

[Robinson, Nelson Lemuel]

Nelson L. Robinson of Old Laurentian Romans Passes SON OF STRONG COUNTY FAMILY, HE LIVED TRADITIONS OF HIS PEOPLE

Nelson Lemuel Robinson, one of the last remaining of that group of men who stood loyally by St. Lawrence University in its struggles in the late seventies and the eighties, and lived to see the final development of the University and the flowering of the Greater St. Lawrence, passed away at his home, 7 University Avenue, Friday afternoon, after a period of frail health. Mr. Robinson was the almost lifetime friend of the late Dr. Charles Kelsey Gaines, who died a few months ago. He was in his 87th year.

The funeral was held at Gunnison Memorial Chapel yesterday afternoon at 2:30, the Rev. Hugh Tigner, minister of the First Universalist Church, officiating. The bearers were Dr. Ward C. Priest, Dr. Henry Reiff, Dr. R. Harman Ashley, members of the University faculty; G. Atwood Manley, secretary of the St. Lawrence Alumni Association, and Charles E. Bowers, representing the bar of Canton and St. Lawrence County. Mr. Bowers' father, the late Attorney George H. Bowers, had been a friend of Mr. Robinson for more than fifty years, and Wm. F. Kip, lifelong friend. The body according to Mr. Robinson's wish, will be cremated. The burial place of the family is in Evergreen.

Nelson L. Robinson was born in the village of Morley, July 17, 1857, a son of George and Cordelia Buck Robinson. Both the Robinson and Buck families were old St. Lawrence County families. George Robinson was born at Massena in 1819. When in his middle teens it is interesting that he clerked in the store of Ebenezer Miner at Massena Point. This is the same Miner who later came to Canton, and married a daughter of Dr. Daniel Campbell. Mary Miner, daughter of Ebenezer Miner, married Richard B. Ellsworth of Canton.

George Robinson later removed to Ogdensburg and became postmaster of the place under Zachary Taylor. George Robinson was a Whig and was one of the first to join the newly formed Republican party in the fifties. During the Civil War period the family removed to Morley where George Robinson and a brother engaged in the milling business. George Robinson served as supervisor of the town of Canton several terms, was elected Superintendent of the Poor of St. Lawrence County in 1870 and then removed to Canton and occupied a brick house on the heights north of the college campus. This place was later traded with Judge Leslie W. Russell for the Russell place on Chapel street, now the Dromey place. This was the family home while Nelson was a student in St. Lawrence University, as a member of the class of 1877.

George Robinson served three terms as county superintendent of the poor, and in the eighties became treasurer of the St. Lawrence University in which he served until 1899. He was a trustee of the University, and one of its loyal supporters and benefactors.

The Bucks—Nelson Robinson's mother was Cordelia Buck—were a family of no little distinction in the county in the early days, but in after years. Lemuel Buck, one of the Bucks Bridge Bucks, was elected sheriff of St. Lawrence County in 1882. The Buck family at this time moved to Canton. Cordelia Buck was a little girl at the time. The

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Buck place was on what was named for the family, Buck Street. The house is still standing, the last house before you reach the Buck Street crossing, on your right. That is just in front of the Sheffield grounds. Here Leffert L. Buck, brother of Cordelia Buck, spent his early life, and it was from here he attended St. Lawrence University and in the Civil War broke his course to enter army service. Leffert Buck, later an R.P.I. man, became one of the most distinguished bridge builders in the world. He performed feats of magic, it seemed, in bridge building. He was the builder of the Honeymoon Bridge at Niagara Falls and built the great Williamsburg Bridge between New York and Brooklyn. Leffert Buck sleeps down in Evergreen with other members of his family and that of the Robinsons, along the Avenue, of Fame as it might be called.

Nelson Robinson attended the old Academy on Pearl street and entered St. Lawrence University, graduating in the class of 1877, just one year later than his friend, Charles Kelsey Gaines. He read law in the office of Leslie W. Russell. He took graduate work in Harvard. He became a partner of Leslie W. Russell and William A. Poste in the early eighties, the firm known as Russell, Poste & Robinson. When William A. Poste went to Albany as deputy attorney general under General Dennis O'Brien, the Canton firm was Russell & Robinson. Later on when Russell gave up his Canton practice Robinson practiced independently, remaining in Canton until well into the nineties when he was for a brief time in Chicago.

It is interesting to tell something about Mr. Robinson's experience in politics. He was a Republican and as such, following the death of Stillman Foote Jr., in 1883, for long years Clerk of the Board of Supervisors of St. Lawrence County, Robinson was named clerk of the Board. At this time Grover Cleveland was the Democratic reform governor of New York. When Cleveland sought the nomination as a candidate for president in 1884, Nelson Robinson, a great admirer of Cleveland, was one of the Canton Republicans who espoused the Cleveland cause. In those days it was looked upon as a "terrible thing" for a Republican to vote the Democratic ticket. He saw his candidate elected that fall, the first Democratic president since James Buchanan. The County Board failed to re-elect him clerk, but named in his place the late Charles M. Hale, who served for nearly fifty years until his death in 1932 [1933].

