

Albert Watson
1915

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The youngest of three sons of Joel Franklin and Sarah Marena Taylor Watson, Albert Watson was born in Mount Vernon, “within a block of the Court House Square,” on April 15,



1857. His grandfather Dr. John Wright Watson had moved from Virginia and then Kentucky to Illinois in 1821, where he farmed and became the first physician in Mount Vernon. Joel Watson attended Mount Vernon Academy, taught in area schools, and in 1842 won election as County Clerk, a position he held for sixteen years.¹

His son Albert attended public school in Mount Vernon and graduated with honors from McKendree College in Lebanon in 1876. He taught in a country school for two years while studying law under Charles H. Patton. In 1880, he married Mary Eunice Way, an elementary school teacher and daughter of Newton E. and Lizzie H. Heaton Way of Mount Vernon. They would become the parents of five children.²

Admitted to the bar in 1880, Watson partnered with Patton for four years and in addition served as master in chancery for Jefferson County. In the fall of 1892 the Democrat Watson became Mount Vernon city attorney. He later served as Jefferson County states attorney and became a director of King City Federal Savings and Loan Association and president of Ham

National Bank, both in Mount Vernon, and an officer of First National Bank of Waltonville, Bank of Bonnie, First State Bank of Dix, and Ewing State Bank. In 1909, he served a one-year term as Grand Chancellor of the Knights of Pythias lodge and supervised construction of its Orphans Home in Decatur, Illinois.³

On February 17, 1915, Governor Edward F. Dunne appointed Watson to fill the unexpired term of Justice Alonzo Vickers, who had died the previous month.⁴ Although he served only until June 7 of that year, Watson wrote a number of opinions, including *Dalbey v. Hayes*, the case of a feeble eighty-two-year-old widower, Aaron Dalbey, with no direct descendants. His “next friend” Fred Dalbey asserted that the widower was mentally incompetent when he conveyed his seventy-three-acre Vermilion County farm, home, and personal property to William S. Hayes, a nephew of Aaron Dalbey’s wife, “for a purported consideration of one dollar.”

The transaction included a written agreement that Hayes would provide a home for Aaron Dalbey and would “do whatever should be necessary to properly care for him.” Hayes assumed control of the farm and personal property, and Dalbey became “a member of the Hayes family.” Eight witnesses testified to Dalbey’s incompetence in business transactions, while twenty-nine considered him competent. “We are not convinced there is a preponderance of evidence showing mental incapacity in Dalbey to make the deed and contract in question,” Watson wrote in affirming the Vermilion County Circuit Court ruling, “and such incapacity is not to be inferred from old age or feeble health, even when combined with a defective memory.”⁵

Another 1915 case, *Burke v. The Toledo, Peoria and Western Railway Company*, involved the accidental death of freight brakeman Timothy Burke at the Gridley, Illinois, train station. Hanging onto the outside of a freight car, he fatally struck baggage trucks placed near the

tracks. The Circuit Court of Tazewell County awarded \$7,500 against the railroad for negligence in the death. In its appeal, the railroad contended that Burke violated company safety regulations. “Unless he saw the trucks and knew they were so near the car as to be a source of danger,” Watson wrote in affirming the Circuit Court decision, “there is nothing in the position he occupied which could be charged as negligence. The fact that his attention was attracted toward the approaching passenger train, that smoke and cinders were blowing towards him from the freight train engine, and that he threw up his arms as if to shield his eyes from the dust and smoke, together with all the other circumstances, tended to prove that he did not see the trucks or their position in time to avoid the danger.”⁶

Following his brief Supreme Court tenure, Watson served for many years as president of the State Board of Law Examiners. “Judge Watson reviewed the qualifications of would-be lawyers throughout two decades,” reported the local newspaper, “giving personal attention to individual cases and influencing the careers of hundreds of successful attorneys.”⁷

During World War I, he became Chairman of the Jefferson County draft board and head of the district board. He served as attorney for several railroad companies and president of the Jefferson County Bar Association. Active in the First Methodist Church of Mount Vernon, Watson served as a trustee, taught Sunday school, and in 1928 was elected a lay delegate to the Methodist General Conference in Kansas City.

Watson maintained his law office on the north side of the downtown square until his mid-eighties, and in 1941 delivered the main address at the dedication of the Jefferson County Courthouse. At the age of eighty-seven, Watson died at his Mount Vernon home on November 26, 1944. Burial in Oakwood Cemetery followed services at First Methodist Church.⁸

¹ *Portrait and Biographical Record of Clinton . . . and Jefferson Counties, Illinois*, Chicago: Chapman Pub. Co., 1894, pp. 382-84; *History of Jefferson County, Ill., 1810-1962*, Mt. Vernon: Continental Historical Bureau, 1962, pp. H-16, W-29-32.

² William Henry Perrin, ed., *History of Jefferson County, Illinois*, Chicago: Globe Pub. Co., 1883, Pt. 4, p. 42.

³ John A. Wall, *Wall's History of Jefferson County, Ill.*, Indianapolis, Ind.: B. F. Bowen, 1909, p. 254; Perrin, p. W-30; *Illinois State Journal-Register*, Nov. 26, 1944, p. 17.

⁴ *Chicago Legal News*, Vol. 47, pp. 343, 427.

⁵ 267 Ill., 521-28.

⁶ 268 Ill., 615-25.

⁷ *Mount Vernon Register-News*, Nov. 27, 1944, p. 1.

⁸ *Mount Vernon Register-News*, Nov. 27, 1944, pp. 1, 2.