

Edwin M. Wright

(January 18, 1836 • November 27, 1893)

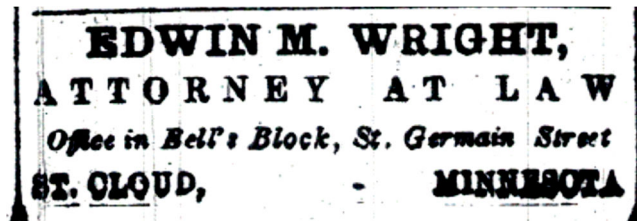
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Edwin Menzo Wright settled in Otter Tail County, Minnesota in 1857, was wounded in the Dakota War of 1862, and moved to St. Cloud, the seat of Stearns County in 1863. He read law and was admitted to the bar by the district court on April 14, 1864.¹ He entered politics, served as county attorney from 1868 to 1870,² and in 1871, running as a Democrat, defeated Lawrence Collins, a politically ambitious lawyer and future Supreme Court Justice, to represent Senate District 31, which encompassed St. Cloud. The results of the election on November 7, 1871, were:³

Edwin Wright.....	1,411
L. W. Collins.....	906

He served one term, and did not seek re-election.

Like other lawyers, he placed his professional card in the local newspaper: ⁴



¹ William Bell Mitchell, 1 *History of Stearns County, Minnesota* 506 (1915). Other publications list 1865 as his date of admission.

² Id at 106-107.

³ *St. Cloud Journal*, November 16, 1871, at 3. Wright's victory did not please the editors of the *Journal*:

The defeat of Capt. L. W. Collins for Senator is to be regretted. He would have rendered Stearns county just such services in the Legislature as are needed. But the leaders of the Democracy feared his growing influence, and brought the full machinery of their party organization, together with all outside influences which could be secured, to bear in defeating him. The result merely demonstrates that the people of Stearns county care more for an empty political victory than for their material interests.

⁴ *St. Cloud Journal*, July 13, 1871, at 1.

Around 1873, he returned to Otter Tail County, where he owned and worked a farm, and reestablished his law practice in Fergus Falls, the county seat. He still published his business card in the St. Cloud newspapers:⁵

**EDWIN M. WRIGHT,
ATTORNEY AT LAW,
FERGUS FALLS, MINN.**

In 1874, he formed a partnership with John W. Mason, and their card appeared in the local newspapers for years:⁶

**EDWIN M. WRIGHT. JOHN W. MASON.
Wright & Mason,
Attorneys at Law,
FERGUS FALLS, MINN.**

He also managed the large estate of Morris D. Cutler, which eventually occupied so much of his time that he stopped practicing. In 1886, the following profile was published in *The Northwest Magazine*:

Hon. Edwin M. Wright

The subject of this sketch, Hon. Edwin M. Wright, was born in Ontario, Canada, January 18, 1836, and moved to the United States with his parents in 1848, settled in Fond du Lac Wisconsin. He was educated at Appleton, in Lawrence University, came to Otter Tail County, Minn., in 1857. In 1862 during the Civil War, he was one of the defenders of Fort Abercrombie, and was severely wounded. Mr. Wright killed with his bayonet the Indian that wounded him. In 1863 he went to St. Cloud, Minn., studied law and was admitted to practice in 1865. He

⁵ *St. Cloud Journal*, September 10, 1974, at 1.

⁶ *Fergus Falls Advocate*, January 13, 1875, at 1.

practiced law in Stearns County from 1865 to 1873, and in the meantime was engaged in farming and Otter Tail County. He served Stearns County, first [as] attorney, and later 1872 as its representative in the state Senate. He commenced the practice law in Otter Tail County [in] 1873, and is still in practice at the present time. He was once elected county attorney of Otter Tail; was a Presidential Elector on the Democratic ticket in 1884; member of Board of Education for four years, and is at the present time a member of the City Council of Fergus Falls.

Mr. Wright is agent for one of the largest estates in Otter Tail County, the property of non-residents.



HON. EDWIN M. WRIGHT.

He is the earliest settler in the county and has seen it pass through every period of its growth, until to-day, Otter Tail has but few equals in general prosperity as well as in natural advantages and beauty. Mr. Wright is still in the prime of life. He has a good law practice and enjoys the confidence and esteem of the citizens.⁷

Many years later, John W. Mason included an affectionate portrait of his old law partner in a history of the county:

EDWIN M. WRIGHT.

Edwin M. Wright, son of Matthew Wright, was one of the early pioneers. At the time of the Indian massacre in 1862, Matthew Wright had a saw-mill on his claim about five miles southwest of Fergus Falls, where the lower dam of the Otter Tail Power Company is now located. At the time of the outbreak, a part of the family, at least, was at

⁷ *The Northwest Magazine*, October, 1886 at 17. (original spelling not changed).

the saw-mill on their claim, then called Dayton. Though this claim was miles and miles from any other human habitation and contained only the log house and primitive mill, still, frontier-like, it had its name. When the Indians went on the war path, the Wrights, with the other few settlers in this region, took refuge at Fort Abercrombie, situated on the Red river about twelve miles below the present city of Breckenridge. One brother, Edward, was killed by the Indians between Dayton and the fort.

