

In Memoriam



FOUNDERS AND MAKERS OF MICHIGAN

A Memorial History of the State's
Honored Men and Women



THIS VOLUME PREPARED FOR

Almena P. De Troy

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James Van Dyke Willcox



FOLLOWING in the professional footsteps of his distinguished father and grandfather, James Van Dyke Willcox established his position among the leading members of the Detroit bar, and in person, in talents and in achievements he was a worthy scion of his race. In 1917, while serving as United States extradition commissioner, he removed to Ann Arbor and here spent the remainder of his life. Born in Detroit, August 19, 1853, he was a representative of one of the territorial families of Michigan, and traced his lineage to Lord North of England. The early forbears of James Van Dyke Willcox were seafaring men. The first representatives of the family in America settled in Detroit in 1797.

Charles Willcox, the grandfather of James Van Dyke Willcox, was born in Connecticut in 1781 and before he attained the age of nineteen was graduated from Union College at Schenectady, New York. Leaving the east in 1820, he traveled westward to Michigan and established his home in Detroit, which then had about fifteen hundred inhabitants, of whom more than two-thirds were of French nationality. Admitted to the bar in 1822, he at once won recognition as a lawyer of marked ability and his practice grew rapidly. His first public office was that of city treasurer, which he occupied from 1825 to 1829, and from 1826 to 1829 was also probate judge. He was the first attorney general of the state of Michigan and served with distinction in that capacity until his death in 1836. Always eager to advance the welfare and progress of his city, he aided in organizing Detroit's first fire department, and was also one of the five trustees of the city, having as his associates on the board A. G. Whitney, A. E. Wing, Calvin Baker and Levi Cook.

Eben North Willcox, the father of James Van Dyke Willcox, was born in Detroit, December 4, 1821, in a cottage which stood in the midst of a potato patch, and on this site was subsequently erected the imposing building now occupied by the First National Bank, then located at the corner of Jefferson and Griswold. Taking up the study of law, Eben N. Willcox was admitted to the bar and in 1847 formed a partnership with William Gray, continuing with him for a number of years. At one time he was associated with his brother, General Orlando B. Willcox, in the practice of law and also had Albert G. Boynton as a partner. Eben N. Willcox was one of the executors of the

will of James A. Van Dyke and after abandoning the active practice of law moved out Woodward avenue some distance from the city for the purpose of engaging in stock raising, paying particular attention to the breeding of fine sheep. Like his father, he was a citizen of marked public spirit and served on the Detroit board of education for two terms. In 1862 he was one of the original incorporators of the street car system of Detroit and was termed "the father of the city's first street railway system." The other incorporators were Cornelius S. Bushnell, John A. Griswold and Nehemiah D. Sperry. In 1847 Mr. Willcox married Marie Louise Cole, who was born in 1826, a daughter of Harry S. Cole, the wit of the Detroit bar. Mr. Cole removed to Detroit from Canandaigua, New York, his birthplace; and his wife, who bore the maiden name of Victoire Desnoyers, was of French descent. Mr. Willcox died in 1891 and his wife passed away in 1892.

Their son, James Van Dyke Willcox, obtained his early instruction in Philo Patterson's School for Boys at Detroit and in 1871 matriculated in the University of Michigan, which he attended for three years. He studied law with the firm of Brownson & Van Dyke, whose office was in the old Seitz building on Congress street, Detroit, and was admitted to the Michigan bar in 1878. His talents, natural and acquired, soon brought him to the fore in his profession and he was elected prosecuting attorney for Wayne county, thus serving from 1889 to 1891. Appointed assistant United States district attorney in 1898, he remained the incumbent of the office until 1906, when he was made United States extradition commissioner, and acted in that capacity for fifteen years, resigning in 1921. To every trust reposed in him Mr. Willcox gave his best efforts and his public service was characterized by ability of a high order and unflinching devotion to duty.

While a student at the State University, Mr. Willcox joined the Sigma Phi fraternity. Although not a church member, he leaned toward the Catholic faith, and his political support was given to the republican party. He enjoyed reading, was artistic in his tastes, and in his leisure hours also derived pleasure from the occupation of gardening. Coming to Ann Arbor from Detroit, he resided here for a period of thirteen years, passing away in this city October 9, 1930, when seventy-seven years of age. Endowed with a keen mind and the capacity for sustained effort, Mr. Willcox was carried into important relations, and his record as a public servant was unassailable, while as a private citizen he stood equally high, for his integrity and honor were above question. He had a wide circle of steadfast friends, one of whom said of him: "The most noted characteristic of 'Jimmie' Willcox was his outstanding courtesy and his desire to oblige those with whom he came in contact." He is survived by a brother, George D. Willcox, of Detroit; two sisters, Miss Julia M.

Willcox and Mrs. John Lawrence, who live in Ann Arbor; and two nieces, Mrs. Vincent L. Price and Miss Marion N. Willcox, the former a resident of St. Louis, Missouri, and the latter of Marshall, Michigan.

Peter Desnoyers, who settled in Detroit in 1797, was a trader and jeweler, and made many trips to New York. He was also a silversmith. He made one trip to Europe bringing back with him some silver spoons, which he copied on his return. The spoons are still in the possession of Miss Julia M. Willcox.

He was a trustee of the town of Detroit 1816 to 1820; county commissioner 1821 to 1825; trustee of the Michigan University 1822 to 1826; trustee of St. Anne's Church, and alderman at large 1827. He was one of the incorporators of the old Bank of Michigan in 1818. John R. Williams was its first president.