Through all the years Cleveland was in the public service as president, and when defeated in 1888, and when elected in 1892, Nelson Robinson was for him, voted for him, spoke for him and supported him. It is recalled that in 1892 David B. Hill sought the nomination for president and the Democratic caucus passed resolutions supporting him and the county convention was for him, but Nelson L. Robinson and others called independent conventions and endorsed Cleveland. In the end Cleveland was nominated and elected.

Mr. Robinson during those earlier years following his graduation from St. Lawrence University, while maintaining residence in Canton was instructor in Civil Government and International Law at St. Lawrence University. He became a trustee of the University in 1899 and continued as such until 1941 when he resigned the office on account of ill health. When Brooklyn Law School, founded by Norman P. Heffley over

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forty years ago, sought connection with a college or University that had the power of conferring degrees, Nelson Robinson was one of the men who joined in the project of bringing the Brooklyn Law School in as a Department of the University. He served on the Brooklyn Law School board and served as its vice president and president.

After going to New York he was associated for a time with his uncle, Leffert L. Buck, who was at the time building the Williamsburg Bridge. It is interesting that a cousin of Mr. Robinson, Holton D. Robinson, a St. Lawrence University man, was associated in the Williamsburg Bridge project. Holton Robinson later became one of the great bridge engineers of the country and was the designer and builder of the St. Lawrence River bridge near Clayton, Jefferson County.

Mr. Robinson while in New York was for many years a member of the law firm of Robinson, Allen & Hoy, 56 Wall street. This association began in 1905 and Mr. Robinson retired from participation in 1937 and returned to Canton to make his home in the Robinson place, 7 University Avenue, which has been maintained as the Robinson home since the death of his wife's parents, Dr. and Mrs. George S. Weaver, over forty years ago. Dr. Weaver was at one time pastor of the First Universalist Church of Canton.

During the first World War Mr. Robinson was a cannoneer, Fifth Battery V.C.A., September through November, 1917, and a private in Co. I, 23d N.Y. Guard, until November, 1919.

He had been a member of the Harvard Club, New York City; the St. Lawrence University Club, New York; the Phi Beta Kappa alumni, New York; the Academy of Political Science, the Association of the Bar, City of New York; the New York Law Institute, the New York State and the American Bar Associations. He was the author of several volumes of "Cases and Points."

Mr. Robinson was more of an office practitioner, and rarely appeared in court to plead. The late Judge Ledyard P. Hale used to say of him, "Nelson Robinson knows more law than any man I know, on the bench or off the bench. In fact he knows too much to be a good trial lawyer." That was admittedly the truth to those who knew him and his fine legal training."

He was twice married, first to Miss Clara Weaver, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. George S. Weaver and a graduate of St. Lawrence University in the class of 1876, one year before he himself took his degree. The ceremony took place at the First Universalist Church on April 6, 1882. She died in 1905.

He contracted a second marriage, taking as his wife, Miss Maude R. Henderson, a New York City librarian, a native of Lafayette, Ind., and a graduate of Purdue University. She died in 1934.

There remain of the family a son and two daughters, Dr. Ernest Leffert Robinson of Schenectady; Miss Marjorie Robinson, at the home, University Avenue for several years and who has given her father tender nursing and care during his decline, and Mrs. John Philip (Ethel) Murphy of Hibbing, Minn., all, like their parents, graduates of St. Lawrence University. There are also six grandchildren, among whom is Miss Catherine Murphy, at

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this time a student at St. Lawrence University, one of the third generation of the family to attend St. Lawrence.

Nelson Robinson is recalled as one of the group of college men and women, alumni, faculty members and students, who in 1885 gathered to find means of making it possible for St. Lawrence University to live. The end had apparently come. There weren't sufficient means to pay a faculty and maintain the one college building, the first brick building on the hill, erected in 1856. Still may be heard the words of Nelson Robinson at the time—his Appeal—and the Appeals of others—Appeals which provided a \$50,000 endowment subscription which saved St. Lawrence.

During those years Nelson Robinson wrote the St. Lawrence anthem, Fides Et Veritas, the Latin phrase appearing in the University seal. This has been sung from year to year with the Scarlet and the Brown, written by Dr. Charles Kelsey Gaines, and other popular St. Lawrence songs.

The friendship of Dr. Gaines and Nelson Robinson was one of the fine, and perhaps pathetic things of the late years of both of these old St. Lawrence Romans. Dr. Gaines often went to the Robinson home, up to the time it was not possible to do this. On the birthday of one or the other during those years there was a dinner with members of the families and perhaps a friend or two.

On one of those occasions at the Robinson home, Mr. Robinson very much wished to secure goose quills so that he might fashion some of the old time goosequill pens. He came to the office of the writer of this and asked where he could secure them. We took up the telephone and called the home of Steve Ragon in Jingleville and Steve said, "Come and I'll give you all the quills you wish." With Mr. Robinson we drove down the Jingleville road to Ragon's and Steve rounded up the geese and procured a number of fine quills.

When we were ready to return to this village, Mr. Robinson said, "Let's go down through what they used to call Horse Heaven, that's one place in Canton I haven't been." So we drove down that way, down the Hall and Paro hills to the Milner Street road and back to Canton. That evening Charley Gaines had plenty of goosequill pens, fashioned by Nelson Robinson, and they would write quite nicely. Charley was delighted, and so was the quite numerous company present delighted.

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Transcribed on 4 Sep 2013 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY