

Judge George G. Wright

B. F. Gue

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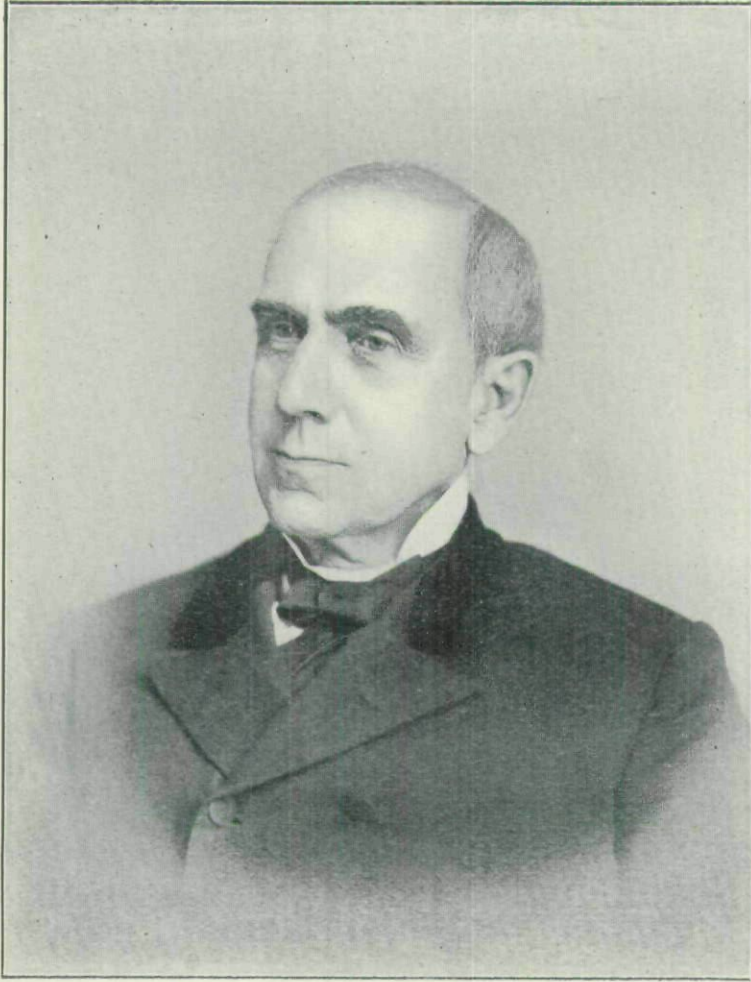
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Yours most Resp.
Geo G. Wright.

JUDGE GEORGE G. WRIGHT, 1885.

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3D SERIES.

JUDGE GEORGE G. WRIGHT.

BY HON. B. F. GUE.*

The following article has been extracted from a paper read by the writer at the reunion of the Pioneer Law Makers' Association of Iowa, held at Des Moines on the 10th day of February, 1898. A paragraph has been added to include a mention of Mrs. Wright who died on the 27th of June, 1897.

George G. Wright is a name which for half a century has been familiar to the public in our State, and for forty years has been as widely known, and as intimately associated with Iowa progress and its current history, as any in her long roll of honored public officials. All the mature years of a long and busy life were passed in this, the land of his choice. His father, John Wright, died at Bloomington, Indiana, in 1825, when his son George G. was but five years of age. At sixteen he was admitted into the State University, and graduated in 1839. His oldest brother, Joseph A. Wright, was then a rising young lawyer, located at Rockville, where George entered his office, and began his law studies. His brother was elected to congress four years later, serving three terms, was governor of the state two terms, and afterwards minister to Prussia.

*Benjamin F. Gue was born in New Baltimore, Greene county, New York, December 25, 1828. His mother was of English and his father of French Huguenot descent. The family removed to Farmington, Ontario county, where he passed his childhood and youth. He was educated in the common schools and at Canandaigua Academy. He came west in 1852, settling on a farm in Liberty township, Scott county. He was a delegate in the first Republican State convention which was held at Iowa City in February, 1856. He served two terms in the Iowa House of Representatives (1858-'60), and four years (1862-'66) in the State Senate. Removing to Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1864, he engaged for some years in journalism, and was elected Lieutenant Governor. President Grant appointed him Pension Agent at Des Moines, and he was reappointed by President Hayes. He now (1900) resides in Des Moines.

