Falls. This was the first time Mr. Mason had ever heard of the “coming city,” but he decided, after hearing the glowing account of Head, that he would investigate the possibilities of the place. The fact that Head offered him free transportation to the town if he would drive one of his teams, was another fact which induced him to make the prospecting trip. Accordingly he helped Head pack his household goods, mounted one of the wagons, and headed his team in the direction of the county and city whose history he was to write forty-five years later.

And so it came to pass that John W. Mason drove into Fergus Falls on June 7, 1871. It must have taken a man with an unusually keen insight into the future to foretell the future possibilities of Fergus Falls in 1871. It was not a county seat town, and at that time there was small prospect that it ever would be such. Certainly it promised little in 1871, when the first settlers were rearing their rude log cabins here and there on lots donated by the owners of the townsite. It may be supposed that young Mason did some serious thinking during the first few days after he arrived. Should he

remain awhile and see whether the place promised a livelihood or should he return home and look for a more favorable location? It is given to some men to forecast the future with an almost uncanny prophetic vision, and it must be admitted that young Mason either did this, or else, to use a Hoosier expression, he was "all-fired lucky." He had to do something, and at once. He had but two dollars in his pocket when he landed and that amount would not last long, even in Fergus Falls in 1871. The story of how he lived for the first year is told by Mr. Mason in his Reminiscences. Suffice it to say that he decided to stay, to cast his lot with the "coming city."

Forty-five years have passed since that June day of 1871 and during all of this time Mr. Mason has been an intimate part of the city's career. From the spring of 1872, when he was elected clerk of the first school district of the village, he has taken an active part in the advancement of every in phase of the growth of the city. He was the first mayor of the city in 1881. He drew its first city charter in that year, drafted the second one two years later, and, as president of the charter commission in 1902, formulated the charter under which the city is now governed. Other public offices have come to him. He was mayor a second time in 1894; the youngest member of the lower house of the state Legislature in 1874, a member of the board of trustees of the Fergus Falls state hospital for the insane from 1891 to 1901; a member of the first board of education of Fergus Falls for four years and its first president. Thus it may be seen that Mr. Mason has taken an active part in the civic life of his community, a part which has brought him no pecuniary reward but which allowed him to use his ability for the welfare of his fellowmen and the betterment of the life of which he was such an intimate part.

All of his work as a public servant of the people, however, has not interfered with his career as a member of the bar, but, on the other hand, has undoubtedly been of benefit to him. Man does not live unto himself in these latter days. If he measures up to the best that is in him he must bear his full share of the problems which confront the community in which he lives. This Mr. Mason has done, not from selfish motives or personal aggrandizement, but that Fergus Falls might be a better city and able to say to all the world — This is the best city in the state. It is to such men that the city owes a debt of gratitude which it can never repay.

But future generations will want to know something of the legal work of this man who has done so much for the city of his adoption. Within a year after he came to the county he was elected county attorney, but certain circumstances, over which he had no control, kept him from entering upon the duties of that office. During the seventies he was gradually building up his practice and growing in ability to handle difficult cases of all kinds. His reputation as an orator were early recognized and history records that he was chosen to make the Fourth of July address in 1876 in his home town. But the decade was not all sunshine; he had to struggle as do all young lawyers in frontier towns; there were ups and downs — cases won and cases lost.

One bright spot in the career of Mr. Mason in the seventies was the beginning of his domestic life. While attending Groveland Academy in the latter part of the sixties he met Fannie S. Safford and this chance acquaintance resulted in the two young people plighting their troth before they left the academy. No doubt if history were to tell the whole truth, this fact was instrumental in taking young Mason to Independence, Kansas, and later bringing him to Fergus Falls. Be that

as it may, it was not until 1875 that he felt himself sufficiently well established to ask her to share his joys and troubles. They were married on June 9, 1875, at Red Wing, Minnesota, settled in Fergus Falls at once and here they have continued to live since that day. They have no children.

