

# Michigan Lawyers in History

George C. Watson Jr.

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.*

**A**ccording to historians, Rep. George C. Watson Jr. threw a hail-Mary pass on the floor of the Michigan House on April 23, 1935, while debating substitute House Bill 114, which proposed the creation of a mandatory bar association in Michigan.

“[I]f you vote ‘yes’ on this bill,” Watson said, “you will be voting to tax every lawyer in the state of Michigan five dollars per year.”<sup>1</sup>

George C. Watson Jr. was born on April 20, 1880, to George C. and Corinne Watson.<sup>2</sup> The Watsons lived in Kentucky before George Sr. headed north to fight in the 15th Ohio Infantry during the Civil War. They later moved to Chicago, where George Jr. was born. After 10 years in the insurance business in Chicago, George Sr. moved the family to Caro, Michigan where, three years later, he was elected to the state House of Representatives as a Republican representing the 2nd District of Tuscola County.<sup>3</sup>

The younger Watson followed his father into public service. He earned his law degree from the University of Michigan in 1902 and began to build his practice in Port Huron. In 1921–1922, Watson served as deputy attorney general under Merlin Wiley. Shortly after, he began his long tenure as a state representative, eventually reaching the position

of Republican leader before retiring in 1938.<sup>4</sup> Watson was well respected on both sides of the aisle—no small feat in Michigan during the Depression.

He may have been a legislator, but Watson was a lawyer first and foremost. As a member of the voluntary Michigan State Bar Association since 1922, he recognized the need for a mandatory bar.

As a state representative, he watched Sen. George Condon introduce the Integrated Bar Bill for a second time in 1923; it passed the Senate and failed in the House. In March 1933, Watson introduced a similar bill with his colleague, William L. Donnelly, as a co-sponsor. Not surprisingly, it passed the House Judiciary Committee, which Watson chaired, and the House with ease, only to swiftly fail in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

In reporting to the Committee on the Integration of the Bar, the bill’s sponsors noted that progress was made despite the defeat. People learned about the need for a mandatory, self-governing bar. The press was offering support. Though it didn’t pass, the 1933 bill could not be deemed a complete failure.

In January 1935, Watson tried again, this time with Willis E. Cuthbertson as his co-sponsor. The bill, 45 sections long, was viewed

by the majority as a complicated lawyer bill; it failed passage by two votes on April 4. Luck was with Watson, Cuthbertson, and the association, however—a substitute bill, shortened to two sections, went before the House 19 days later.

And while it is not written down in any legislative journal, State Bar historian Henry Woolfenden told the story of Watson’s memorable line in support of his bill to his fellow representatives. Apparently, the members of the House erupted into laughter and took a vote. The Integrated Bar Bill passed the House by an 83 to 13 margin and made it through the Senate by a 25 to 3 vote. On May 15, Governor Frank D. Fitzgerald signed into law Public Act 58 of 1935, creating the State Bar of Michigan.

Three years after his great achievement, Watson retired from legislative service to become attorney for the Michigan Bridge Commission.<sup>5</sup> He also served the newly formed State Bar of Michigan, chairing the Legislation and Law Reform Committee, and eventually earning a seat on the State Bar Board of Commissioners representing the 7th Congressional District.<sup>6</sup>

Watson’s term on the Board of Commissioners expired October 31, 1943,<sup>7</sup> and he died 11 days later. His obituary in the



*Michigan State Bar Journal* noted that he was one of the “ablest and best informed members” of the legislature.<sup>8</sup> He also sponsored the bill that created the State Bar of Michigan. ■



*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](mailto:csharlow@mail.michbar.org).*

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Woolfenden, *History of the State Bar of Michigan*, 38 Mich St B J 21 (1959).
2. *Memorials: George C. Watson*, 23 Mich St B J 174 (1944).
3. Jochim, *Official Directory and Legislative Manual of the State of Michigan for the Years 1893–4* (Lansing: Robert Smith & Co, 1893), p 605.
4. *Memorials*, n 1 *supra*.
5. *Id.*
6. *Id.*
7. *Id.*
8. *Id.*