

“AN HONORED AND RESPECTED JUDGE”

“He is a favorite everywhere; the city of St. Paul is proud of him, proud of his record and esteems him one of her favorite sons.”

His caseload increased.

During the first year, the District Court Docket contained a few dozen cases. In the last year of his service, there were a few hundred cases. Toward the end of his service, he was trying without success to get a second judge for Minnesota.

Even though his workload was great, and he traveled to several cities to hold court, he still participated in outside activities.

1856 he became one of the early members of the Minnesota Historical Society.

1873 Judge Nelson and five other Episcopal laymen (Henry Sibley, Amherst Wilder, J.W. Bass, A.H. Cathcart, William Dawson) stood before a notary public to incorporate a new hospital for St. Paul, the Church Hospital and Orphan's Home, which served many of the city's poor. Through many changes and mergers this hospital became St. Luke's Hospital, then United Hospital.

1888 Judge Nelson was a founding member and the first President of the Town and Country Club of St. Paul.

1890 Judge Nelson joined the Minnesota Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, naming in his application great-grandfathers on both sides who were soldiers in the Revolutionary War.



St Luke's Hospital at 105 Eighth Street in St. Paul, ca 1879.
From the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society

1892 Walter Sanborn, (photo right) Eighth Circuit Court Judge, accepted a bust of Judge Nelson with the following words:

“The records of this court, the reports of the decisions in the District of Minnesota have made and will preserve an imperishable record of his [Judge Nelson] learning, ability and judgment, but the calm dignity, –unruffled amid the fiercest encounters; the unwearied patience; the courteous bearing, the kind suggestion that made plain the mistake yet robbed defeat of its sting, –these attributes of the learned jurist whose bust you present, the records of the court do not disclose. In his presence we recognize their influence and feel their power, and as in future years we gaze upon this representation of his countenance, memory will clothe him with these attributes and inspire us to emulate his virtues.”



After his retirement Judge Nelson still maintained a law office,



The Minnesota Club,
Fourth and Cedar in St. Paul, ca 1915.
Seven Corners, St. Paul, 1874.
From the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society

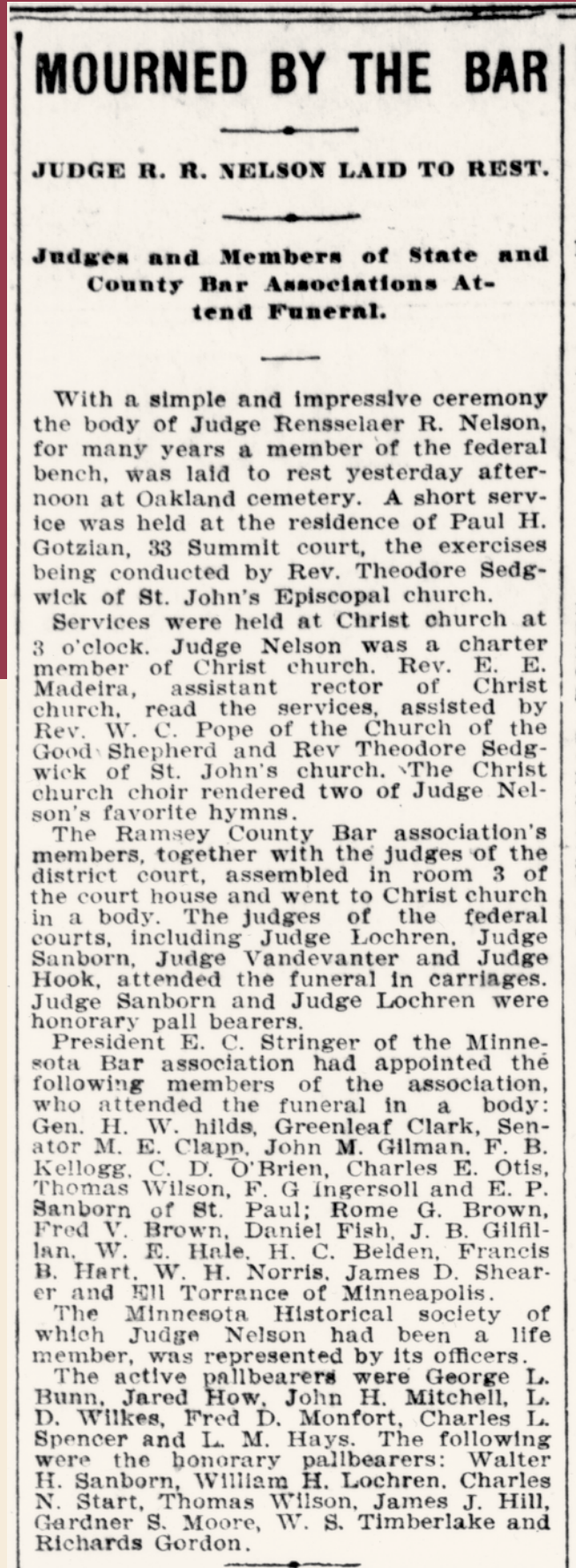
and enjoyed frequent visits to the Minnesota Club, where he reminisced with friends, and “exchanged pleasantries.” In 1902 he received a courtesy nomination to the Senate in the Minnesota Legislature, with no hope of defeating the Republican candidate–Knut Nelson.



May 16, 1896

At the age of seventy, Judge Nelson sent his resignation to President Grover Cleveland and announced it from the Bench in Duluth, where he was holding a court session. These are his words as he retired:

“I have this announcement to make, which will be a matter of record in this court. My judicial life will terminate tomorrow at noon. I have resigned the position of judge of the United States District Court for the district of Minnesota. This step has not been taken by me without due reflection. I have been 39 years in judicial life in Minnesota. I am the oldest federal judge in commission in the United States and the only federal judge whose commission ante-dates the War of the Rebellion. I have seen many changes since I first entered office. I have arrived at the age allotted to man for life in this work, and if I am spared by divine providence I feel that my remaining years should be devoted to rest. My associations with the members of the bar of Duluth and of the state, also with the officers of the court and the citizens of the state who have been jurors in the courts held by me have been agreeable and pleasant. My heart is saddened as the time approaches for severing this relation. I have tried to do my duty under the sanctity of the oath which I took when I entered judicial service. Undoubtedly I have erred sometimes, but it has been an error of judgment, and my conscience does not reproach me in any respect. I shall never again preside over the federal courts of Minnesota. It is with a pang of sorrow that I now say the only thing which is left for me to say, which is to bid you all farewell.”



Judge Nelson and Emma had two daughters, Emma Beebe Nelson and Kate Russell Nelson. Kate died at the age of eight. In 1886 Mrs. Nelson died.

Judge Nelson lived in St. Paul till the end of his days. On October 15, 1904 he died in the hospital he helped start. His funeral was held at the church where he was a founding member. Many judicial officers of the federal and state courts were present. Honorary pallbearers included James J. Hill, William Lochran, Walter Sanborn, and Frank Kellogg. He was buried in St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery.

In one of the later tributes a speaker said of Judge Nelson “he was born two months before Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died. When he died, Harry Truman was twenty. His long life spanned a large part of this nation's history.”

HONORABLE CAREER CLOSES

Judge R. R. Nelson, First Federal Judge in Minnesota, Is Stricken at St. Luke's Hospital—Came to St. Paul and Was Appointed to Federal Bench When State Was Admitted to the Union.



View of St. Paul with the second State Capitol building, ca 1890.
From the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society

St. Paul population in 1890: 133,156