

Michigan Lawyers in History

Clarence M. Burton

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.

If you are interested in Michigan history, you should know of Clarence M. Burton. During his lifetime, it was written that “no resident of the state has a wider or more intimate knowledge of Michigan history” and “his contributions to its records have been of inestimable value.”¹ He was a lawyer by trade, but history was his passion.

Clarence Monroe Burton was born in California on November 18, 1853, to Annie (Monroe) and Dr. Charles Seymour Burton. Native New Yorkers, the Burtons moved to Michigan, where Charles founded the *Battle Creek Journal*. When the elder Burton expressed an interest in California, the family moved again. Shortly after Clarence’s birth, they returned to Michigan, permanently settling in Hastings.

After receiving his preliminary education in Hastings, Clarence enrolled in the University of Michigan. He first studied literature, but switched majors and completed his studies at the school’s recently established law department. On November 19, 1874, the day after his 21st birthday, Clarence was licensed to practice in Michigan and began working at the Detroit law office of Ward & Palmer.

In a roundabout way, his connection with Ward & Palmer led to the establishment of the Burton Library. John Ward, one of the firm’s partners, co-owned a title abstract company, and Clarence shared the responsibilities for running it. His services soon became invaluable, and Clarence gained a share in the business before buying out Ward. The firm was renamed the Burton Abstract Company.

Once the business gained firm footing and became a success, Clarence’s financial security allowed him to indulge his love of books and history. Every week “boxes of books and manuscripts arrived, some from local sources, others from the East or from London.”² His personal library was eventually housed in a fireproof wing of his home, and he hired a secretary to maintain his collection.

Clarence’s collection, in turn, led him to write about what he read. He wrote about Cadillac, the founder of Detroit, and later followed Cadillac’s historical journey from France to the New World; he wrote about Michigan as a province, territory, and state; he wrote about Detroit amusements, early Detroit, the building of Detroit, its landmarks,

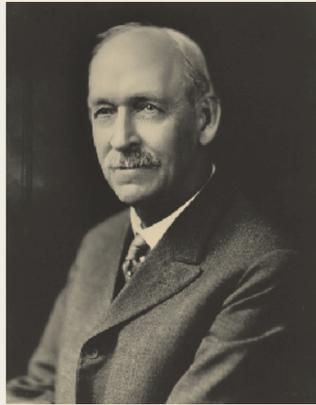
and its professional personages. In 1922, he published his five-volume series, *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701–1922*,³ a jewel for modern-day genealogists and historians.⁴

But he didn’t keep his head in dusty books. In between raising children (he had eight with his first wife), building companies, and expanding his library, Clarence served on the Detroit Board of Education for 10 years and was a delegate to the Michigan Constitutional Convention of 1908. His son, Frank, would later recall that Clarence generally worked 12–13 hours a day, starting at the office and ending in his study at home.⁵

