A Citizen of Fine Spirit

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Abstract
William T. Francis was (1869-1929), by most measures, the most successful of the early African American alumni of William Mitchell College of Law's predecessor law schools. Francis was a skilled lawyer, an adroit politician, a popular orator, a vigorous crusader for human and civil rights, and a respected U.S. diplomat.

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William Mitchell

ILLUMINATRANSYVANIA FRANCIS

was not the first black graduate of the Law School of St. Paul, but he was, by most measures, the most successful of the early African American alumni of St. Paul College of Law or its predecessor law schools. Francis, one of a handful of students who managed to make a living practicing law in St. Paul during the first quarter of the 20th century, frequently appeared in the civil and criminal courts of the city and in the halls of Minnesota's Capital. Born in Indiana on April 26, 1869, he came to Minnesota in 1888. In 1904, he graduated from the St. Paul College of Law along with such future luminaries as Thomas Schall and John A. Burns. Schall later became a U.S. Senator, Burns, after a successful private practice, served as the last Dean of the St. Paul College of Law and the first Dean of William Mitchell College of Law. Francis, soon developed into a skilled lawyer, an adroit politician, a popular orator, a vigorous crusader for human and civil rights, and, finally, a respected U.S. diplomat. He married Nellie Griswold on Aug. 14, 1893. It was to all appearances an extraordinarily happy union of two extraordinarily talented people. An article in the Aug. 1893 issue of The Appeal, a local newspaper, described the elaborate 25th anniversary celebration the Francises had held at their home on Aug. 8 of that year. Designed to replicate their wedding celebration, the program featured a reenactment of the original ceremony, as well as speeches, recitations, and singing by the talented and handsome couple, known to their friends as Billy and Nellie, and others. Among the many guests were the prominent black Minneapolis attorney W.R. Morris and Miss Hattie Q. Brown. The Francises lived in a comfortable, impressive two-story home at 605 S. Anthony Ave. The 1920 census designates William's race and that of his wife. Nellie, born about 1874 in Tennessee, as "Mu," apparently meaning mulatto, in contrast to most of their neighbors, who were designated "B." Nellie Francis's sister and brother-in-law, Lola and Richard Chapman, lived with them. According to the census, the Francises owned the home free and clear, and the Chapmans rented from them. St. Paul College of Law records tell us that Francis had only a "common school" education before coming to law school, as a lad he had obtained a job with the Northern Pacific Railway Company, first as a telegrapher and then as an office boy. Not content to remain in such modest positions, he had studied telegraphy and shorthand, eventually becoming a stenographer and then a clerk, in the law firm where his brother-in-law was a partner. While in law school and for some time following graduation, Francis continued to work in the railroad's legal department, ultimately becoming chief clerk, a position that required him to have the training and skill of a lawyer and to do a lawyer's work. During his time with the railway, Francis was, according to the First City Star, another local black person "persistent in religious, political, social and fraternal circles." In 1904 he ran as a Republican candidate for the city assembly. He finished well out of the running, but he accumulated more than 9,000 votes, a respectable showing for a black candidate at the time. The Twin City Star in 1910 optimistically held up Francis as a person whose career "should be an inspiration to any young man and shows that strict attention to duty, being ready when opportunity knocks at the door, always brings to an individual that for which he labors." In 1911, The Appeal noted that Francis had been "the leading candidate for the position of Minister to Haiti" a short time previously and that he was "one of the most versatile men of our city," who could be "found in the forefront at all times and on all occasions looking to interests and welfare of his fellow men...." Francis, in a St. Paul interview, denied that he had applied for the Haiti position, saying: "Nellie Griswold Francis was a social reformer who deserved primary credit for lobbying Minnesota's first anti-lynching bill through the Legislature. That "friends in the East" must have put his name forward without his knowledge. He allowed, however, that if the post were to be offered to him, he "most certainly" would accept it. Upon the death in 1912 of the great Fredrick L. McGhee, St. Paul's first black lawyer, Francis accepted McGhee's widow's offer to take over her deceased husband's practice. He soon settled into McGhee's office space in the Union Block, an office building that stood just across the street from the city hall and county courthouse where Francis had, as a St. Paul College of Law student, taken his law school classes. A few years later, when the Union Block was razed to make room for the St. Paul Athletic Club, Francis moved his practice to the National Exchange Bank Building a block away at Fifth and Cedar streets.

For some time after opening his private practice, Francis ran an ad in the Appeal announcing that he was a skilled lawyer, an adroit politician, a popular orator, a crusader for human and civil rights, and, finally, a respected U.S. diplomat.

Douglas R. Heidenreich, '61, joined the William Mitchell faculty in 1963 and was the law school's dean 1964-75. He teaches contracts, commercial law, trusts and estates, and international instruments and professional responsibility. He is a frequent contributor to Bench & Bar of Minnesota, Minnesota Lawyer, and law reviews. He is the author of With Satisfaction: The William Mitchell College of Law, 1900-2000, the law school's 125-page centennial history (ordering information, page 24). This is the fourth and last of a series of articles on the law school's history that he has written for William Mitchell. The earlier articles are "Hiram F. Stevens and the Founding of the St. Paul College of Law, 1867," "And Then There Was One" (on the law school's Minneapolis predecessors), spring 1998; and "Porcupine Lipomym Reviews Summits (Ave.) Accord" (on the 1996 union of Minneapolis and St. Paul law schools that resulted in William Mitchell), spring 1999.
him for short periods. One of those young black lawyers was Clynder James Smith, who, after a knock-about childhood in St. Paul, had gone to Washington, D.C., for a time and later returned to his hometown. While working at a variety of jobs, Smith attended the St. Paul College of Law for two years and the Northwestern College of Law in Minneapolis for a year. He finally completed his studies at the Minnesota College of Law, also in Minneapolis, and was admitted to the bar in 1923.