George was admitted to the bar in 1840, and in September of that year he started for the new territory of Iowa. It was a long trip down the Wabash and Ohio rivers, and up the Mississippi by steamboat, and across the wild prairie by stage coach, to the new frontier town of Keosauqua, which had been platted three years before. A few log houses had been erected, and it had just been made the county seat of Van Buren county. But one term of court had been held in the little log village, and it was a most unpromising place in which to make a living by law practice. But at twenty a young man is full of hope and enthusiasm, and this "Hoosier" youth could see in the not distant future visions of fame and fortune awaiting the studious, energetic law student, who was willing to work and wait. From the start young Wright won friends by his genial manners, his cordial ways, his hopeful disposition and studious habits. Two years after his arrival he was nominated by the whigs for prosecuting attorney, and elected.

Joseph A. Wright, the older brother, was a staunch democrat, but George G. was a whig, and also took an active interest in politics. In 1848 he was nominated by his party for State Senator, and elected for the term of four years. He soon won recognition as an able legislator, and was in 1850 made a member of the joint committee on the revision of the laws of the State which resulted in the code of 1851.

Judge Robert Sloan, of Keosauqua, an old friend and neighbor of Judge Wright, thus speaks of the lawyers he met in legal conflicts as a young man just entering upon the practice of his profession in 1841:

At this first of the courts where his name appears as transacting legal business there were present: Hugh T. Reid, R. Humphreys, Alfred Rich, J. W. Woods, Oliver Wild, I. N. Lewis, S. W. Somers, David Rorer, James W. Grimes, H. W. Starr and J. C. Hall. Judge Wright had six cases at this term, and from this time the record shows that his business rapidly increased, and during the next few years James B. Howell, J. C. Knapp and Augustus C. Hall were added to the bar.

My object in giving the names of those who practiced in the Van Buren district court is to show the men with whom he was associated and

against whom he had to contend when he entered the practice. James W. Grimes, J. C. Hall, David Rorer, Henry W. Starr, N. H. Starr, J. W. Woods, and Hugh T. Reid, had quite an extensive practice there until Iowa was admitted to the Union, and the mention of the above names is only necessary for any one to observe that they were among the ablest lawyers Iowa ever produced. When we remember the age of the Judge, and the rapid growth of his practice, it is evident that he developed very early the qualities which afterwards so distinguished him as a jurist and advocate.

In the fall of 1850 he was nominated by the whigs of the first congressional district, which then embraced the south half of the State, for representative. Bernhart Henn was the democratic candidate, and as the district had a clear democratic majority he was elected.

