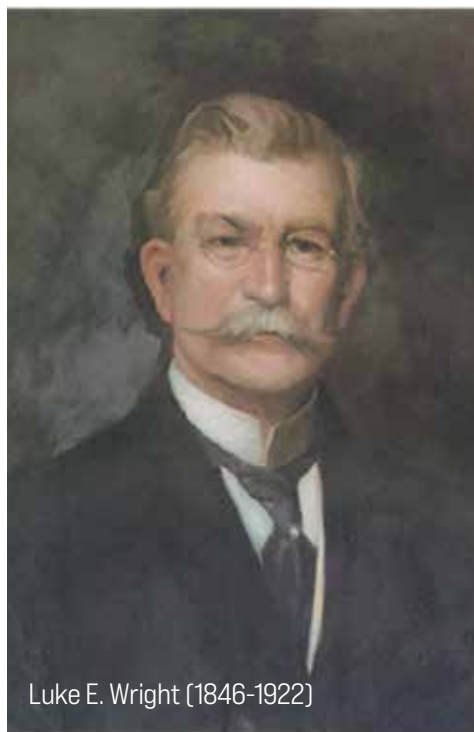
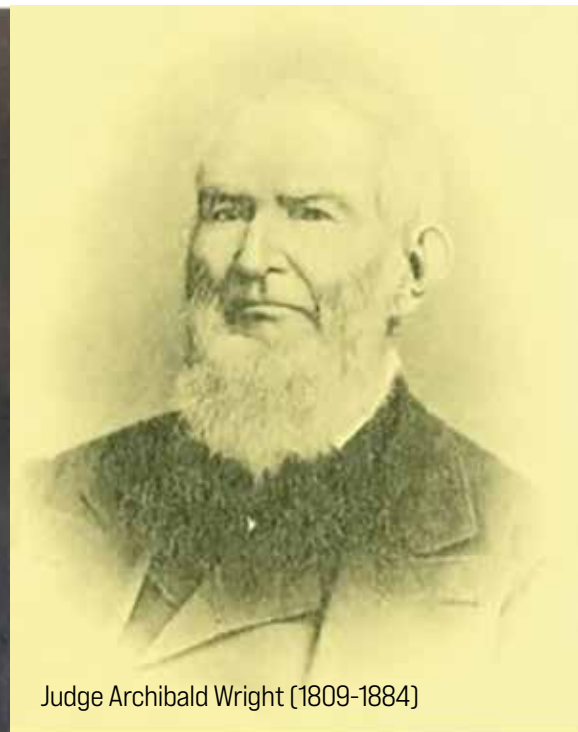




Luke Wright: The Lawyer Who Saved Memphis



Luke E. Wright (1846-1922)



Judge Archibald Wright (1809-1884)

Tennessee's preeminent lawyer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was Luke Wright of Memphis. As prosecutor, defense attorney and corporate counsel, Wright litigated major civil and criminal cases across Tennessee and 15 appeals before the U.S. Supreme Court.¹ He confronted brutal tyrants and lawless mobs alike. He was governor-general of the Philippines, our first ambassador to Japan and Theodore Roosevelt's secretary of war. But perhaps his greatest contribution was his struggle to save Memphis during the great yellow fever epidemic of 1878.

Boy Soldier and Young Lawyer

Luke Edward Wright was born in Giles County, Tennessee, on August 29, 1846, the son of lawyer Archibald Wright.² The elder Wright relocated his family to Memphis in 1851 and became a Tennessee Supreme Court judge in 1858.³ With the advent of the Civil War, Luke enlisted in Southern forces at 15 as a private in the Memphis Light Guards.⁴ He was promoted for extreme bravery at 16

to lieutenant and joined an artillery battery commanded by his older brother, Eldridge.⁵ Judge Archibald Wright, "old and crippled,"⁶ followed the army everywhere riding a mule, determined to look after his boys.⁷

Luke Wright fought in the battles of Belmont, Shiloh, Corinth, Jackson, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Resaca, Atlanta, Franklin, Nashville, Mobile and Savannah and suffered a serious wound at Jonesborough, Ga.⁸

During the midst of the Battle of Murfreesboro (Stones River), Luke heard: "Eldridge has been killed!" After a "great sob," the adolescent lieutenant "righted himself" and advanced.⁹

By battle's end, his cannon was captured, but he escaped, and with his brother's body.¹⁰

After the war, Wright attended the University of Mississippi for a year then studied law in his father's office. He was admitted to the bar in 1868. At 24 he was elected Shelby County attorney general, for which, against his wishes, he was forever called "General Wright."¹¹ For eight years, he strove to clean up the rowdy river city.¹²

In one prosecution, Archibald Wright

defended a leading citizen charged with a shooting, but his son won conviction after a three-week trial.¹³ Devoted to his father, Luke Wright once challenged an editor who criticized his father in print to a duel, but the antagonists spoke, cancelled the contest and the editor became a lifelong Wright supporter.¹⁴

The Hero of 1878

In 1878, a devastating yellow fever epidemic struck Memphis. Twenty-five thousand fled. Of the 20,000 remaining, over 17,000 contracted the disease and of these over 5,000 died. Due to the chaos, the city's charter was eventually surrendered.¹⁵ But Luke Wright refused to leave.¹⁶

The most vital entity was the Committee of Public Health appointed by a citizens' gathering. Wright was named its chair, and chair of the Relief Committee, and his first

Luke Wright managed equitable distribution of the limited food in Memphis during the yellow fever epidemic of 1878.

act was to request a meeting with African American leaders the next day to seek help and assure that the Black community would be treated equally, conduct this community would long recall.¹⁷ He proved "absolute freedom from prejudice."¹⁸

The Nashville Banner described Wright's leadership: "He buried the dead. He directed those who were nursing the sick. He regulated the distribution of food supplies. He put down lawlessness; he checked rioters."¹⁹ It was said, "He held this city together."²⁰

The Tennessean reported Wright "went up and down the streets of the town by night and by day. He never lost his nerve. Through hospitals, among the dead and the dying, he went serenely about the tragic work."²¹

When not performing administrative tasks, Wright nursed the ill and the dying vomiting black blood.²² A survivor remembered being a small boy near death, "burning with fever," and waking to General Wright,²³ the man with "smiling eyes,"²⁴

checking his pulse, feeling his forehead and then writing a release of scarce medicine.²⁵

The tireless, optimistic lawyer became all the government there was, backed by a fearless Black militia unit. When "a wall" of rioters was about to rush the food warehouse protected by these troops, the "steel-eyed and steel-voiced"²⁶ Wright appeared, stepped onto a crate, commended the soldiers, then threatened to order firing on the mob. The crowd dispersed.²⁷ Henceforth, Memphians called Wright the "Hero of 1878."²⁸

Memphis leaders who fled met in St. Louis in 1879 to decide the city's fate. The consensus was abandonment. Wright, however, heard of the assembly and went. He rose, interrupted and presented his inspiring vision of a greater metropolis. He moved that "Memphis be recreated and rebuilt by the people of Memphis." His resolution was adopted and committees formed to achieve it.²⁹

The Great Tennessee Lawyer

Wright was in partnership with his father in the firm of Wright, Folkes & Wright until his father's death in 1884, and William Folkes was elected to the Tennessee Supreme Court in 1886. The famed firm became Turley & Wright until Thomas B. Turley was appointed to the U.S. Senate in 1897. Later, Wright partnered with his young son, Eldridge.³⁰

Luke Wright's claimed specialty was chancery litigation.³¹ He represented corporations: banks, streetcar lines, utilities and cotton brokerage houses.³² But his criminal cases were legend.

National attention turned to Memphis in 1892 during the murder trial of Alice Mitchell, the 19-year-old accused of using a razor to slit the throat of her lover, 17-year-old Freda Ward, at the river landing. Wright won acquittal with an insanity defense before tyrannical Judge Julius DuBose.³³

Once while appearing before the judge, DuBose threatened, "I will put you in



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Eldridge E. Wright, Luke Wright's son and law partner.

irons." Wright replied, "If you attempt to put me in irons, Jules DuBose, one of us will die." The judge muttered, "Proceed with your argument."³³

In 1893, Wright prosecuted DuBose (criminal court judge, Klan leader and crime boss all in one) during a month-long impeachment trial in the state senate. The dangerous jurist was convicted and

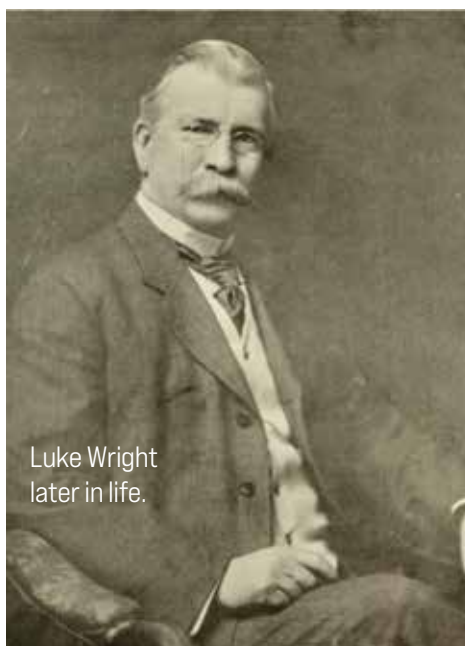
President Roosevelt named Wright America's first full ambassador to Japan in 1906, a critical assignment following the Russo-Japanese War ... With rumors of a Wright candidacy for the White House, Wright finished his diplomatic assignment in 1907 saying, "I have had enough of public life, and have come home to grow up with Memphis."

removed from office.³⁵ The "laughter-loving"³⁶ Wright, then counsel for the "Law and Order League," delighted in telling how when he stood to cross-examine DuBose, Wright's illegally concealed "six-shooter" fell from his hip pocket and hit the senate floor.³⁷

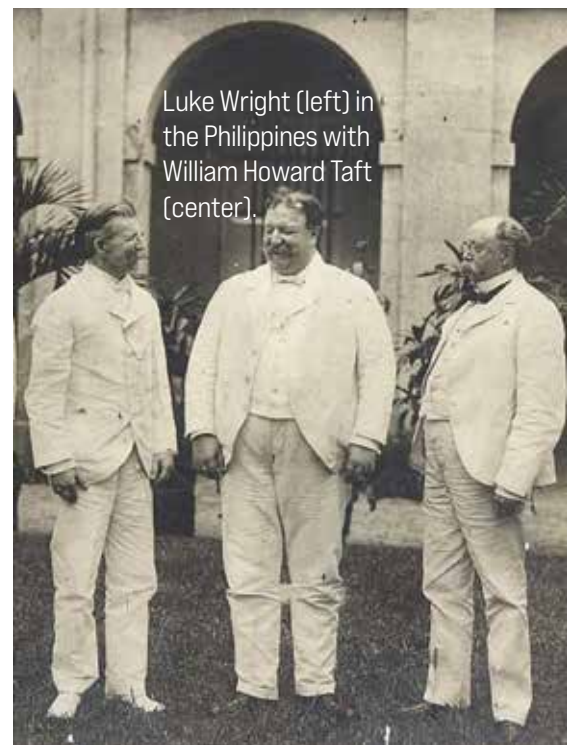
In 1896, Wright won acquittal in Chattanooga of Tennessee Chief Justice David Snodgrass, indicted for wounding a lawyer after he criticized a Supreme Court decision.³⁸ And in Nashville in 1910, he represented Col. Duncan Cooper, who was charged with murdering former U.S. Senator Edward Ward Carmack.³⁹ Wright was known for charming hostile witnesses⁴⁰ and giving withering closing arguments, one six hours long.⁴¹ His feats were not limited to the courtroom, however. He reasoned with a bloodthirsty Memphis lynch mob for over an hour until persuaded to disband.⁴²

Politics, Diplomacy and the Cabinet

Wright was an active Democrat, and his candidacy for governor and senator was often suggested.⁴³ Within his party, he opposed populist William Jennings Bryan and supported the gold standard and American expansionism.⁴⁴ His



Luke Wright later in life.



