

JOHN H. NILES.

(November 22, 1857 – July 28, 1913)

JOHN HENRY NILES arrived in the town of Anoka in the summer of 1883 with educational credentials few other lawyers in the area could match. After reading law for two years with a prominent firm in Albany, New York, he attended the Law Department of the University of Iowa, which awarded him a degree in 1883, and then practiced in Minneapolis with Wilson & Lawrence, one of “the leading firms in the city.”¹ Most of his “brethren at the county bar” would have been impressed that he had worked with Eugene M. Wilson and James W. Lawrence, albeit briefly, but several might have expressed greater interest in his clerkship with that Albany law firm.

Hand, Hale & Bulkeley specialized in appeals to the New York Court of Appeals, the state’s highest court, which sat in Albany. Samuel Hand, the head of the firm, was “a leader of the appellate bar...[who] enjoyed a state-wide prominence,” and reputedly argued appeals before that court “in greater number and importance than those argued by any other lawyer in New York” during the two decades preceding his death in 1886.² For a brief period, he was the reporter of that court’s decisions, compiling them for publication.³

Here we digress. Samuel Hand and his wife Lydia had two children, a daughter, Lily, and a son, Billings.⁴ It is reasonable to suppose that at some point during Niles’ two year clerkship, Billings visited his father’s office and was introduced to him. Almost twenty years later, Billings dropped his first name, and was known thereafter—and to history—by his middle name, Learned. Had Niles lived to see Learned Hand become one of the century’s great jurists and had he children who became lawyers, this meeting, if it

¹ For a description of Wilson & Lawrence, see “Eugene M. Wilson (1883-1890)” 6-7 (MLHP, 2008).

² Gerald Gunther, *Learned Hand: The Man and the Judge* 7 (Knopf, 1994). The partners were Samuel Hand, Matthew Hale and Alpheus T. Bulkeley.

³ Francis Bergan, *The History of the New York Court of Appeals, 1847-1932* 117 (Columbia Univ. Press, 1985).

⁴ Gunther, *supra* note 2, at 3-4. Lily was 8 years older than her brother. Billings Learned Hand would have been 8-10 years old when Niles clerked for his father.

happened, would have become a family legend, repeated for generations, but alas he did not.⁵

Niles may have been attracted to Anoka because it was a small but growing community. Anoka County had 7,108 residents in 1880 and 10,089 in 1885. The town of Anoka, the county seat, had a population of 4,629 in 1885.⁶ Obviously he could not replicate the specialized practice of Samuel Hand in such a small community, yet his clerkship with Hand's firm may have prepared him for success in his eventual specialty — abstracting titles to real estate. Drafting and proofing appellate briefs and abstracting titles require attention to details, concentration, accuracy and patience. Abstracting was also solitary work. He became such a renowned and proficient abstracter that he claimed to hold a monopoly on this service in Anoka County for many years.

In 1900, Charles E. Flandrau's *Encyclopedia of Biography of Minnesota* was published. Because Niles was a "subscriber," a flattering biographical sketch was included in the book (it is flattering because he wrote it):

John H. Niles, one of the most successful lawyers of Anoka, Minnesota, was born in Albany county, New York, November 22, 1857. His father, John H. Niles, senior, of whom he is the namesake, was also a native of the Empire State, who died when the subject of this sketch was a child of four years. John H., junior, was reared in the State of his birth, attended the common schools, and later the high school, of the city of Albany, then went to New Hampshire and became a student at Dartmouth College. He took a classical course, and graduated from the institution in 1880. Upon leaving college, he returned to Albany and read law for two years in the office of Hand, Hole & Bradley (sic), a prominent legal firm of that city. Soon after he came west, and took a course of instruction in the Law Department of the University of Iowa. After obtaining his degree at the university, he came to Minneapolis and practiced his profession for a short time. During the summer of 1883 he located in Anoka, announced

⁵ Learned Hand was nominated to the U. S. District Court for the Southern District of New York by President Taft, confirmed and took office in 1909. He was nominated for the Second Circuit by President Coolidge, confirmed and took office on December 29, 1924. He died in 1961.