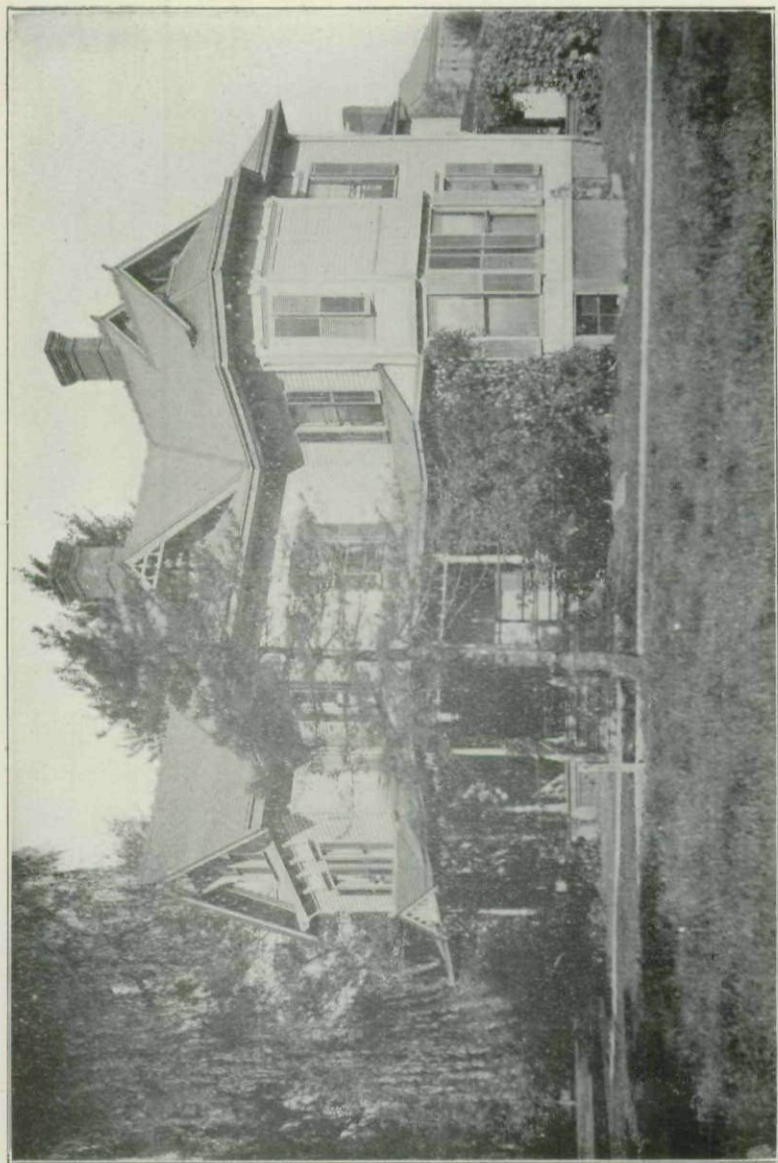
In 1853, when Gen. George W. Jones was re-elected to the United States senate, George G. Wright received the votes of the whig members of the general assembly, though he was but 33 years of age. Young as he was, he had become the acknowledged leader of his party in the State. In 1855, when but 35 years of age, he was elected one of the supreme judges, and for fifteen years served the State in that position with marked ability. Among his associates on the bench during this period were Judges W. G. Woodward, N. W. Isbell, L. D. Stockton, Caleb Baldwin, Ralph P. Lowe, John F. Dillon and C. C. Cole, all of whom were jurists of distinguished ability.

It will be generally conceded that during the period from 1855 to 1870 the highest judicial tribunal of Iowa was called upon to settle the most important legal contentions that have ever been brought before our State supreme court.

The code of 1851 presented many legal problems then unsettled by the court of last resort; the new constitution of 1857 embraced many radical changes in our organic law; the creation of a board of education with legislative powers; the acts of the seventh general assembly, the first under the new constitution; the new code of civil and criminal procedure of 1860, the remodeling of our judiciary system; the numerous complicated questions arising out of the various land

grants; the new banking system; the beginning of the era of great corporations for railroad building, and other purposes—all of these problems affecting the interests of the people and the State, came before the supreme court in various phases during this period of Judge Wright's long term of service. How ably and equitably the conflicting contentions were settled by this tribunal, is a matter of history that reflects the highest honor upon the eminent judges who were members of that court in this formative period of Iowa jurisprudence.

In 1870 one of the notable senatorial contests in the ranks of the republican party took place. William B. Allison, a young member of congress from the Dubuque district, who was serving his fourth term as representative, and had won a high reputation, was brought out as a candidate from northern Iowa for the United States senate. From the time the republican party had come into control of the State in 1856, the United States senators chosen by it had all been residents of the south half of the State. In the approaching election of a successor to James W. Grimes, a powerful combination was made by leading republicans of northern Iowa to secure the new senator in that section, and William B. Allison was chosen as their candidate. But the friends of Judge Wright, from all portions of the State, were urging his election as a suitable successor to Grimes. The contest became very warm throughout the entire State. Allison's supporters had a formidable advantage in location, and used it with great effect. A majority of his support came from the north half of the State. But as the contest progressed, the wide acquaintance and great personal popularity of Judge Wright was found to be making serious inroads upon northern Iowa, in spite of the eloquent appeals of Allison's supporters to stand firm for northern representation in the senate. But nothing could check the enthusiasm of the hosts of friends of Judge Wright, who flocked to the capital from all parts of the State, as the legislature convened, to work for the elec-



THE RESIDENCE OF THE LATE JUDGE GEORGE G. WRIGHT, ON PLEASANT STREET, DES MOINES, IOWA.

tion of their old-time friend. The pressure became irresistible, and when the caucus convened Judge Wright was nominated on the first formal ballot. There was probably not another man in Iowa who could have won the nomination over William B. Allison, who has for a long time been the acknowledged leader of the United States senate. It was not the work of politicians, but the unbounded personal popularity, based upon his exalted public services, his commanding ability, and his stern integrity, that placed George G. Wright in the senate.

