

Joseph A. Ross

September 22, 1829 – April 2, 1913

On August 29, 1912, the weekly *Princeton Union* carried the following item on its first page:

E. L. McMillan for County Attorney.

Late yesterday afternoon Mr. E. L. McMillan filed for the republican nomination for county attorney. Mr. McMillan had no intention of filing until Mr. J. A. Ross, the present incumbent, informed him that he would not be a candidate for re-election. With all due deference to the other gentlemen who seek the office, we believe that Mr. McMillan will be nominated and elected by a stunning majority, and that he will make the most efficient county attorney Mille Lacs county has ever had. Mr. McMillan ranks high in his profession and is a thoroughly honest and conscientious gentleman at all times and in all places. Mille Lacs county will indeed be fortunate if it secures the services of Mr. McMillan. ¹

The following week, the *Union* published a lengthy front-page article on another aspect of this story—the decision of “Uncle Joe” Ross to retire after a quarter century of service:

¹ As it turned out, McMillan eked out victory over Olin C. Myron in the Republican primary on September 17, 1912. He received 512 votes to Myron’s 492 votes. *Princeton Union*, September 26, 1912, at 4.

In the general election on November 5, he won by a large majority:

Elvero L. McMillan (Republican).....	1,091
Charles A. Dickey (Democrat).....	373
Rolleff Vaaler (Public Ownership).....	450

Princeton Union, November 14, 1912, at 4.

TWENTY-SIX YEARS

**For That Length of Time Joseph A. Ross
Has Served as County Attorney of Mille Lacs.**

**He Proved a Conscientious Official in
Whom People of the County
Had Implicit Confidence.**

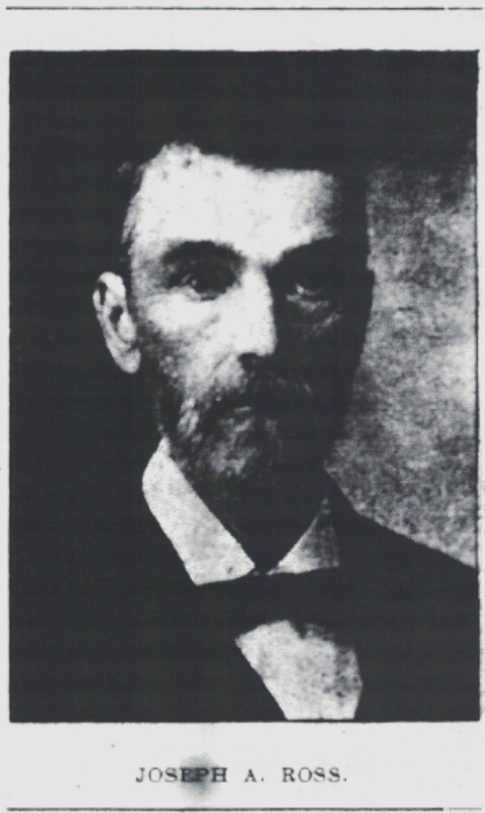
A hastily written announcement of the candidacy of Mr. McMillan and the retirement of Mr. J. A. Ross from the race for county attorney appeared in the last issue of the Union. But the withdrawal of an old and faithful official deserves more than a passing notice. Be it understood that Mr. Ross withdrew of his own accord. Had he chosen to remain a candidate he would undoubtedly have again been elected. He had such a warm place in the affections of the voters that he was invincible at the polls.

Mr. Ross was born at Jefferson, Maine, September 22, 1829. He was graduated from Waterville college in that state in 1856. He served in a Maine regiment during the war of the rebellion and for his soldierly qualities and meritorious conduct was promoted to a lieutenancy.

After the close of the war he taught school in his native state for a number of years and came to Minnesota in 1869. For a time he farmed in the town of Baldwin and followed his avocation as a teacher. In 1876 he was admitted to the bar and the same year located in Princeton and was elected county attorney of Mille Lacs county. The first ballot the writer ever cast contained Mr. Ross' name for county attorney. Mr. Ross performed the duties devolving upon him in such a

satisfactory manner that he was re-elected in 1878, and served until January, 1881. In 1890 he was again elected county attorney and has held the office continuously ever since. On other occasions he had live opponents good, able attorneys but a majority of the voters always expressed their preference for "Uncle Joe."