With the added responsibilities which followed the establishment of a home, Mr. Mason plunged into his legal work with renewed vigor. His reputation as a practitioner before the local court brought him cases from adjoining counties. With the advent of the railroad in the latter part of the seventies he became interested in railroad legislation. He attracted the attention of the railroad officials because of the cases he won against them, and his ability in handling these cases finally resulted in the Great Northern offering him a position on their legal staff.

The career of Mr. Mason as attorney for the Great Northern from 1883 until he resigned from their employ in 1910 took him into all parts of the state and brought him all the business he could handle. During part of the time he had a partner. It might be mentioned here that his first partner in the seventies was Bert Melville, whose inability to distinguish himself between different kinds of bars, legal and otherwise, finally lead to a dissolution of the partnership More of this same Melville is told by Mr. Mason in his Reminiscences He next associated himself with Edwin M Wright, under the firm name of Wright & Mason, and this second partnership lasted from 1873 to 1875. The next three years he had J. P. Williams as partner. Following the dissolution of this partnership Mr. Mason practiced alone until 1888, when he formed a partnership with C. L. Hilton, and they continued together until Mr. Hilton was elected county attorney, in the fall of 1898. Since that date Mr. Mason has practiced alone.

The twenty-seven years Mr. Mason spent with the Great Northern as one of their attorneys were filled with hundreds of cases which he handled. His ability is amply testified to by the fact that the company kept him in their employ as long as they could and parted with his services most reluctantly in 1910. Some idea of the amount of business he handled for the company may be seen when it is known that in one year he had no less than seventy-one cases pending. The records will show that he appeared before the supreme court of the state oftener than any other country lawyer in the state. He was frequently called to St. Paul to try cases when the other attorneys of the company were very busy. From 1904 until his resignation, six years later, Mr. Mason handled all the company's cases north and west of St. Cloud; in fact, the work became so onerous that he gave up his private practice and devoted all of his time to the business of the company. Since 1910 Mr. Mason has done very little legal work and has not sought cases of any kind. His long service has brought him a sufficient competency so that he is able to live the remainder of his days in peace and quiet. He is now devoting himself to literary and automobile pursuits. It is hoped by his friends that he will leave for posterity some of his reminiscences which he has felt would not be exactly appropriate for this volume. He has intimated that he intends to characterize certain phases of his county's history for future publication. It is needless to say that future generations will read this product of his pen with the same avidity with which his writings in this volume will be scanned.

One more phase of the life of Mr. Mason remains to be noticed, namely, his literary ability, as shown by his written and delivered addresses. For more than forty years he has been before the people of the county as a platform speaker on all sorts of occasions and on all

kinds of subjects. He seems equally at home when pleading before a jury in the court room or when appearing before a woman's club with a dissertation on their duties as members of society. He has been frequently called upon to assist in political campaigns and in the presidential campaigns of 1896 and 1900 he was employed by the Republican state committee as one of their special speakers delivering speeches in all parts of the state during the progress of the campaign. His experience in these two campaigns may account for his antipathy toward Bryanism, free silver and kindred men and measures.<sup>3</sup> He has been a wide reader of the best literature and is able to illustrate his speeches with extracts from the writers of all ages. His anecdotes, with which he adorns his speeches, have a peculiar aptness that always gives what he has to say a pleasing piquancy of expression. As a raconteur he has few equals in his home city, while his quick repartee makes him a delightful conversationalist.

But it is in his character sketches that Mr. Mason is probably at his best. Proof of this may be seen in the keen character delineations which he has portrayed in this volume. As a result of his long practice before the court, he has that keen and incisive way, suggestive of his legal training, of summing up the strong and weak points of a man or an incident and setting them forth in such a way that the reader gets a striking picture of the man or incident so characterized. The writer of this sketch came to Otter Tail county in the fall of 1915, not knowing a single person in it, and yet after reading Mr. Mason's pen picture of such old pioneers as Jake Austin, he feels that he is well acquainted with the burly old

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of the populist movement in Otter Tail County, centering on the activities of Haldor E. Boen, who served one term in Congress, 1893-1895, see Lowell J. Soike, *Norwegian American and the Politics of Dissent, 1880-1924* 84-115 (Norwegian-American Historical Society, 1991). Mason is not mentioned in this chapter.