During the six years' term he won a high position in that body, serving on the committees on judiciary, finance, revision of the laws, claims, civil service, and retrenchment. He declined a re-election, preferring to return to the work of his chosen profession, for which he always had an abiding love.

This ended his official public services, which had been almost continuous for a period of thirty years. In the practice of his profession he had been first a member of the law firm of Knapp & Wright, in Keosauqua. Joseph C. Knapp was an eminent lawyer, who became United States district attorney, and afterwards a district judge. Henry Clay Caldwell, who later became a member of the firm, was a representative in the legislature of 1860; colonel of the Third Iowa cavalry in the war of the rebellion; was appointed by President Lincoln United States district judge, and has for a long time been an eminent judge of the United States circuit court of appeals. Before the close of his term in the senate, Judge Wright became a member of the law firm of Wright, Gatch & Wright, the latter his eldest son, Thomas S. Colonel C. H. Gatch was for two terms a prominent member of the state senate.

In 1881 the firm was composed of Judge Wright, T. S. Wright, A. B. Cummins, and Carroll Wright. In 1887 he finally retired from practice in his profession, having served two years as president of the American Bar association. In 1865 Judge Wright removed from his old home at Keo-

sauqua and settled with his family in Des Moines. In the fall of that year, with Judge C. C. Cole, he established the first law school west of the Mississippi river. After the first year Prof. W. G. Hammond accepted a position with them, giving his entire time to instruction in the school. In 1868 the law school was removed to Iowa City, and by action of the regents became the law department of the State University, Judges Wright and Cole becoming law lecturers of the department.

Up to the last year of his life, Judge Wright took a deep interest in the University, and especially in the law department, which he had helped to establish. His lectures to the students were filled with wholesome advice, wise counsel, and sound enunciation of the fundamental principles of the science. His last lecture given before the law department was in June, 1896, and in it he refers with deep feeling, in eloquent and pathetic words, to the work of the pioneer law-makers, who had in early times been his associates in laying the foundations of our State and its institutions. His closing sentences were as follows:

Our State may challenge any other for the economy of its administration, the ability and wisdom shown in the conduct of public affairs. If we look to those framing our constitution, making and revising our laws, and administering justice in our courts, we shall see how large a responsibility has rested upon our pioneers. No class of men have been more devoted to their State; none more faithful to their obligations; none more proud of its history and position, civil and military, in the great federal family. I love to think of the old guard, the steady march of the old column. I look over our constitution and statutes and there see the impress of their minds. I look abroad at our schools, our colleges and public institutions, and find in them noble monuments of their liberality and public spirit. I inquire for the master spirits who passed through the early days and trials of frontier life, and find the old guard ever in the van doing their whole duty. Those gone, and many of them living, animated by hope or depressed by care, often weighed down by sickness, or old age, or business depression, have performed a noble part in building here a happy, prosperous and free State, with institutions unexcelled, and a name which challenges the admiration of men everywhere.

Soon after I was requested to prepare this paper, I wrote

my old friend, Judge John F. Dillon, who was long associated with Judge Wright on the supreme bench, to send me his opinion of our departed president as a lawyer and a judge. The following is his reply:

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 4, 1898.

Hon. B. F. Gue, Des Moines, Iowa:

MY DEAR GOVERNOR:—I have the pleasure to acknowledge receipt of your valued favor of January 30th. I comply with your special request to give you in a page my views concerning my old friend and former associate, the late Chief Justice George G. Wright.

