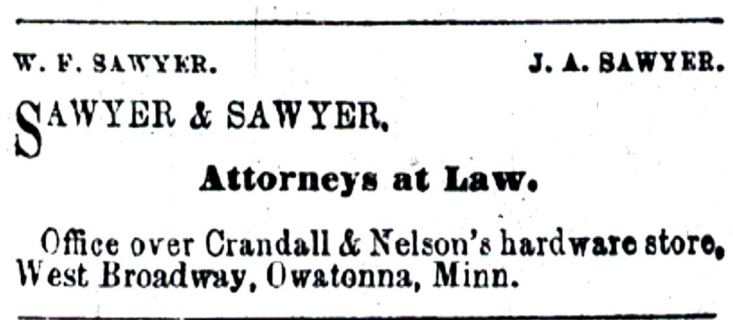


Joseph A. Sawyer

(August 2, 1846 + June 16, 1918)

The Sawyer family moved from New Hampshire to Minnesota in 1856. Joseph A. Sawyer was ten years old at the time. He attended local schools and received his higher education at Carleton College. Like many lawyers-to-be, he taught school for many years while also reading law. In the spring of 1880 he was admitted to practice by the Steele County District Court and joined his brother, Walter F. Sawyer, who was already practicing. Their business card was published in the *Owatonna Journal and Herald*:¹



The firm opened a branch in Waseca, an unusual move in the 1880s.² He served as the attorney for Steele County and the city of Owatonna for several years. In October 1906 his son Abbott was admitted to the bar and joined his father in the firm of J. A. Sawyer and A. W. Sawyer, while William joined Wesley A. Sperry in the firm Sawyer & Sperry.³

¹ *Owatonna Journal and Herald*, March 11, 1887, at 1.

² *History of Steele and Waseca Counties, Minnesota* 30-31 (MLHP, 2008) (published first, 1887) ("J. A. Sawyer, of the law firm of Sawyer & Sawyer, was born in Merrimac County, N. H., in 1846. When eight years, his old father's family came west to Illinois and to Minnesota in 1856. Our subject received his education at Northfield, where he graduated in 1877. He afterward studied law and was admitted to the bar in the spring of 1880. The firm of Sawyer & Sawyer also have an office at Waseca and do an extensive legal business. Mr. Sawyer's father, Joseph Sawyer, died in the fall of 1886, aged nearly eighty-five years. Our subject was married in 1882 to Miss E. N. Abbott, a native of New Hampshire. The names of their children are Abbott W. and Carleton J.").

³ *Roll of Attorneys, Supreme Court, State of Minnesota, 1858-1970*, at 91 (Minnesota Digital Library). Abbott Woodman Sawyer was admitted on October 1, 1906, by the State Board.

In 1907, Joseph Sawyer placed the following biographical sketch in *The Book of Minnesotans*:⁴

SAWYER, Joseph A., lawyer; born near Concord, New Hampshire, Aug. 2, 1846; son of Joseph and Ann Sawyer; came to Minnesota, 1856; educated at Carleton College, Northfield, Minn.; married at Northfield, 1882, to Miss Nellie Abbott. Taught school for many years; read law and was admitted to the bar, 1881 and to U. S. Supreme Court bar, March, 1903; has been engaged in practice of law in Owatonna since 1882; member firm of J. A. and A. W. Sawyer. Was county attorney Steele Co. 4 years and city attorney 3 years. Republican. Congregationalist. Recreations: Literature, gardening and working with tools. Address: Owatonna, Minn.

Three years later the following sketch appeared in a chapter on the bench and bar of Steele County written by Wesley A. Sperry for a two volume history of Rice and Steele Counties:⁵

J. A. Sawyer is a brother of W. F. Sawyer, was born in New Hampshire, in 1846, and came to Minnesota in 1856. He was educated in the schools of this county and at

⁴ Albert Nelson Marquis ed., *The Book of Minnesotans: A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Men of Minnesota* 445 (A. N. Marquis & Co., 1907).

⁵ Wesley A. Sperry, "The Legal Profession of Steele County" in Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, 1 *History of Rice and Steele Counties, Minnesota* 29-30 (MLHP, 2011-2015) (published first, 1910). It followed this sketch of brother William:

W. F. Sawyer was born in Warner, Merimac county, New Hampshire, on October 26, 1850, and came to Steele county in May, 1856. He was educated in the public schools of this county and at Carleton college, Northfield. He studied law in this county and was admitted to the bar in Owatonna in 1876. Subsequently he went into partnership with his brother, J. A. Sawyer, under the firm name of Sawyer & Sawyer. During this partnership they established a branch office at Waseca where a portion of their time was spent, the office afterwards passing into the hands of W. M. Abbott who had previously studied law with them in this city and is a brother-in-law of J. A. Sawyer. Mr. Sawyer has held the office of county attorney for six years and city attorney ever since one can remember. He is at present the senior member of the firm of Sawyer & Sperry and still enjoys the confidence and patronage of a large clientage.

Carleton college, Northfield. He studied law and was admitted to the bar in Steele county in 1880, and entered into partnership with his brother, W. F. Sawyer, under the firm name of Sawyer & Sawyer. He has held the office of county attorney for four years, and has enjoyed a very large practice, covering Steele, Waseca and Freeborn counties. He has probably had more cases in the Supreme court than any other attorney in the city. He is noted for a great memory and as being a great worker and is always seeing possibilities in his cases that other attorneys are unable to discover but for which he is always able to give reason and generally to find authority to substantiate. He is still in the practice of law having associated with him his son A. W. Sawyer.