The subject of this sketch was a remarkable man in many respects. His height was a little over six feet. He was very deliberate in movement and speech, and had at all times the most perfect command of his mental and physical powers, and was very reticent in talking of himself. He was a graduate of Appleton College, Wisconsin, a good lawyer and a brave man, as what I am about to tell will show.

In 1874, he had been my law partner for over two years. At that time there was an inclosure on the north bank of the river used for a bath-house.

While in the bath-house with Mr. Wright one hot day in summer, I observed a very severe scar on his shoulder. I had never heard of any injury received by him, and when we returned to the office, I asked him directly how and when he sustained the injury to his shoulder. He said it was in 1862 at Fort Abercrombie. I waited for further information and as it was not forthcoming, asked him to tell me about it. After some hesitation, and then in a rather indifferent manner, he related the following incident:

He said that one night at the fort, after the settlers had all been brought in there, he heard a noise in the stable among the horses. Saying nothing to the others, he took his gun, on which the bayonet was fixed, and went out to the barn to investigate. It was dark at the time, and as he opened the door and stepped in behind the horses, he was shot in the shoulder by an Indian. As soon as the shot was fired the Indian jumped into the manger in front of the horses and lay there. There was no way of escape from the barn except by the door where he stood. Wright

reversed his gun, ran to the manger, where the Indian was lying, and jammed his bayonet clear through the Indian, killing him then and there. The short but thrilling story was ended in these words: "When I ran him through with my bayonet, he squealed like a pig."

During my long acquaintance with Mr. Wright, I never heard him refer to the incident again. His hatred of the Indians was sublime, if that word may be applied to hatred. In 1874, another brother, John, was killed in Dakota by the Indians, and who can say that he did not have ample reason for his hatred? A man who had been shot himself and had two brothers scalped by the Indians, could hardly be expected to entertain great Christian love for the "noble red man." He died at Fergus Falls in 1893 in the month of November.⁸

He died on the night of Monday November 27, 1893, at age fifty-seven. The *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* reported the story:

DEATH OF E. M. WRIGHT.

One of the oldest citizens of Fergus Falls passes away after a lingering illness.

Edwin M. Wright died at his home in this city Tuesday (sic) night at 11:20 o'clock after an illness, which with occasional periods of revival, has lasted for the past four years. His illness was Bright's disease, which he has fought with a will that was indomitable even to the last. The time of the funeral will be announced later.

Edwin M. Wright was born in Trenton, Canada, January 18, 1836, one of a family of six, two brothers and four sisters. When he was a boy of 12 his parents moved to Fond du Lac, Wis., and shortly afterwards to Appleton Wis. At Appleton young Wright graduated with honors from Lawrence University. When he was 21 years old he struck out alone for the western frontier, one of the outposts of which at that time was at Otter Tail city. It was at that time of the first "townsite boom" which had

⁸ John W. Mason, ed., 1 *History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota* 668-669 (1916).

so much to do with the early development of this country. His older brother Edward had preceded him and located at townsite called for "Lapham," on the present site of Judge Williams' farm, south of this city. Edwin located a claim on the banks of the Red River, five miles below the city, at the ford, afterward known as Dayton. Here he lived alone for two years, and was joined by his parents and other members of the family.

In the year 1862 came the great Indian outbreak, which swept all over the Northwest, and the Wrights moved back to St. Cloud, even then a well-settled place. At St. Cloud Edwin studied law with Judge Parsons, and after being admitted began its practice there. He rapidly came to the front as an attorney and occupied a leading position in the bar of Stearns County. He was county attorney for several terms, and was sent to the legislature as state senator, besides holding other offices of honor and trust.

He lived at St. Cloud until 1871 and then moved back to Dayton. Meanwhile the settlement of Fergus Falls had been started and Mr. Wright practiced law there, riding to and fro each day. Dayton was the natural site of the town, from its being the head of navigation, with a river crossing and water power, and for a long time it was uncertain whether Dayton or Fergus Falls would be the site of the future city. At one time Mr. Wright, by the grant of a large tract at Dayton, succeeded in getting the railroad to agree to cross the river at that point, and it looked as if Dayton would be the town. Then there was another shuffle of the cards. The railroad was induced to change and Dayton was left out, leaving the land near simply good farming land, nothing more. The stories and reminiscences of those early days are legion, many of them full of interest and excitement. Mr. Wright philosophically abandoned the struggle and moved into Fergus Falls, where he has lived ever since.

