

David M. Woodson
1848

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Justice David Meade Woodson served only a one-month tenure on the Illinois Supreme Court. He did, however, compile a distinguished record in the state's political and judicial history.

Born on May 18, 1806, in Jessamine County, Kentucky, Woodson was the second son of prominent attorney Samuel H. and Anne R. Meade Woodson. The young Woodson attended Lexington schools and studied law with his father. He graduated from Transylvania University in Lexington. In 1831, Woodson won election as a Whig to the Kentucky House of Representatives. "His personal popularity," wrote a local historian, "and his ability led to his election and amid the shouts of the people he was borne in triumph on the shoulders of his friends through the streets of the town."¹

Also in 1831, Woodson married Lucy McDowell, daughter of Major John McDowell of Fayette County, Kentucky. They became the parents of one son. Moving to Carrollton, Illinois, in the fall of 1833, Woodson began a fourteen-year law practice with another newly arrived resident, Charles D. Hodges. Woodson returned briefly to Transylvania University for additional courses and studied under George Robertson, chief justice of Kentucky.²

After the death of his wife in 1836, Woodson married Julia Kennett of Kentucky in 1838, daughter of Dixon H. Kennett. The couple became the parents of one daughter.³ Also in 1838, Governor Joseph Duncan appointed and then state legislators approved Woodson to serve as state's attorney in the First Judicial Circuit, comprised of eight counties in central Illinois.⁴

He served as lead prosecuting attorney in the murder trial of land office registrar Henry B. Truett, who had been accused of shooting Methodist preacher and physician Jacob M. Early during a heated political argument. Springfield attorney Abraham Lincoln, in one of his first murder trials, joined several other lawyers in defending Truett, while Stephen A. Douglas assisted Woodson in the prosecution. The prosecutors “described the expression of Truett’s countenance before speaking to Early,” wrote one observer, “the determined manner in which he spoke to Early, and the abuse, the repeated insults, and the provoking epithets—spoken by a cowardly man to one his superior in size, strength, and courage.”

After five days of trial, the jurors deliberated for nearly three hours before rendering a verdict of not guilty. A decade later, Thomas Ford, who had served as Illinois Governor and Illinois Supreme Court justice, explained such cases when he wrote, “There was now and then an indictment for murder or larceny, and other felonies, but in all cases of murder arising from heat of blood or in a fight, it was impossible to convict.”⁵

In 1840, Woodson won election to the Illinois House of Representatives, serving for one term. In 1844, Woodson received the Whig nomination to challenge the incumbent Democratic Congressman Stephen Douglas. “Woodson was no match,” according to Douglas biographer Robert W. Johannsen. “Both candidates traveled extensively about the district, but the Whig’s efforts were at best half-hearted.” Douglas won by more than 1,700 votes, with Woodson carrying only one county.⁶

In 1847, he served as a delegate to the Illinois Constitutional Convention, serving on the Committee of Law Reform.⁷ When Justice Samuel D. Lockwood resigned from the Illinois Supreme Court, Woodson succeeded him on November 3, 1848. The new

Illinois Constitution had already taken effect in April 1848, but the new Illinois Supreme Court of three members (Trumbull, Treat, and Caton) had not yet been seated. When the new Supreme Court met in Mount Vernon in December 1848, Woodson's tenure of one month had expired. The Court held no sessions during that month, and Woodson neither heard any cases nor wrote any opinions.

In the 1848 judicial election, Woodson won the circuit court judgeship for the First Judicial Circuit, remaining in that position for eighteen years. "Judge Woodson was a gentleman of the old school," wrote fellow lawyer John M. Palmer, "and maintained the dignity of his court under all circumstances."⁸

Woodson became president of a western Illinois rail company, which eventually became the Chicago and Alton Railroad. In his honor, residents of a new Morgan County settlement along the rail line named their town Woodson.⁹ He retired from the circuit court in 1867, succeeded by his former law partner Charles D. Hodges.¹⁰ In 1868, "having in the meantime become an advocate of the Democratic party," Woodson again won election to the Illinois House of Representatives, serving one term.¹¹

Woodson died at his Carrollton home on August 26, 1877. Following funeral services at the residence, he was buried in the City Cemetery.¹² "The favorable opinion which the world had passed upon him at the outset of his professional career," one county historian reported, "was in no degree set aside or modified throughout all the years of his practice or of his service upon the bench."¹³

¹ Edward Miner, *Past and Present of Greene County, Illinois* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1905), 338-41.

² Miner, 341.

³ John M. Palmer, ed., *The Bench and Bar of Illinois; Historical and Reminiscent* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1899), 1095.

⁴ Frederic B. Crossley, *Courts and Lawyers of Illinois* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1916), 339-40; Palmer, 1095; *United States Biographical Dictionary . . . Illinois Volume* (Chicago: American Biographical Pub. Co., 1876), 254.

⁵ Harry E. Pratt, "Abraham Lincoln's First Murder Trial," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 37 (1944), 243-48.

⁶ Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 148-49.

⁷ Arthur Charles Cole, *The Constitutional Debates of 1847* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1919), 66.

⁸ Palmer, 4.

⁹ *History of Morgan County, Ill., Its Past and Present* (Chicago: Donnelley, Loyd, & Co., 1878), 429.

¹⁰ Judge Cyrus Epler, "History of the Morgan County Bar," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 19 (1926-27), 168-69.

¹¹ Miner, 341; *History of Greene and Jersey Counties, Ill.* (Springfield, IL: Continental Hist. Co., 1885), 601-02.

¹² *Daily Illinois State Journal*, Springfield, 28 August 1877, 2; *Carrollton Gazette*, 1 September 1877, 2.

¹³ Miner, 341-42.