

Judge Burr Wilson

While visiting the Fayette County Court House, how often have you looked upon the wall across from the probate tag office at the photographs of our earlier Probate Judges and wondered about the lives these men lived or the kind of men they were? Personalities are not distinguishable within the stern-faced poses prevalent in the earliest days of photography. Perhaps in this article we can enlighten readers about one of these anonymous faces.

Burrell W. Wilson was born in 1809 in Franklin County, Tennessee. We are not sure when he came to Fayette but records show he was appointed county judge (precursor of the probate judge) in 1830 at the age of 21 years and served through 1834. According to the publication, *Soldiers, Statesmen & Scalawags of Fayette County* (from 1819-1872), Judge Wilson resigned his county judgeship position to become a Justice of the Peace for the Town Beat because it was “far more lucrative”.

He was elected as a Fayette County Representative to the General Assembly (State Legislature) in 1835. Later, in 1837 he was elected as the Senator representing Fayette (which at that time encompassed all of Lamar County) and Marion Counties. He served in the Senate until 1842 when he was defeated by Elijah Marchbanks. According to the book, *Reminiscences of Public Men in Alabama*, written by former Secretary of State William Garrett in 1872, “Mr. Wilson was a decided Democrat - was a vigilant and faithful representative in his votes, but withal very quiet and taciturn, seldom occupying the floor except to make a report from committees. He labored under an impediment of speech, which embarrassed his delivery”.

Wilson also ran a store next to his home located on what is now Rev. John Stamps’ property off now U. S. highway 43 north. A journal and daybook were found in the current Fayette County Court House’s vault containing entrances of charges and receipts for Burr Wilson’s store from 1836 to 1844. Records show Wilson started practicing law in 1844. How his ledgers came to be in the vault has remained a mystery, since the courthouse burned in 1854 and again in 1866 and all records were destroyed. Speculation is the books were in Wilson’s home during the time of those fires. He became probate judge in 1868 and probably brought the books to the courthouse during his time in office.

In 1861, he was elected as a delegate to the Constitution Convention that passed the Ordinance of Secession seceding Alabama from the United States. According to records, Burr Wilson “voted as a Union man” not to secede. Fayette County’s popular vote on secession held a few weeks earlier was 432 “yes” and 1110 “no”.

Wilson and his wife had 5 children. His two oldest sons joined the fight for Confederacy. William Wilson, his second child, served in the 11th Alabama Regiment. Shortly after his enlistment he was killed on June 1, 1862 at the battle of Seven Pines in Virginia. This was one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War in which both sides claimed victory. The Confederates, under General Joseph E. Johnston, suffered 7,997 casualties, and 5,739 Union boys were killed in two days of fighting. General Johnston was seriously wounded

and the following day General Robert E. Lee became the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Van Wilson, Judge Burr Wilson's oldest child served in Col. J.E.B. Stuart's Calvary. He was killed on July 7, 1863 at a battle in Hagerstown, Maryland protecting the battered army of General Robert E. Lee retreating from Gettysburg.

Two other sons, John Wilson and Lee Wilson were too young to participate in the war. Judge Wilson was 53 years old when his youngest child and only daughter was born. Lucy Belle Wilson was born in February of 1862. She married Felix Robertson, son of John Crichton Robertson. Although she was too young to remember her brothers who died in the Civil War, later in her life she honored their memory by donating the Civil War Memorial statue on the Fayette Court House lawn. Lucy Belle died in 1945 at age 83.

After the war, Judge Burr Wilson along with Elliott Priest Jones was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1865 to rewrite the Alabama Constitution according to the policy of President Andrew Johnson. Wilson was elected Probate Judge of Fayette County in 1868-1874 during the tough reconstruction years.

In 1945, Mr. R. L. Berry, in an interview published in the *Northwest Alabamian*, recalled his memories of the reconstruction years in Fayette County. Mr. Berry had sharp memories of those bitter days, when the hardships of pioneer life were intensified by the collapse of the military and the economy in the South. "In Fayette County people suffered for bread. They hauled corn in from the Tennessee Valley and ground or crushed it in 'gritters'. They farmed with straight shovels. They made coffee from okra seeds and dug up the packed dirt floors of smoke houses from which they extracted salt."

Mr. Berry recalled "old Judge B.W. Wilson" who he said used to come into town to the saloon and get drunk according to the frank and hard-drinking custom of those dreary times. "He would come in on a shambling blue mule, and when he had drunk his fill, somebody would push him (Judge Wilson) aboard, throw the reins around the mule's neck and turn the mule's head homeward."

Whether it was a love for the bottle or a product of all the sorrows Judge Wilson suffered finally overpowering him, we know not. Judge Burrell W. Wilson died in 1883 at age seventy-four years.