I esteem it one of the felicities of my professional career that I was associated for six years with Judge Wright on the supreme court bench of the State of Iowa. It is scarcely necessary for me to express my opinion of his learning as a lawyer, and his merits as a judge. No difference of opinion on this subject, so far as I know, ever existed among the bar and the people of Iowa. The verdict of the bar on this subject, is that, take him all in all, he had no equal among the State's chief justices or judges in her judicial history. Some of them may have had, in special and exceptional lines, superior gifts, or superior learning, but as I have just said, take him all in all, he easily stands conspicuous and foremost. To those who served on the bench with him, and to the bar who practiced during the period of his long connection with the court, the reasons for this are not difficult to find. I may refer to some of them briefly and without elaboration.

First among these reasons may be mentioned his zeal and conscientiousness in the performance of his official duties. As chief justice he was always present; and, having control of the deliberations of the court, would never consent to adjourn any term until every case which had been argued or submitted was considered. The period of my association with him was when there was no rule requiring the records and arguments to be printed. They were mostly in writing. Judge Wright was a rapid and most excellent reader; and his invariable habit during our consultations, in all cases submitted, was, first to take up the argument of the appellant; read it; next the argument of the appellee; then any reply, referring to the record whenever necessary; then to insist on a full discussion and a vote. I believe I may safely affirm that no case was decided during these six years that I was on the bench without this "formula" having been complied with. No case was assigned, previous to full consideration among the judges, for examination and an opinion by a single judge. I verily believe that the admitted excellence of the judgments of the supreme court of Iowa during the period of Judge Wright's incumbency of the office of chief justice, is due to the course of procedure above mentioned.

Another characteristic of Judge Wright was his intimate knowledge and memory of the legislation and course of decisions in the State. He was a living digest of these decisions. He carried in his memory every

important case that had ever been decided, and thus kept the lines of judicial decision consistent.

As a presiding officer he was without an equal. He had remarkable executive ability. He presided with dignity; maintained the utmost decorum in his court, and yet no member of the bar, I believe, ever felt that he was exacting, oppressive, or that he in any way encroached upon their legitimate rights and privileges. He had almost in perfection what I may call the "judicial temperament." He showed absolute impartiality, had great patience of research, and above all, a level-headed judgment, and strong, sure-footed common sense. Combining these merits and qualities with ample learning in his profession, it is no marvel that the bar of Iowa hold him and his memory in such deserved honor. I am very truly yours,

JOHN F. DILLON.

Such an estimate from one of the most eminent jurists and judges Iowa has ever produced, who has since his removal from our State won national fame in the profession, must forever fix the place Judge Wright will occupy in Iowa history.

It is as a judge of our highest court, that his fame will be most enduring.

In an address delivered at Iowa City, in February, 1896, Judge James H. Rothrock, late of the State supreme court, spoke as follows of Judge Wright:

The practice and administration of law, was really his life work. His other public work was temporary. It requires the closest application, earnest study, and untiring efforts of the lifetime of most men, to become distinguished lawyers. But Judge Wright was an exception to that rule. He was a man of diversified acquirements. Some men succeed at the bar who cannot acquire distinction upon the bench. Others who fail as trial lawyers, may become acceptable, and even great jurists. Judge Wright, in all the varied pursuits of life, as lawyer, judge, statesman, or in business affairs, was eminently successful. He was a master workman in every calling or position to which he devoted his attention. The young man of today who is in course of preparation for the bar, has the aid of law schools and access to vast law libraries. Judge Wright had none of these advantages. I do not think it extravagant to say, that there are now in the State, private law libraries which contain more volumes, than were to be found in all the Territory of Iowa, when Judge Wright made his beginning in the profession in 1840. In those days, more reliance was placed on the reasoning faculties, the power to analyze, and apply the law by logical lines of thought, and the application of principles underlying the issues involved in the controversy, than to resort to current opinions of others contained in text books and reports. I have sometimes thought, that while



MRS. MARY H. WRIGHT, 1890.

it was more difficult then than now, to rise to distinction at the bar, yet when eminence was once attained, it was far greater than in this generation. The pioneers in the law, were those who laid the foundations of the structure. The present jurisprudence of the country rests upon that groundwork.

George G. Wright did not grow old or antiquated in the law. He was fully abreast with the profession, when he was seventy years of age.