New Yorker. The ability to select just such characteristics as will best portray a man is the happy gift of Mr. Mason, and this faculty, added to this facility of expression, gives all of his writings of this nature a fascinating charm of their own. He has been a frequent contributor to the papers and magazines on a wide variety of topics, but it is safe to say that it is his character sketches which will remain his best contribution to future generations of Fergusonians.

Such, in brief, is the life of the man who is the editor of this history of his county. The general editor of the publishing company who has charge of the history came to Fergus Falls in September, 1915, and during the succeeding two months worked on the official records in the court house and collected miscellaneous data of all kinds. During all of this time he was in constant touch with Mr. Mason, who had agreed to assume the general editorial supervision of the history. He came back to Fergus Falls in the first week of February, 1916, and spent more than two months in completing the work on the history. A project of this kind depends very largely upon the local editor, and the publishing company always endeavors to get the best man in the county to have general charge of the history. The editor of the publishing company believes it is due to Mr. Mason to say in this connection that he has performed his part of the work faithfully and well. The historian has learned to know him intimately during a period of more than four months daily companionship and has written this appreciative study to prefix his Reminiscences. This article concerning himself is the only one in the volume which he has not read and the only one which is going into the history without his knowledge. The historian has worked in many counties in several states and has found that no history, especially when of such a local nature as a county history must necessarily be, can meet with the

approval of everyone. In the case of Otter Tail county, there are many people living yet who were here when the county was organized.

The historian mingled with the people of the city of Fergus Falls long enough to convince himself that it has indeed been a city of factional fights and that personal prejudices are very much in evidence in places. The writing up of some phases of the city's history has for this reason been made difficult; in a few instances things have been left to future historians to handle. The historian has noticed the extreme care taken by Mr. Mason to state all facts in an impartial light, and yet with all the possible care which he has exercised there will be some who might have a different view of some disputed questions. It can be truly said that the work of Mr. Mason has preserved for the county many facts which in a few years would have been lost forever. It is the opinion of the historian that no man in the county could have done the work of supervising such a publication in a better or more efficient manner than Mr. Mason. His time during the past six months has been given wholly to the work, and the historian wishes to take this final opportunity for expressing the debt which he owes to him for his hearty cooperation in the history from its inception until the completed manuscript was ready for the printer. The first history of Otter Tail county has been written; it is left to future generations with the hope that many valuable facts have been preserved which otherwise might have been lost to posterity.

About the time *History of Otter Tail County* was published, Mason retired. For the next decade he seems to have led the life of the proverbial village squire – a respected, wise, elderly gentleman, who enjoyed the company of many friends.

He died on August 7, 1927, at age eighty. The *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* reported the story the next day and, in keeping with the journalistic style of the day, described his final illness in great detail:<sup>4</sup>

## Long Career of Hon. J. W. Mason Ended

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Resident of Fergus Falls for 56  
Years — Legislator, City At-  
torney and Mayor

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Prominent Citizen and Pioneer  
Dies of Cancer After Com-  
paratively Short Illness

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Hon. John W. Mason, who has been a resident of Fergus Falls for more than fifty-six years, died at his home in this city at 4:50 a.m. Sunday, August 7, 1927, in his 81st year. His death was not unexpected, although it occurred sooner than was anticipated.

Until about the first of July, he had been as well as usual. The latter part of June he drove to Duluth with Mrs. Holmes, his wife's sister, and visited Mr. and Mrs. Donald Holmes for several, and drove home. There was no indication of illness aside from a little gastritis, which he sometimes had, until about the Fourth of July when he began to feel more or less lassitude and seemed to lack his usual energy. About the tenth of July he had a vomiting spell and when a physician was called he saw

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<sup>4</sup> *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, Monday, August 8, 1927, at 4. A photograph of Mason is omitted.

that the indications were serious. In a few days it was apparent that he had either cancer of the stomach, or possibly ulcers, although the indications were that it was cancer.