Mr. Ross was ever faithful to the best interests of the county and well the voters knew it; they



believed in him and trusted him; their confidence was not misplaced. He always did his duty, but was never arbitrary or unreasonable. His sympathies have always been with the poor and unfortunate. Had he charged reasonable fees for the legal advice he has given he would be a rich man to day. But Uncle Joe is so constituted that he could not charge a poor client for advice, and his advice was always sound.

Now, as stated at the commencement of this article, Mr. Ross voluntarily withdraws from the contest for the office which he has so long and so ably filled, with the proud distinction of having held the office of county attorney longer continuously than any other man in Minnesota, and

he retires with the best wishes of the people whom he has served so efficiently. ²

Ross's efficiency in office was a recurring theme in the newspaper's accounts of district court proceedings. Here, for example, is an excerpt from its article on the first day of the Spring term of district court in Mille Lacs County in May 1912:

In Joseph A. Ross, county attorney, the taxpayers have a grand old man who is ever alert to their best interests. Mr. Ross is a man who does not believe in advising people to rush into litigation if there is any possible way of otherwise settling their differences.³

He died on April 2, 1913, aged eighty-two. The *Princeton Union* carried the story:

JOSEPH A. ROSS DEAD

**For Many Years County Attorney of
Mille Lacs and a Man Beloved
in the Community.**

Joseph A. Ross, for 26 years county attorney of Mille Lacs, passed away the home of S. Petterson in this village at noon yesterday, April 2.

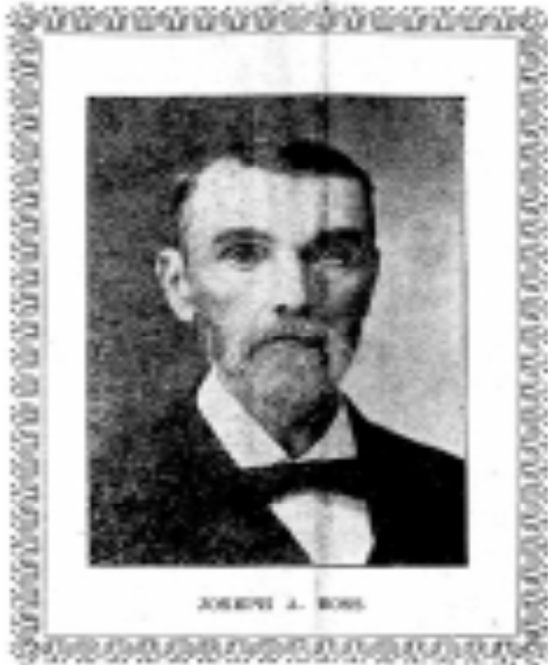
Mr. Ross had been ailing for about a year, but, despite his advanced age he was a man of remarkable vitality and was not compelled to take to his bed until a short time before his death. For several days before his demise, "Uncle Joe," as he was familiarly known to his numerous

² *Princeton Union*, September 5, 1912, at 1.

³ *Princeton Union*, April 4, 1912, at 1.

friends, was unable to take food of any kind, and he gradually sank until death relieved him of his sufferings.

He passed away in peaceful repose while friends, who had known for some time that the end was near, watched over him. The last time that "Uncle Joe" was down town was on village election day,



and then he persisted in casting his ballot, and his wish was gratified by his friends, who accompanied and assisted him to the polls. In consequence of ill health Mr. Ross withdrew his candidacy for the county attorneyship at the last election, but he could doubtless have been elected to that office as long as he

lived, for he was a faithful servant of the people and always performed the duties of his office satisfactorily. There was not a man in Mille Lacs county who could defeat our old friend at the polls.

. . .

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After the close of the war he taught school in his native state for a number of years and came to

Minnesota in 1869. For a time he farmed in the town of Baldwin and followed his vocation as a teacher. In 1876 he was admitted to the bar and the same year located in Princeton and was elected county attorney of Mille Lacs county. Mr. Ross performed the duties devolving upon him in such a satisfactory manner that he was re-elected in 1878, and served until January, 1881. In 1890 he was again elected county attorney and held the office until compelled by ill health to tender his resignation. Upon many occasions, when a candidate for the office of county attorney, Mr. Ross had able opponents, but so well liked was he throughout the county that he was continuously elected. He is survived by one brother, E. A. Ross, and two step daughters, Mrs. S. Petterson and Miss Mary Huse, all of this village.