Luke Wright (left) in the Philippines with William Howard Taft (center).

views caught the attention of Republican President William McKinley; hence, in 1900 McKinley named him to the new commission governing the Philippines.⁴⁵

After three years in the Philippines, Wright returned to his beloved Memphis, welcomed with a parade and grand banquet at the Peabody Hotel merrily attended by his close friend, President Theodore Roosevelt. Wright and Roosevelt next spoke to a jubilant multitude of Black Memphians still appreciative of Wright's service and fairness during the epidemic. Afterwards, the President spent the night in Wright's home.⁴⁶

In 1904, Roosevelt appointed Wright to succeed William Howard Taft as governor of the Philippines, with the enhanced title of "Governor-General."⁴⁷ It was a difficult two years because of rebel attacks, and Wright, like Lincoln, suspended habeas corpus in two provinces.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he declared "equal opportunity for all," improved Manila Bay to allow larger ships and opened the first electric streetcar line.⁴⁹

President Roosevelt named Wright America's first full ambassador to Japan in 1906, a critical assignment following the Russo-Japanese War, during which

Roosevelt mediated a settlement and was thus awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.⁵⁰ With rumors of a Wright candidacy for the White House,⁵¹ Wright finished his diplomatic assignment in 1907 saying, “I have had enough of public life, and have come home to grow up with Memphis.”⁵²

Nonetheless, Roosevelt made Wright secretary of war in 1908, once again succeeding Taft.⁵³ In the cabinet, with some noting the irony (and unity) of a former Confederate soldier over the U.S. Army,⁵⁴ he removed unfit officers and pioneered the development of air power, which would be crucial in the coming World Wars.⁵⁵

As secretary of war and a Confederate veteran, Wright drew acclaim speaking at Lincoln’s birthplace on the centennial of Lincoln’s birth. He said Lincoln “believed that slavery was a curse and a great moral wrong; and in believing thus he was right.”⁵⁶ As for the Confederacy, Wright concluded “it was best that it did fail.”⁵⁷

Starting a rift between Taft and Roosevelt, Taft broke a promise to Roosevelt to keep Wright secretary of war when Taft became President in 1909.⁵⁸ Yet Wright eagerly returned to Memphis, where he pursued charitable projects and endlessly battled the ruthless and corrupt political machine of E. H. Crump in the courts, such as opposing the city’s takeover of utilities and streetcars, and in the *Commercial Appeal*, of which Wright was an owner.⁵⁹

When Wright’s son and law partner, Eldridge, was tragically killed in a railroad accident in 1912, Wright insisted on personally taking over his son’s heavy litigation caseload and completing every case.⁶⁰ Later that year, another son, Luke Jr., died of heart failure.⁶¹ A decade later, and still Tennessee’s foremost lawyer, Luke Wright died following a fall at 76 on November 17, 1922.⁶² A Nashville newspaper said, “he did more for the city of Memphis than any other man that ever lived and died in it.”⁶³ ■

NOTES

1. *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), Oct. 31, 1902, at 4.
2. *Id.* Feb. 22, 1900, at 1.
3. John W. Green, *Lives of the Judges of the Supreme Court of Tennessee* 127 (1947).
4. *Commercial Appeal* Dec. 5, 1922, at 1.
5. *Id.* Feb. 22, 1900, at 1; John J. Thomason, *Bluff City Barristers* 20 (2008).
6. *Washington Post* June 23, 1908 at 10.
7. Robert A. Lanier, *The History of the Memphis & Shelby County Bar* 16 (1981); Green at 130.
8. *Commercial Appeal* Feb. 22, 1900, at 1; *Commercial Appeal* Feb. 25, 1901, at 1; *Washington Post* June 23, 1908, at 10.
9. *Record-Journal* (Meriden, Conn.) July 29, 1908, at 5.
10. *Commercial Appeal* Oct. 29, 1908, at 13.
11. *Id.* Feb. 22, 1900, at 1; Thomason at 20-21.
12. See Lanier at 42.
13. *Washington Post* June 23, 1908, at 10.
14. *Record-Journal* (Meriden, Conn.) July 29, 1908, at 5; *Marion Star* (Marion, Ohio) July 11, 1908, at 3.
15. Thomason at 21.
16. *The Tennessean* (Nashville) Nov. 18, 1922, at 14; Lanier at 44.
17. *Daily Memphis Avalanche* Sept. 10, 1878, at 1.
18. *Commercial Appeal* Nov. 18, 1922, at 6.
19. *Nashville Banner* March 27, 1916, at 2.
20. *Commercial Appeal* Nov. 18, 1922, at 6.
21. *The Tennessean* Nov. 18, 1922, at 14.
22. *Commercial Appeal* Aug. 31, 1903, at 7; *Knoxville Sentinel* July 18, 1808, at 3.
23. *Essex County Herald* (Island Pond, Vt.) Sept. 18, 1903, at 1.
24. *Commercial Appeal* Oct. 29, 1908, at 13.
25. *Essex County Herald* (Island Pond, Vt.) Sept. 18, 1903, at 1.
26. *Commercial Appeal* Oct. 31, 1902, at 4.
27. *The Tennessean* Nov. 18, 1922, at 14.
28. *Marion Star* (Marion, Ohio) July 11, 1908, at 3.
29. See Lanier at 45; *The Tennessean* Nov. 18, 1922, at 14; Thomason at 21-22.
30. *Commercial Appeal* Feb. 25, 1900, at 1; *Commercial Appeal* Jan. 23, 1912, at 1.
31. *Montgomery Times* (Montgomery, Ala.) June 25, 1908, at 1.
32. See Lanier at 57; *Commercial Appeal* April 18, 1897, at 5.
33. See Alexis Coe, *Alice and Freda Forever: A Murder in Memphis* (2014); *Washington Post* June 23, 1908, at 10.
34. *Washington Post* June 23, 1908, at 10.
35. See Russell Fowler, “Evil on the Bench:

The Rise and Fall of Judge Julius J. DuBose” *Tennessee Bar Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Feb. 2020).

36. *Commercial Appeal* Aug. 31, 1903, at 7.
37. *Chattanooga Daily Times* June 28, 1908, at 20; *Chattanooga Daily Times* June 3, 1893, at 1.
37. *Chattanooga Press* May 29, 1896, at 6.
39. *Chattanooga Daily Times* Feb. 1, 1910, at 1.
40. *Commercial Appeal* Nov. 18, 1922, at 6.
41. See *Id.* Dec. 12, 1894, at 3.
42. *Record-Journal* (Meriden, Conn.) July 29, 1908, at 5.
43. *Chattanooga Daily Times* Jan. 23, 1894, at 1; *The Tennessean* Jan. 22, 1904, at 4; *Chattanooga Star* June 1, 1907, at 1; *Chattanooga News* June 25, 1908, at 4; *The Tennessean* Dec. 31, 1910, at 1.
44. *Commercial Appeal* Aug. 13, 1903, at 7.
45. *Knoxville Sentinel* Feb. 24, 1900, at 1.
46. *Nashville Banner* Nov. 20, 1902, at 2.
47. *San Francisco Call* Feb. 8, 1905, at 2; *Biographical Directory of the United States Executive Branch* 370 (Robert Sobel, ed. 1977).
48. *Fisher, on behalf of Barcelona, v. Baker*, 203 U.S. 174, 181 (1906).
49. David AT Barrows, *History of the Philippines* 305-314 (1925).
50. *Knoxville Sentinel* Jan. 19, 1906, at 1.
51. *The Tennessean* Sept. 21, 1907, at 1; *Chattanooga News* June 24, 1908, at 1.
52. *The Tennessean* Sept. 21, 1907, at 1.
53. *Baltimore Sun* June 22, 1908, at 3.
54. *Id.*
55. *Knoxville Sentinel* Aug. 31, 1908, at 9.
56. *Buffalo Commercial* (Buffalo N.Y.) Feb. 12, 1909, at 1.
57. Luke Wright, *Speech Delivered at the Centennial Celebration of Abraham Lincoln’s Birth*, Hodgenville, Ky. 10 (Feb. 9, 1909).
58. Doris Kerns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit* 81 (2013).
59. See Thomason at 22; William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis* 113-15 (1964); *Commercial Appeal* July 31, 1916, at 4.
60. *Commercial Appeal* Feb. 25, 1900, at 1; *Commercial Appeal* Jan. 23, 1912, at 1.
61. *Commercial Appeal* July 3, 1912, at 7.
62. James A. Crutchfield, *Timeless Tennesseans* 169 (1984); *Buffalo Morning Express* Nov. 22, 1922, at 40; *The Courier* (Waterloo, Iowa) Nov. 18, 1922, at 1. Wright was survived by his wife, Katherine Semmes, the daughter of Confederate Admiral Raphael Semmes, a son, Semmes, and two daughters, Anne and Katrina.
63. *The Tennessean* Nov. 18, 1922, at 14; Thomason at 22.