During the first days when the matter was in doubt, Mr. Mason felt that his recovery was not uncertain, but an X-Ray indicated that it was cancer and his intelligence was such that it was useless to deceive him, and he knew that an operation was impossible. He grew weak quite rapidly but his mind was keen and active, and it was expected he would last several months.

About the twenty-fifth of July he attended to some matters which needed attention, and from that time on, it was apparent that he was giving up hope of his recovery. In fact, he told those who came to see him that he had lived his allotted time, and it did not seem right to attempt to keep him when he was suffering and causing distress to others.

The day before he died, he saw some of his friends and chatted with them. On Saturday he had a bad spell and it was apparent that he would not last very long. In the afternoon he passed into a sort of comatose condition and slept practically all the time from then on until the end came.

His suffering from his illness apparently was not very great, and when he learned what ailed him, he said to his physician that he was not afraid to die but he did not want to suffer pain and insisted they exercise every effort to relieve it.

Mr. Mason was born at LaPeer, Michigan, October 6, 1846. With his parents, he came to Dodge county shortly before the war. He enlisted in Battery B, First Minnesota

Heavy Artillery, but did not see any active service. He went to school for awhile and then studied law, and when ready to be admitted, came to Fergus Falls in 1871 and started the practice of his profession.

He has represented the district in the legislature, was city attorney and mayor on two different occasions. He was a prominent candidate for district judge on two occasions, but failed to achieve his ambition.<sup>5</sup>

Some ten years ago, when he had reached the age of seventy, he gave up the practice of his profession. Deafness interfered to some extent and, as he put it, he had worked long enough and had acquired a competency. He maintained an office, however, until a few weeks ago, where he went daily, to meet and discuss public matters with his friends.

He married Miss Fannie Safford June 9, 1875 at Red Wing, and they settled in Fergus Falls at once, and have always resided on the same corner. Mrs. Mason died July 9, 1923. They had no children. Mr. Mason's father and mother died at his home in this city some years ago. He was the last of his family. One of his brothers died of cancer many years ago. The only relatives are some nephews and nieces who reside in Minneapolis. Since the death of Mrs. Mason, her sister, Mrs. W. J. Holmes, has lived with Mr. Mason.

Mr. Donald Holmes, his nephew, of whom he has always

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<sup>5</sup> The 1904 election was exceptionally close, but he lost to the incumbent, Luther Baxter:

John W. Mason.....	13,676
W. F. Valentine.....	6,121
Luther L. Baxter.....	13,801

1905 Blue Book, at 512.

been very fond, arrived from Duluth ten minutes before he expired, but he was unconscious when he came.

The funeral will occur from the home at 2 o'clock Tuesday afternoon and he will be buried beside Mrs. Mason in Mount Faith cemetery.

The *St. Cloud Daily Journal-Press* carried this tribute:

Hon. John W. Mason of Fergus Falls, one of the: best known attorneys of northwestern Minnesota, died yesterday at the age of 80 years. For nearly half a century he was the leader of the Otter Tail county bar, and so great was his ability that he was often called to other sections of the state in important cases. For several years he was attorney for the Great Northern. In later years he took an active interest in public affairs and had many communications in the *Fergus Falls Journal*. Since his retirement he was engaged in writing of his experiences in Minnesota, and giving his impression of many public men. This it was understood to be published after his death, and if such proved to be the case, it will attract much attention, as he was not only a gifted writer, but frank and fearless. He was a candidate for district judge some years ago but was defeated by a small majority by the late Judge Baxter, who was a most popular jurist, and had a much larger personal acquaintance than did Mason. Mr. Mason was most loyal to his friends, a patriotic citizen and who rendered his city, county and state good service, by his honesty and his courage. <sup>6</sup>

In an editorial on August 8th, the *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* remarked that because "no ordinary obituary notice can satisfactorily cover his activities," it had commissioned Elmer E.