On February 28, 1911, Joseph was admitted to practice by the Minnesota Supreme Court (his admission by the district court in 1880 permitted him to appear in previous appeals).⁶

He died on June 16, 1918, at age seventy-one. His obituary was published in *The Daily People's Press*:

**DEATH CLAIMS
J. A. SAWYER
THIS MORNING**

**Prominent Attorney Passes
Away at His Home in This City
Sunday Morning
Was A Pioneer of
Steele County**

**Was Prominent in Congregational
Church Circles in State and
Was Leader.**

⁶ Roll of Attorneys, Supreme Court, State of Minnesota, 1858-1970, at 111 (Minnesota Digital Library). The Roll states "Order from district court Steele County, admitted to practice." It also lists 1881 as the date of his admission in District Court.

Attorney J. A. Sawyer died at his home in this city Sunday morning. He had been in poor health for several months and had been confined to his bed for several months.

Mr. Sawyer was born in in New Hampshire in 1846. He came to Minnesota in 1856. He was educated in the schools of this county and at Carleton college, Northfield. He studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1880 and entered into partnership with his brother, City Attorney W. F. Sawyer, under the firm name Sawyer & Sawyer. He has held the office of county attorney for four years. Later he associated with his son, A. W. Sawyer in the practice of law, the firm being J. A. Sawyer and A. W. Sawyer.

Mr. Sawyer enjoyed a very large practice covering Steele, Waseca and Freeborn counties. He was a worker and had more cases in the supreme court than any other attorney in this city. He had a great memory.

Mr. Sawyer was a public spirit[ed] man. He was a leader in the Congregational church. He had many close friends and was held in respect and esteem by the entire community.⁷

⁷ *The Daily People's Press* (Owatonna), Sunday, June 16, 1918, at 2.

Two days later, at the annual meeting of the Steele County Old Settlers Association, a memorial was drafted and adopted:

[Toastmaster] E. T. Winship ... spoke of the death of J. A. Sawyer, one of the old settlers, who made an address here at the Old Settlers' Annual meeting last year, and appointed Benj. E. Darby, F. W. Adams and Thomas E. Cashman a committee to draft resolutions of condolence to be published and a copy of which would be sent his family.

...

Resolutions of Condolence

On the death of Joseph A. Sawyer, Esq., authorized by the Steel County Old Settlers' Association at their annual meeting at the Owatonna Mineral Springs, Tuesday, June 18, 1918:

Whereas our heavenly father has seen fit to take from our midst one of our pioneer citizens, Mr. Joseph A. Sawyer, a kind and loving father, a faithful husband and a good neighbor and able lawyer.

Therefore, be it resolved that we, the members of the Steel County Old Settlers' Association, assembled June 18, 1918, do extend to the bereaved family of the deceased our heartfelt sympathy in this their role of sorrow and that copies of these resolutions be published and sent the wife and family of the deceased.

At the annual convention of the Minnesota State Bar Association in 1918, a memorial with an unusual concluding paragraph was delivered:

Joseph A. Sawyer was born in Concord, N. H., on August 2d, 1846. His parents were Joseph and Ann Sawyer, who came to Minnesota and settled in Steele County in 1856, when Joseph was ten years of age. As a boy, Joseph worked on the farm, assisting his parents, and attended school, finally finishing his education at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota. In 1882 he married Miss Nellie Abbott.

After finishing his education at Northfield he taught school for a number of years.

He took up law, and in 1881 was admitted to the bar. For many years he practiced law in Owatonna, Minnesota, first in company with his brother, W. F. Sawyer, and later with his son, Abbott W. Sawyer, and the firm soon took a leading position among the attorneys, not only of Steele County, but in the territory adjoining.

While some men get into the profession of law through circumstances which lead them there, it may be said of Joseph Sawyer that when he entered the legal field he did so, first driven by his ambition to become a lawyer, and second, because the natural tendency of his mind made him specially qualified for the work, and it may be truly said of Joseph Sawyer that he had a legal mind. He possessed the power of analyzation in an exceptional degree. His remarkable memory, coupled with his capacity for intense application, peculiarly fitted him for the legal work, and his success as a lawyer naturally followed.

Benj. E. Darby,
F. W. Adams,
Thos. E. Cashman,
Committee.

The Daily People's Press, Wednesday, June 19, 1918, at 7 ("Old Settlers Deplore Loss of J. A. Sawyer").

Had Joseph Sawyer confined his efforts to the legal field, he might have been a wealthier man at the time of his death, but the love of nature and a desire to couple farming operations with the profession of law, were a handicap to his financial success. This is mentioned not in a derogatory way, but to bring forth the characteristics of the man when facing a financial crisis, for first of all, it is Joseph Sawyer, the man, whose memory we wish to honor. That he was a lawyer and a good one, was but an incident, but mostly do we rejoice in the memory of him as an honorable man with irreproachable habits, a citizen trusted and respected, and a father, who by his example and by self-sacrifice brought up and educated a family of children, who, on their part have become useful and honored members of society, the facts that count in a man's life.⁸

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⁸ Proceedings, Minnesota State Bar Association 163 (1918).