

# Michigan Lawyers in History

Charles H. Wisner

By Carrie Sharlow



*The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.*

**T**he headline announcing his death in *The Flint Daily Journal* was several font sizes larger than the one next to it regarding the Russian line in Warsaw during World War I. The news that Circuit Court Judge Charles H. Wisner had died<sup>1</sup> was obviously of more importance to the community than the fact that the “Teutons [were] in a marsh”<sup>2</sup> in Poland. After all, Wisner had been a figurehead in Flint for more than a half century; the conflict overseas was as yet a foreign thing.

The headline and sub-headlines stated several key facts about Wisner: he died early enough on the afternoon of July 6, 1915, to have the news printed in the last edition of the *Journal*; he’d been ill for quite some time, so his death was not unexpected; he was the son of former Michigan Governor Moses Wisner; and he was “One of the Ablest Lawyers and Jurists in Michigan,”<sup>3</sup> an epitaph any lawyer would love.

Charles Wisner was born in Pontiac in 1850 to Moses and Angelina (Hascall) Wisner. Moses Wisner was an attorney, as were several other members of his extended family. He was a member of the new anti-slavery political party—the Republicans—and served as Michigan’s governor from 1859 to 1861. After he was replaced by Austin Blair, the elder Wisner was “appointed a

colonel in the volunteer army and was assigned to command of the 22nd Regiment of Michigan.”<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, Charles Wisner gravitated toward the law. By 1871, he had graduated from the University of Michigan Law School. That same year, he moved to Flint<sup>5</sup> and formed a partnership with one classmate and then another, married twice (his first wife died), and ran for various offices. After serving as a member of the school board, county prosecuting attorney (like his father), and supervisor of the United States Census for the Second District of Michigan in 1890,<sup>6</sup> he successfully ran for the position of circuit court judge, an office he held until his death.

He was undoubtedly an “able lawyer” and excellent judge, and an entirely different article could be written about his legal career. But that’s not what he’s remembered for now. In fact, nothing in his obituary’s headline or sub-headlines gives any indication of what Wisner is remembered for now, which is peculiar, because *The Flint Daily Journal* obituary mostly discussed his hobbies.

Among his friends—including Bill Durant, who owned a carriage company in town—Wisner was known as “a genius in other lines”<sup>7</sup> outside of his profession. He painted, sculpted, photographed, and invented. He

even had his own little Menlo Park “in the rear of his residence”—a barn of some sort.

Wisner wasn’t just a weekend tinkerer; he was a successful inventor and had at least five patents to his name. His patents show the progression of his interests. Letters Patent No. 599,086 of 1898, a minnow trap,<sup>8</sup> was followed the next year by No. 627,767, a fishing reel. The latter was mentioned in his obituary as being “so intricate a design”<sup>9</sup> that it cost \$75, fairly expensive for a fishing rod in any era.

He might have stuck with fishing implements—he was an avid sportsman, spent vacations in the Upper Peninsula, and decorated his house and office with his catches—had he not lived during the infancy of the automobile. The fishing reels and minnow traps were replaced by spark plugs and combustion engines.

Wisner is actually credited with building the first automobile in Flint; if you do a Google search for his name, this result appears most frequently.<sup>10</sup> The invention sparked his friendship with Bill Durant. Apparently, Wisner took Durant for a spin to show off his new “contraption”; after all, Durant was a carriage maker and might have been interested in purchasing the “horseless carriage.” The drive wasn’t a success—the automobile stalled in the road<sup>11</sup>—nor was the vehicle, which the neighbors



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nicknamed “buzz wagon”<sup>12</sup> because of its noise, and Charles was unable to sell the design to Durant. Still, the first automobile in Flint—which would soon become a General Motors base—is nothing to sneeze at, even if it didn’t have any brakes and had to run into a wall to stop.<sup>13</sup>

The next three Wisner patents after 1900 also involved vehicles: a “sparking plug for combustion engines”<sup>14</sup> in 1904, a “starting device of explosive-engines” in 1906, and a “priming-cup for gasoline-engines”<sup>15</sup> in 1909. The second Wisner automobile was more successful, and it’s easy to imagine the constant noise coming from his backyard at 516 E. Court Street.

By the time he died in 1915, Wisner had made his mark in Flint, and not only with automobiles and fishing rods. When the local Masons purchased property to build a permanent temple, Wisner—who also studied architecture in his spare time—chaired the building’s construction committee. It still stands on Saginaw Street, and the Genesee County Bar Association held

its holiday event there in 2015, appropriate since Wisner was a former member.

Wisner’s barn/carriage house/workshop still stands at the Genesee Crossroads Village at the corner of Main Street, slightly kitty-corner to Durant’s barn.<sup>16</sup> Its continued existence is probably the best memorial to a man whose pursuits knew no bounds. ■

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#### ENDNOTES

1. *Judge Charles H. Wisner Died This Afternoon*, Flint Daily Journal (July 6, 1915), p 1.
2. *Russian Line Stonewall on Warsaw Front*, Flint Daily Journal (July 6, 1915), p 1.

3. *Judge Charles H. Wisner Died*, p 1.
4. Wisner, *The Wisners in America and Their Kindred: A Genealogical and Biographical History* (Baltimore: G. Franklin Wisner, 1918), p 168.
5. *Id.* at 2.
6. *Id.* at 176–178.
7. *Judge Charles H. Wisner Died*, p 2.
8. Official Gazette of the US Patent Office (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, Vol LXXXII, January 4 to March 29, 1898), p 966.
9. *Judge Charles H. Wisner Died*, p 2.
10. Patrick, *Eccentric Chicago Inventor Drives His Unique Car Through Owingsville on a Sunday in May 1903*, Bath County News-Outlook (June 7, 2007), p A-1.
11. There’s an extremely funny story about this in Lawrence R. Gustin’s biography on Billy Durant.
12. *Eccentric Chicago Inventor*, p A-1.
13. *Id.*
14. Allen, *Digest of United States Patents of Air, Caloric, Gas, and Oil Engines 1789–1905* (Washington, DC: The Columbia Planograph Company, 1906), p 828.
15. Official Gazette of the US Patent Office (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, Volume CXL, March 16, 1909), p 626.
16. See Genesee County Parks <<http://www.geneseecountyparks.org/images/contentImages/file/2015%20Updated%20CRV%20Map%20Graphic%20with%20key.pdf>> (accessed September 17, 2016).