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<sup>6</sup> *Daily Journal Press*, August 8, 1927, at 10.

Adams to prepare a “review” of Mason’s life.<sup>7</sup> Two days later, Adams’ lengthy “Review” of Mason’s “Life and Times” appeared. Curiously, he does not mention Mason’s county history.

## COMMENT <sup>8</sup>

### J. W. Mason, A Review of His Life and Times

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The death of Mr. J. W. Mason ends a career which is co-extensive with the existence of Fergus Falls. He was here in the very beginning and he has been here down to the present time. His life was one of the few which has completely spanned the life of Fergus Falls.

It will be remembered that James Fergus sent Joe Whitford here in 1857 to look for water power and a suitable place for a townsite. He was killed by the Indians and James Fergus, for who the town was named, never was nearer than Little Falls.

It was not until 1870 that the town was started. Some

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<sup>7</sup> *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, supra note 4, at 2:

Mr. J. W. Mason who died in this city Sunday morning has been one of the most active and most influential citizens of Fergus Falls during his long, residence of 56 years. No ordinary obituary notice can satisfactorily cover his activities and the Journal has asked Mr. Elmer E. Adams to prepare a review of Mr. Mason’s life and work here. This will appear in the Journal within a few days. Mr. Mason was so widely known throughout the county and has been so active that we are sure anything about him will be read with interest.

<sup>8</sup> *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, Wednesday, August 10, 1927, at 2. A typo in the original headline (“As” instead of “A”) has been corrected.

Elmer Ellsworth Adams was the editor of the *Fergus Falls Journal* from 1885 to 1912. See his profile in Mason, II *History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota* 80-81 (B. F. Bowen & Co., 1916).

preliminary work was done, a few frontier buildings were erected and word was sent out that there was going to be a city called Fergus Falls.

Mr. Mason at that time was residing in Dodge county and was about 25 years of age. He was born October 6, 1846 at La Peer, Michigan, and was the son of Harley and Clarissa Hazen Mason. Although I have known Mr. Mason for more than forty years, I have never heard him say much about his childhood days. The family moved from Michigan and settled in Dodge county where he went to school in the winter and worked in the summer as was the custom of the youths of that time.

He enlisted as a member of Battery B, First Minnesota heavy artillery in the Civil War, but on account of his age, he was unable to join the military service until late in the war, and never saw much active service.

After he was mustered out, he returned to school and obtained what school education he had. He attended Groveland Seminary in Wasioja, Dodge county, and was at Carleton college nearly a year in the early days of that institution.

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After becoming of age, he decided to study law and in 1869 entered the law office of Hon. Grove B. Cooley at Mantorville, Minnesota. There were fewer law schools in those days and it was the custom of young men who wanted to become lawyers, to read law and learn the profession in the offices of elder lawyers.

Mr. Mason was fortunate in being able to go to the office of a man like Mr. Cooley. Although Judge Cooley was a very heavy drinker, he afterwards was the

municipal judge of Minneapolis and he would have attained much greater prominence had it not been for his habits. He was apparently a good preceptor for Mr. Mason became well-grounded in the principles of law, and being of a studious mind, he applied himself industriously.



Not very long ago I heard someone say that Mr. Mason was not an educated man. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many people have the idea that if a young man or a young woman graduates from a high school and enters a college or a university that he acquires an education. There are thousands who have spent four years in college who do not acquire as much education as some young man or young woman who reads and studies by himself, and is actuated with a desire to learn. Diplomas and degrees are not an absolute evidence of an educated and cultured mind any more than the possession of a number of buttons won in a contest is a guaranty that a young woman is a stenographer.

Mr. Mason has been an omnivorous reader of good literature all his life, and having the mental qualities to absorb and retain that which was good, stored his mind with useful information and knowledge which may never acquire in their student days.