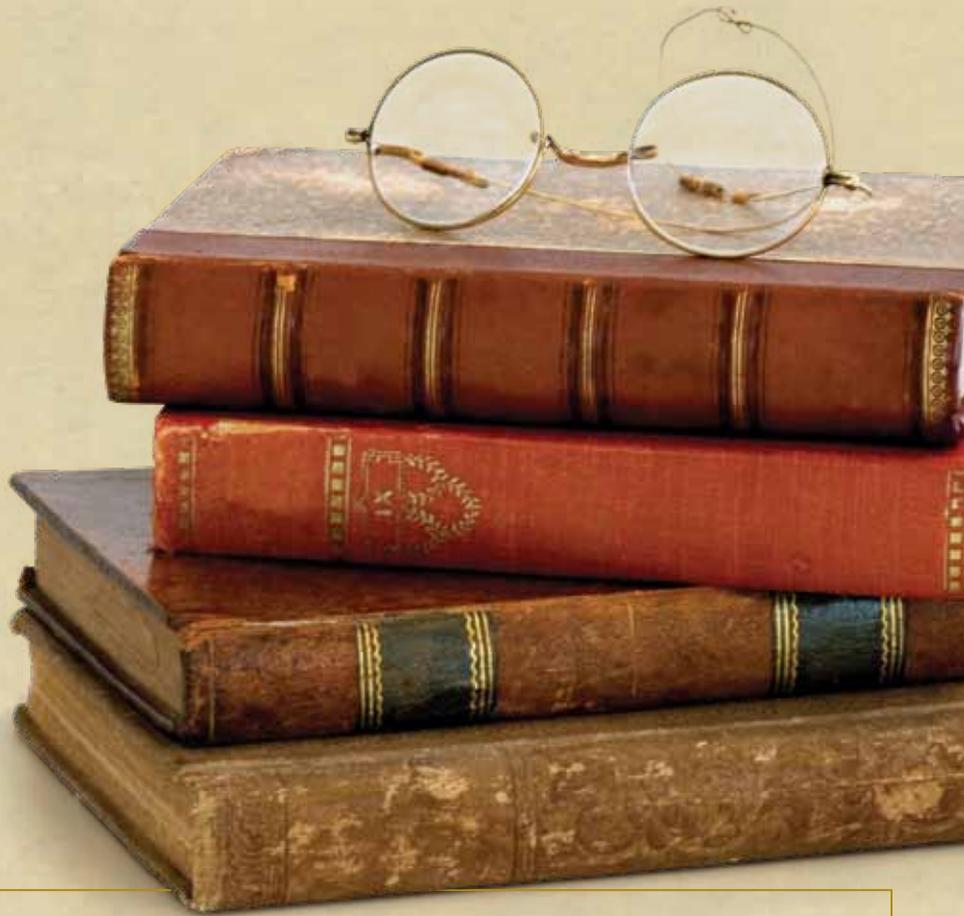
Through his title abstract company, library, and writings, Clarence became known around Detroit and the state as “an authority upon abstracts and land titles, as a student and historian, and as a business man.”⁶

Once, when an individual wrote to the University of Michigan Library regarding a genealogical request, he was told to contact Clarence, who was “better informed about everything connected with Detroit and Michigan than any other living man.”⁷ Two weeks later, the person had his answer from Detroit’s historian. This was not an unusual situation. Clarence loved history and wanted

Photo courtesy of Clarence M. Burton III



Clarence M. Burton



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others to appreciate it. He allowed people to use his personal library, and in 1914, he donated his collection and the building that housed it to the Detroit Public Library. By this time, Clarence's library contained at least 30,000 books, 40,000 pamphlets, and "nearly half a million unpublished letters and documents," as well as thousands of photographs.⁸

Clarence also founded the Detroit Historical Society—which later created the Detroit Historical Museum—and served as its president. He was also president of the Michigan Historical Society and was a member of the Michigan Historical Commission until his death.

Burton's family followed in his legal and historical footsteps. At least two of his sons became attorneys, and several descendants followed in the same profession. His eldest daughter, meanwhile, helped him edit histories.

Clarence continued writing, researching, and promoting Michigan history until his death on October 23, 1932. He is the quintessential Michigan lawyer in history, especially since he wrote most of it. ■

FOOTNOTES

1. Leake, *History of Detroit, Volume III* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co, 1912), p 843.
2. Bragg, *Hidden History of Detroit* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011), p 24.
3. Burton, *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701–1922* (Ann Arbor: The SJ Clarke Publishing Co, 1922).
4. For instance, this author found her great-grandfather on page 718 of Volume III.
5. Bragg, n 2 *supra*, p 23.
6. Burton, *et al.*, *History of Wayne County and the City of Detroit, Michigan, Volume III* (Ann Arbor: The SJ Clarke Publishing Co, 1930), p 632.
7. Parkyns, *The Perkins Family in Ye Olden Times* (Utica: DW Perkins, 1916), p 61.
8. Burton, n 3 *supra*, Volume III, p 845.



Carrie Sharlow is an administrative assistant in the Executive Office of the State Bar, assisting Governmental Relations. She has a BA in English and a master's in literature.

If you are interested in State Bar history or have a suggestion for "Michigan Lawyers in History," please e-mail her at csharlow@mail.michbar.org.

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