As a man Mr. Ross was the soul of honor. He was absolutely incorruptible and as a friend many a poor man can bear testimony to his great kindness in fighting their cases and giving them legal advice free of charge. When a poor man was in the right, and Mr. Ross knew it, he would even pay money out of his own pocket to fight his case for him.

He performed his work in this world, and he performed it well, and many mourn his taking away. Besides being a veteran of the civil war, a member of the G. A. R., a Mason and an Odd Fellow, Mr. Ross was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, and of this organization he was particularly proud.⁴

⁴ *Princeton Union*, April 3, 1913, at 1 (funeral arrangements omitted) (portrait reduced and repositioned).

On April 9, 1913, the Mille Lacs County bar presented a memorial to Ross in District Court. The proceedings were described by the *Princeton Union*:

A memorial was presented to Judge Roeser yesterday afternoon at 5 clock by the Mille Lacs county bar in a mark of respect to the memory the late Joseph A. Ross. E. L. McMillan made the opening address, which was as follows:

"If the court please, the committee appointed by your honor to prepare a memorial in the form of a resolution in recognition of the death Mr. Ross, for a great many years county attorney of this county and a member of this bar and officer of this court, have prepared a brief memorial which we now present to the court and which Mr. Keith, one of the members of the committee, will read to your honor and to those assembled here. In presenting this report and asking that it be spread upon the minutes of the court and copies be furnished to the press, there is little that would be fitting for me to say in commendation of Mr. Ross. In fact, in this community where he has been so long and so favorably known, words of commendation on my part would amount to but little.

He was one of the first men whom I met on coming to this county about eleven years ago, and our relations were always very cordial and very friendly. Not that we always agreed, because he was a man of strong opinions and strong likes and dislikes, but he was also a man of friendly disposition with whom it was possible to disagree and still maintain relations of the most cordial friendship, and I am very to say that that has been the in the relations between Mr. Ross and

myself. I most cordially endorse all that is said in this memorial, and if there were anything I would add, it would be to call attention to the fact that Mr. Ross was a man particularly devoted to his conscience, a man who listened to the words of his conscience and was peculiarly guided had a peculiar respect and obedience for the dictates of his conscience. What he believed to be right was the course he would invariably pursue without regard to what its effect might be in a social or political or business way. He was a man who peculiarly desired to follow his conscience and to be governed and guided by what he thought was right in any situation that might arise. While he is with us no more in the flesh, I think it will be long before the influence of Mr. Ross, not only on fellow members of the bar but on the community at large, will wane. With these few words, I will ask Mr. Keith to read this memorial and present it to the court."

Charles Keith then read the memorial, as follows:

"Upon the eve of the convening of this court the senior member of the Mille Lacs county bar in years and experience, like a shock of corn fully ripe, has passed to the great beyond, and the undersigned, as directed by the court, present this memorial of his life and services.

"Joseph Augustus Ross, a descendant of sturdy colonial and revolutionary stock, was born at Jefferson, Maine, September 22, 1829. His boy hood days were the usual days of the boy on the farm, dependent on his own resources. He graduated from Waterville college (now Colby university) in 1856 and followed his chosen pro-

fession of teaching until the commencement of the civil war, enlisting in a Maine regiment as a private. His abilities were early recognized and, through successive promotions, he reached and held the grade of lieutenant at its close. He then resumed his profession of teaching, which he followed in Maine and Minnesota for the ten years next succeeding.

"He was admitted to the bar of this court in 1876 and the same year took up his abode in Princeton, where he continued to reside until his death, April 2, 1913, and where, with a brief interval, he held the office of county attorney for this county for twenty-six years. He was infinitely a man of the people they knew him and loved him as a man. His presence was always a cheer. He was sympathetic and responsive to every human appeal. Endowed with a spirit of unfailing kindness, he was the personification of generosity. Friendliness was his birthright. He was a scholarly man of wide reading and quick application his mind intuitively turned toward investigation. He was the friend of the poor and oppressed, and the man without money or friends found in him a safe counselor and devoted advocate. He did not want and would not have money beyond his necessities, and his name for it was the language of contempt.

"His tender and solicitous care of his family was marked. For more than twenty years he watched by night at the sick bed of his life companion, whose life struggle ended only short time before his own. In his death the community has lost a patriotic and useful citizen, the county faithful servant, and this court and bar a beloved

member, whose memory we shall long cherish and revere.

"We move that this expression of our sincere regard be spread upon the records of this court.