After Mr. Mason had been admitted to the bar in 1871 he looked for a location where he might establish himself in his profession. In the early spring of that year, he started for Independence, Kansas, which was a booming town of that time with about 1800 people. Mr. Mason had about \$100 when he left home for his new location, but the cost of living there was high and as there were 27 lawyers already in the town, he decided he had better look for a more fertile field.

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On returning to Minnesota, he met Major Whallon of Rochester, who was the step-father of W. D. and George B. Lowry, pioneer residents of the city, but who lived in Rochester at that time. Major Whallon suggested that Mr. Mason go to Rochester and interview George Head who was on the point of moving to Fergus Falls. Mr. Head had already looked the field over and had made some investments and he encouraged Mr. Mason to locate in the new town. As an inducement to come here, Mr. Head offered Mr. Mason free transportation if he would drive one of the teams in the caravan which Mr. Head was organizing to move his household and other goods.

It will be recalled that at this time, Campbell was the entrepot of Fergus Falls and the freight and passengers coming to the city came to Campbell and were then transported across this city. The Fergus Falls division of the Great Northern at that time had not been built farther than St. Cloud, and the haul from Campbell was very much shorter. There is an incident in this connection which is of interest. When the home of Charles F. Wright was dismantled recently, among the belongings was what was probably the first and longest extension table ever brought to Fergus Falls. In fact, it was so long that it was not all unpacked until recently and on one of the crates was the shipping tag which read:

“Charles D. Wright  
Fergus Falls, Minnesota  
Via Campbell.”

Mr. Mason always delighted to talk about his first trip from Rochester to Fergus Falls. There were three or four teams in the caravan, and Mrs. Head rode in a carriage

tied to the rear wagon. It was on the seventh day of June 1871 that Mr. Mason arrived here. Very little building had been done, and the pioneers were building log houses.

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One of the first men that Mr. Mason met on arriving here, was Dr. R. M. Reynolds, the first doctor to locate in Otter Tail county. At the time that Mr. Mason met him, he was crossing the river on the way to where he was building a log house. This log house was located where the Occidental Hotel stands at the present time on Union Avenue south. Mrs. Reynolds had not come to Fergus at that time, and Dr. Reynolds was building the log house preparatory to her arrival. Later Captain Compton moved his house, which stood on Mill street on the site of the Swedish Lutheran church to the site where Dr. Reynolds had built his log house; and it was the Compton house which became a part of the Occidental Hotel. When Dr. Reynolds' log house was torn down, Captain Compton had a little model of it made in the exact proportions including the sign which swung in the breeze, reading, "R. M. Reynolds, Physician and Surgeon."

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This meeting of Dr. Reynolds and Mr. Mason led to a lasting friendship. Both liked to read and discuss questions. They officed together at the start over Sim's Drug Store, which was the first drug store established in the city; and Mr. Mason has always maintained that while the store sold quinine, there was as much liquor consumed as there as there was in a good-sized saloon later on.

It was hard picking in those days for young doctors and young lawyers. Dr. Reynolds used to ride on horseback all over the county making trips north of Pelican Rapids

and Henning, thus becoming acquainted with the scattered settlers and through his influence, business was turned toward Mr. Mason, who gradually began to get a foothold.

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Mr. Mason has never attempted to hide the poverty of those days. That first winter, he and Alonzo Brandenburg and a man named Bill Smith lived in the rear room of a building in which Smith operated a saloon. Mr. Brandenburg, who will be remembered later on as the sheriff and president of Citizen's National Bank, of the Fergus Falls National Bank, and of the First State Bank, was a plasterer in his youth and he did the cooking for his share of the board that winter.

In those days, the settlers were always looking to the East to see who and what was coming. The young men all over the country were moving westward, but what was needed most and what was the scarcest, was somebody with money to do some of the things which they wanted done. Whenever George B. Wright, who lived in Minneapolis, arrived in Fergus Falls, the first things they wanted to know of him was what tidings he brought of the oncoming settlers and industries.