Three years after his admission to the bar, on the 19th of October, 1843, George G. Wright was united in marriage with Miss Hannah Mary Dibble, daughter of Hon. Thomas and Ruth Gates Dibble. Hannah M. was born in Saratoga county, New York, August 15, 1820, and lived there until she was seventeen years of age. Her father was a man of marked ability, and had been a member of the New York legislature. In 1837 he removed with his family to Van Buren county, then in the Territory of Wisconsin, settling on a farm near Keosauqua. He soon became a man of influence in that new country, and in 1846, when a convention was called to frame a constitution for the new State of Iowa, Mr. Dibble was chosen a member, and helped formulate the constitution under which it was admitted into the Union. Mrs. Wright inherited the intellectual endowments of her father, was an independent thinker, forming her own opinions of new problems presented, after intelligent investigation. She was conscientiously loyal to her own convictions of right and duty as she saw them, regardless of popular opinion. She was a noble and helpful companion for a husband who was destined to hold some of the most exalted official positions in the State and Nation; a companionship which remained unbroken for more than fifty-two years. Mrs. Wright was a woman of broad philanthropy, ever sympathetic and helpful. In war times, she was an active worker for the health and comfort of the soldiers. She was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Women, and President of the Board of Managers of the Women's Christian Home at Des Moines. After the death of her husband, Mrs. Wright made her home with her daughter, Lucia, (Mrs.

E. H. Stone) in Sioux City, where she died on the 27th of June, 1897.

During his busy life, while professional and public duties were crowding upon him, Judge Wright took a deep interest in the industrial development of the State. In 1860, he was elected president of the State Agricultural Society, serving for four years, and always thereafter was one of the most influential and trusted advisers of its officers and managers. In 1879 he was elected a director in the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad company, a position which he held the remainder of his life.

After retiring from the practice of his profession, he was chosen president of the Polk County Savings bank, also president of the Security Loan & Trust Company, which position he held at the time of his death. For nearly six years he was the honored president of the Iowa Pioneer Lawmakers' Association, and I am confident that of all the honors that came to him during his long and busy life, this brought him the most unalloyed enjoyment. Here every member was an old acquaintance and friend. These reunions brought together his political associates, opponents and companions of youthful conflicts, defeats and triumphs. All of the animosities of partisan combats have long been buried in the lapse of years. The surviving actors in the fierce and bitter political rivalry of pioneer times, here meet as long separated members of one family, and clasp hands in friendship as they look upon the whitening hair and wrinkled brows from which youthful vigor and enthusiasm have departed. But passing years never cast a shadow of gloom over the sunny face of our late president. His cheerful greeting, his irrepressible fund of anecdote and wit, and happy rejoinders, were contagious and always enlivened our sessions. He could call every member by name, and knew every one's record in the past, his mental calibre and his peculiarities. He was one of the founders of the association and never missed a session. When the shadows of life's evening were gathering around him, his

thoughts wandered toward the companions of pioneer days.

The last letter that his hand inscribed was addressed to an officer of this association, relating to the approaching session, then but a few weeks away, in which he felt a deep interest. But before it assembled he had "passed over the river."

His home life was an ideal one. The sunshine that his presence carried into every group of which he was a part, was never obscured by passing shadows. The wife and mother, the children and grandchildren, were always cheered by his kindly greeting and the household was brightened by his coming. His friends and neighbors were sure of a cordial welcome. His pure, upright life was an inspiration to the young, and was the pride of his children. Three of his sons inherited the rare legal endowments of their father, and attained eminence in the profession before reaching middle life. Our great State has reared and developed many talented, useful and noble men and women. Their achievements have shed lustre upon its fair name. Among those who in early days wisely laid the foundation for the giant structure that has arisen like magic in a period of sixty years from a wild plain, the home of the Indian and buffalo, prominent and honored among its architects and builders will always stand the name of George G. Wright.

WARNING TO NEGROES.—Notices have been printed, and will be served by the Marshal upon the "colored gentlemen" through the city, notifying them to leave the town within a certain specified time, in accordance with an act passed by the Legislature in 1850, prohibiting the importation of free negroes into the State of Iowa. So look out—"white man is mighty deceiving."—*Keokuk (Iowa) Times, June 27, 1857.*

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