**E. L. McMillan, O. C. Myron, Charles Keith,
Committee."**

Olin C. Myron – "May it please the court, I do not know that I can add very much to what has been said and read. I am only a new beginner the law profession in this county, had occasion to come into this county on August 16, 1909, and six days later I always remember that date, August 23, 1909, I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Ross in a criminal action. He gave me a lot valuable information, proved himself to be a friend and co-worker, an ardent counselor and a devoted advocate of what was right and justice in all matters. I remember what he said the first time he shook hands. He said, 'I am very glad to meet you. I hope you are a man who believes in righteousness.' And whenever he came to Milaca he would always make it a point to call at my office and confer with me regarding matters and would always give me valuable data concerning the organization of the county and its growing days. I have always cherished the ideas that were given to me by Mr. Ross, and I feel that I cannot add any more to what has been said. I heartily concur in the resolutions, and I ask that the court spread upon its minutes a fitting tribute to the memory of Joseph A. Ross. "

Charles A. Dickey – "May it please the court, and gentlemen of the bar, I can add nothing to the sentiments that have been embodied in the resolution presented to the court. I can only say that personally I was as near, perhaps, to Mr. Ross as any member of the bar in this county or district. I came to Princeton something over twenty-five years ago, a mere boy, and after being here a short time I went into partnership with Mr. Ross. I was his partner for over three years, and I can thoroughly concur with all that has been expressed both in the resolutions and by the remarks made by the other gentlemen who have preceded me. Mr. Ross was indeed a man of strong and determined fealty to his opinions, which were founded upon the dictates of his conscience.

"He was not a lover of money except, as has been said, what was necessary to support him and his family. He did not love money for just the sake of money, and whenever he could render a service without a financial reward he did it. As a successful practitioner in the sense of being a successful money getter in the practice of law, he was not that. I remember as a boy that oftentimes it seemed to me that he ought to have more reward than he would demand or receive, but it was absolutely impossible to get him to take it. Many a time I have seen him, when a client would try to pay him, return the money. Many a time I have heard a client say, 'Well, you have got to take it,' and throw it down on the table and walk out. And many a time I have seen Mr. Ross chase him out of the office and almost force it upon him. So I say he did not want the money simply for the sake of the money. If he

needed that dollar perhaps he would have taken it. But he was a good old man. He was a man that never did any harm to this community, but he did much good to this community."

H. B. Fryberger – "Please the court, I had only the briefest acquaintance with Mr. Ross: I met him but once, a year ago last December. I think, or, it was at the term of court a year ago last fall. At that time a little incident came up when there were a number of important cases from a financial stand point that were on the calendar and demanding the right of way. Mr. Ross had some very minor criminal case that he wished tried, and I was struck with the firmness of Mr. Ross and at the same time the courtesy that he extended to us in that matter. He evidently was a gentleman of the old school, and I have thought about it time and time again since the extreme courtesy of Mr. Ross at that time, and at the same time insisting upon his rights. I think from the testimonials that have been offered here to his memory that it must be Princeton has lost a very valuable citizen, and can only say to the younger members of the bar that they would do well to emulate this man instead of trying to imitate him. "

W. S. Foster – "Please the court, as a former member of the Mille Lacs county bar, I am glad to join in the kindly sentiments expressed in the little memorial which could not be expressed too strongly in Mr. Ross' case. As already stated, he was one of those kindly men whose smile will

live many years to come in the memory of all who knew him. Perhaps the words of Mark Anthony could not be better applied in any case his: 'His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world. This was a man.' "

The Court — "Gentlemen, I have not had the pleasure of an intimate personal acquaintance with the deceased, but from my deceased partner Mr. Reynolds, and other members of this bar, I have heard a great deal of his quaint personality, his kindly and cheery nature, and his sterling honesty. He lived a long and useful life in this community, and the high esteem in which he was held by those who knew him, and the grateful remembrance of those who were helped by the deceased without pay or expectation of reward, will be a more fitting and enduring monument to his worth as a man and citizen than marble slab or fulsome praise. Your meeting here has been very fitting and very appropriate, and it is hereby ordered that your memorial be filed and recorded in the minutes of this court, and a copy thereof and of the remarks made by the bar be transmitted to his relatives and furnished to the local press. And as a further mark of respect to his memory, this court will now stand adjourned for the day." ⁵

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Posted MLHP: August 13, 2017.

⁵ *Princeton Union*, April 10, 1913, at 1-4.