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The village grew slowly because there was no transportation and it was not until 1878 that the railroad reached Fergus Falls and gave it the impetus which set it ahead of other towns in the northwestern part of the state. Neither railroads nor anything else came in those days without an effort, and it was a struggle to see whether the railroad came via Fergus Falls or went through Dayton Hollow. When you drive from here to Parkdale, you travel over some of the old grade which was made when it was intended that the St.

Paul and Pacific should cross the river where the Dayton Hollow dam now stands.

Matthew Wright the father of Edwin M. and Albert M. Wright owned a farm at Dayton which they hoped would be the town site. This family of Wrights was not related to Geo. B. Wright. The railroad would have gone via Dayton Hollow if it had not been for the fact that the road became embarrassed and the Dutch bondholders had to foreclose. It became necessary to get a land grant extended and through influence in the legislature, a provision that the road should be built through Fergus Falls was put into the law extending the land grant.

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Soon after locating here, Mr. Mason formed a law partnership with an eccentric character named Bert Melville which did not last very long because under the articles of agreement both were to attend strictly to business. If anything was taken in it was an excuse for Melville to go on a tear, and the partnership was soon dissolved. Later on he was in partnership with Edwin M. Wright but this did not continue very long. He was also in partnership with J. P. Williams. He practiced alone for a great many years, but finally took Clifford K. Hilton into partnership with him, and this lasted until Mr. Hilton was elected county attorney.

Mr. Mason's practice grew quite rapidly considering the conditions of those days. There was not the money in the country then that there is at the present time; but his ability was recognized. Some time ago in discussing the earning power of attorneys, he said that without the aid of stenographer or even a typewriting machine, he earned \$7,000 on year in his little office on Lincoln avenue.

He was elected city attorney and was a member of the legislature in 1874, representing the 41st district in the lower house. At that time this district comprised Otter Tail, Wilkin and Wadena counties and all the territory north to the Canadian line.

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While attending the school at Groveland Academy in Wasioja, in Dodge county, he met Fannie S. Safford. An attachment sprang up between them and they were married June 9, 1875, after he had started his practice in Fergus Falls. He built a very small house at the corner of Vernon avenue and Court street and they started house keeping in this little house. A few years later it was moved to Bancroft avenue where it now stands and he built his present home where he has resided continuously.

It is interesting to note that in the early days of Fergus Falls there were two distinct ideas as to the proper place for homes. One element thought that the only place was in the grove around Lake Alice while others built on what was later known as Nob Hill which then was virtually devoid of trees and was exceedingly barren. On account of the industry and characteristics of those who built, it was beautified until it has become one of the grand residence sections of the city.

Those who lived over in the grove around Lake Alice always thought it was along ways to Nob Hill, and I remember many years ago being at Mr. Mason's house for dinner. Among the guests were Judge and Mrs. J. P. Williams. As the judge was bidding his host goodbye and he was urged to come again, he replied that he would like to but, using his favorite expletive, "I would come oftener but it is so damn far." The people on the north side have always had this idea bout the locations on the south side of the river.

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Mr. Mason's married life was very happy. He was a good deal of a tease and torment and nothing delighted him more than to have fun at someone else's expense.

Mrs. Mason thoroughly understood this characteristic and was of such a disposition that it never disturbed her, when she was the victim of his wit. When some one soaked him hard oftentimes she used to say to him, "You did not get any more than you deserved."

Mr. and Mrs. Mason entertained a great deal. They liked to have their friends and acquaintances about them. Mrs. Mason delighted to provide her friends and an evening spent with Mr. Mason was an intellectual treat.

Aug. 10, 1927.

Elmer E. Adams.

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For related articles on the MLHP, see Mason's "The Bar of Otter Tail County," "Melville & Mason: The First Law Firm in Fergus Falls," and "John O. Barke (1850-1921)," "James L. Brown (1853-1929)," "William L. Parsons (1858-1939)," "Judge Frank C. Barnes (1889-1963)," and Eben E. Corliss, "Reminiscences of the Early History of Otter Tail County" (1916)." ■

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