According to Smith's recollection, recorded more than 50 years later, Francis did not treat Smith well. Francis, Smith alleged, insisted that his young employee deal with clients because of questionable dealings with them. Some clients claimed to have given Smith money to see the end of their antagonist. Arneson, when the association was unable to get the money, claimed that the union would be forced to fire Smith. The association then tried to persuade the couple, but the Francises were not interested in hiring Smith. The Francises to abandon their plans, things turned ugly. Association members marched in front of the house the Francises to occupy, burning flares and making loud noise in protest. Anonymous threatening phone calls and letters followed. On two occasions crosses were burned in front of the home that the Francises had purchased. The local and national NAACP pressed public officials for assistance. Mayor Arthur E. Nelson, '15, also a graduate of the St. Paul College of Law, promised support but seems not to have carried through with that promise. The police made some effort to protect the couple, but the Francises were not interested in hiring private security guards.

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honor probably goes to the great Frederick Douglass, who was Minister to Haiti in the late 19th century. Shortly after Francis’s appointment, he and his wife moved to Monrovia and assumed their diplomatic duties. William T. Francis, however, was to serve his country as a diplomat for only two years.

The small nation of Liberia, clinging to the western coast of Africa, was populated in its interior by several groups of natives, all of which spoke different dialects, and, in the coastal cities, largely by former slaves and their descendants. The country, created as a haven for freed former slaves, had struggled with financial problems, health problems, internal unrest, and the incapacity of the great powers throughout the hundred years of its existence. In the mid-1920s, as Francis took over his task, the American corporate giant Firestone Rubber Company had extracted huge concessions from Liberia and was moving in to burn thousands of acres of jungle in preparation for the establishing of vast rubber plantations.

Not the least of the nation’s problems was disease. Francis, in his dispatches, often discussed the problem of yellow fever. In 1929, yellow fever was, according to the diplomatic dispatches, “prevalent in Monrovia at all times.” In 1934, in his book Liberia Rediscovered, James C. Young wrote that “Dr. A.W. Sellards of the Harvard Medical School [had] devoted special research to yellow fever and its prevention.” Dr. Sellard’s recommendations “have had lasting results,” said the author. Whatever these results might have been, they had come too late for Francis.

Struck down by yellow fever, William T. Francis, barely 60 years old, died in Monrovia, the Liberian capital, at 5 a.m. on July 15, 1929.

His death was a difficult one. When Francis complained of severe headaches on Sunday, June 16, 1929, Dr. Rudolph Fuszek was summoned. The doctor quickly concluded that his patient had malaria and treated him accordingly.

By Thursday, June 20, Fuszek and Dr. Justus Rice, a colleague who worked as a doctor for the Firestone Company, concluded that Francis had developed yellow fever. The patient’s condition steadily worsened as complications developed over the next several weeks. On July 11, Clifton R. Wharton, secretary of the U.S. legation in Monrovia, sent a dispatch describing Francis’s deteriorating condition. “The intense pain and suffering of the Minister as witnessed by the writer even at this writing,” Wharton wrote, “can hardly be described.” On July 13, Nellie Francis dictated a brief note to various people, including several St. Paul friends. She spoke of her husband’s “pain, weariness and exhaustion” and observed that the minister was “in VERY weakened State, but still managing to hold on with some of marvelous old rallying strength.” Two days later, after a month of agony, Francis died.

Henry L. Stimson, the U.S. secretary of state, immediately issued a statement, complimenting Francis for “splendid work” in Liberia and calling him one of the nation’s “most able and trusted public servants.”

Upon hearing of Francis’s death, the St. Paul City Council adopted a resolution of tribute, calling him “a citizen of fine spirit [who had been] held in high esteem by those who knew him” and extending its “sincere sympathy to the bereaved family.” William T. Francis’s body was returned to St. Paul for a funeral service at the Pilgrim Baptist Church on Sunday, August 11, 1929, following which it was sent to Tennessee, his wife’s birthplace, for burial.

Nellie Francis survived her husband by 40 years. She moved to Tennessee, but appears also to have lived for a time in California. She visited friends in St. Paul on at least two occasions in later years. In 1930, the U.S. House of Representatives defeated a bill to award her $5,000, equivalent to her late husband’s salary for one year—on the grounds that she had not been shown to be dependent. Minnesota Representative Melvin Maas reintroduced the proposal in 1934. Finally, in 1935, the U.S. Congress passed the bill that directed the U.S. treasurer to pay "to Nellie T. [sic] Francis, widow of William T. Francis, late minister resident and consul general at Monrovia, Liberia, the sum of $5,000, equal to one year’s salary of her deceased husband." In 1969, after a long life of service and commitment to civil and human rights, Nellie Griswold Francis joined her beloved Billy in the Greenwood Cemetery in Nashville, Tenn.