In 1872, one year after year he came to Dayton the second time, he was married at Little Falls, Minn., where his wife's parents lived, to Miss Josephine Braun. He leaves a wife and four children, three girls, Mary, Carrie and Kittie, and a boy of 16, Edward. Mr. Wright's two older brothers, John and Edward, died years ago. The

latter was killed in the Indian outbreak in 1862, the former by Indians near Bismarck, North Dakota, in 1875. The parents, Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Wright, still survive, and for some time past have lived with their son, Edwin. Their children now living are A. M. Wright, of this city, Miss Martha Wright, who now lives in Missoula, Mont., and Mrs. Oscar Taylor of St. Cloud.

For several years past Mr. Wright's health has been such that he could take no active part in business. At the time of his death he was city attorney of Fergus Falls. In the early days and until his health failed, he held various city and county offices, and enjoyed a large law practice. He became the confidential adviser and attorney of Mr. Head, the agent of Morris D. Cutler, who held large interests in this neighborhood, and after Mr. Head's death succeeded to the agency of the Cutler estate. Its management demanded all his time and attention, and thus he was compelled to a large extent to abandon his law practice.

Mr. Wright was a man of broad and liberal views on all subjects. He was a thinker, a reader and student. He had fine argumentative powers and at the same time was personally the most genial of men. He was the possessor of oratorical powers of a high order. He was a man of the strictest integrity and highest views of morality. In religion he was a free thinker, though all his family and children are church people. He accorded the right to all to enjoy their own opinions without molestation and for himself demanded the same right. He had a catholic mind and was always one of the champions of any movement either for the good of the town or for the good of his kind. The oldest citizens – to those who have known him the longest and best – bear the warmest testimony to his high qualities of heart and mind. His death leaves a distinct gap in the community.⁹

⁹ *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, Tuesday, November 28, 1893, at 3. The *Little Falls Transcript* quoted two paragraphs of the *Journal's* obituary in its report of Wright's death. *Little Falls Transcript*, December 1, 1893, at 3.

The weekly *Fergus Globe* followed:

The death of E. M. Wright, city attorney, occurred last Monday night, and was not unexpected. Mr. Wright has been in feeble health for a number of years. He was one of the oldest settlers in this county, in fact was here before the Indian massacre of '62. The bar association

Led by John Mason, the local bar association passed resolutions in his honor:

Resolutions of Respect.

When the District Court convened Tuesday afternoon J. W. Mason asked the forbearance of the court for short time. He spoke of the death of E. M. Wright the night before, and said that in view of the long-standing of Mr. Wright as a member of this bar, and recognition of the sterling qualities as a man and citizen it had seemed fitting to the members of the bar association, his colleagues and friends, to give some expression of their regret. He then read the following resolutions:

Whereas, it is just come to our knowledge that Hon. Edwin M. Wright, a member of this bar long-standing is died, and

Whereas, it is deemed fitting that some expression of respect and regret for such loss be made by the said bar, of which the deceased was a member.

Resolved, that our sympathy be and hereby is extended to the family and friends of deceased in this, their hour of bereavement, and that this court, during the hours of the funeral, out of respect to the memory of the deceased stand adjourned, and that the bar of this city attend said funeral in a body.

Resolved that these resolutions be spread upon the minutes of this court and a copy hereof forwarded by the clerk to the family of deceased.

The relevant resolutions were adopted. C. C. Houpt then spoke briefly, alluding to the high esteem in which Mr. Wright was held, to his enviable record as an attorney, his

of the city met this week and passed resolutions of respect as did the city council Wednesday evening. The funeral was held at his residence Thursday afternoon. In accordance with the wish of the deceased no religious services were held but C. C. Houpt spoke of his life and character. All the members of the bar, the city council and many old citizens were present to attest their esteem.

Fergus Globe, Saturday, December 2, 1893 at 5.

integrity and purity of character, his energy and strength of mind, and to his fair and impartial disposition. He concurred heartily in the resolutions, as expressive of the genuine and sincere respect of all Mr. Wright's Associates.

Mr. Houpt was followed by James A. Brown, who endorsed most heartily both resolutions and Mr. Houpt's remarks, and spoke particularly of Mr. Wright's judicial fairness of mind, and the uniform courtesy which he showed the younger members of the bar.

Judge Searle spoke briefly from the bench. He said he knew Mr. Wright intimately for twenty-three years and knew him as a man of untarnished character, of sterling integrity and more than ordinary ability. At the close of his remarks he directed the resolutions be spread on the records of the court and a copy furnished to the family of the deceased.¹⁰

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¹⁰ ***Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, Tuesday, November 28, 1893, at 3. The weekly *Fergus Globe* carried this item:**

The death of F. M. Wright, city attorney, occurred last Monday night, and was not unexpected. Mr. Wright has been in feeble health for a number of years. He was one of the oldest settlers in this county, in fact was here before the Indian massacre of '62. The bar association of this city met this week and passed resolutions of respect as did the city council Wednesday evening. The funeral was held at his residence Thursday afternoon. In accordance with the wish of deceased no religious services were held but C. C. Houpt spoke of his life and character. All the members of the bar, the city council, and many old citizens were present to attest their esteem.

***Fergus Globe*, Saturday, December 2, 1893, at 5.**