⁶ 1889 Blue Book, at 401, 406.

his professional capacity, was immediately recognized as an enterprising and thorough young lawyer, and soon found himself established in a lucrative and growing practice. In connection with the regular duties of his profession, he adopted, as a side issue, the specialty of abstracting titles; and the demand for his services in this line increased until his work as an abstract attorney formed an important and profitable department of his business. Indeed, for many years he has had the exclusive control of the abstracting for Anoka county. The political views of Mr. Niles are Democratic, in the larger sense of the word — he is a Democrat in principle rather than in party prejudice. He has entertained no aspirations towards public office, but he is always ambitious to see the high places of the land filled with men of high ability and character. Mr. Niles is a thorough-going business man, and in the prime of life possesses a handsome competency; but he is also a man of kindly impulses and deeds, and while traveling the road of financial success he has made warm friends all along the way. Mr. Niles was married, on November 22, 1887, at Anoka, to Miss Zole Ticknor, a daughter of H. L. Ticknor, of that city. One child has been born to Mr. and Mrs. Niles.⁷

Two years later, another self-portrait of Niles appeared in a history of Anoka County. Though shorter, it listed some of his civic activities:

JOHN H. NILES, attorney at law, Anoka, is a graduate from Dartmouth (1880), and from the law department of the Iowa State University (1882). He was born in Bethlehem township, Albany county, New York, Nov. 27, 1857. His father died when he was four years of age, and the family removed a few years later to Albany, where Mr. Niles graduated from the high school in 1876. After this he studied law in the office of Hand, Hale & Bulkeley at Albany, just before his entrance to the Iowa State University. He spent one year in the law office of Wilson & Lawrence, Minneapolis, and in the spring of 1883 came to Anoka and opened a law office, and has been in continuous practice ever since. In connection with his legal work he conducts an abstract office. Mr. Niles has been on the school board for eight years, and

⁷ Charles E. Flandrau, *I Encyclopedia of Biography of Minnesota* 448-49 (1900). The correct name of the firm was Hand, Hale & Bulkeley.

was president of this body for several years. He is secretary of the library board, and has taken an active part in the erection of the fine new library building. Mr. Niles was married Nov. 22, 1887, to Zale Ticknor, and one daughter, Natalie, was born to them. Mrs. Niles died Feb. 20, 1902.⁸

Niles died on July 28, 1913, at age fifty-five. The following day the *Anoka Herald* carried his obituary on its front page:⁹

JOHN H. NILES

One of Anoka's Leading Citizens Died Yesterday.

John H. Niles died at his residence on Third avenue yesterday morning after a prolonged illness. Although his death has been expected for some weeks it was only during the past ten days that he began to sink rapidly.

He was born in Albany county, New York on November 27, 1857. A few years later he moved to Albany and there graduated from the high school in 1876, from Dartmouth university in 1880 and from the law department of Iowa state university in 1882.

He spent a year in Minneapolis in the offices of Wilson & Lawrence and in the spring of 1883 came to Anoka to reside. He remained in the continuous practice of law here from that time until about a year ago when failing health forbade.

On November 22, 1887 he was married to Zale Ticknor, who died February 20, 1902.

During his long residency in Anoka, Mr. Nils held many positions of trust and honor. He was president of the school board, a member of the library board, municipal judge and a member of the Episcopal church and of the Knights of Pythias.

⁸ Albert M. Goodrich, *History of Anoka County and the Towns of Champlin and Dayton in Hennepin County, Minnesota* 265-66 (1905).

⁹ *Anoka Herald*, Tuesday, July 29, 1913, at 1.

Mr. Niles was a man of many friends, a student, kindly and genial and well liked by all who knew him.

The funeral services will be held from the home Wednesday afternoon. Rev. A. D. Stowe, his former pastor, will officiate. The Knights of Pythias will assemble at the lodge hall at two o'clock sharp to attend. ■

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