

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XI

8-4-89

No. 31

JOHN CUNNEEN

Last week the Orleans County Legislature passed a resolution naming one of the county buildings in the Historic Court House District Cunneen Hall. This structure which is located at 27 Court Street across from the county jail now serves as an office for the District Attorney with the intent that other rooms may be also used for a judicial related office. The name Cunneen was selected for its appropriateness to the building's present use. You ask, who was John Cunneen?

John Cunneen was born near Ennis, Ireland, May 18, 1848 where his family lived in a cottage of unbaked brick with a thatched roof. He was next the eldest of seven sons, all named for the apostles. His father recognized that John had potential and felt he would have a better opportunity to achieve success in life if he were sent to America.

In 1860, at the age of twelve, he booked passage on one on an ocean sailing vessel where he spent most of the trip huddled against a smokestack for warmth. He arrived in the port of New York with all his earthly possessions tied up in a knapsack. From there he took a train to Albany and made the rest of his trip by packet boat to Albion where he was met by a cousin named Scanlan. For the next three years he worked on a farm for his room and board and attended a district school to complete his eighth grade education. While working on the farm he became interested in carpentry and for a few years worked at that trade. Yet, at the same time continued his quest for knowledge and self-improvement. During the early 1870s he began the study of law under John H. White and Judge Sanford E. Church in Albion. While studying for the bar in 1873, he taught at the District No. 5 Cobblestone School in Childs where he was paid \$3.50 per week. He walked from Albion to Childs every day, three miles each way. Being extremely poor at the time he kept bachelor's quarters in a room where he fixed his own meals. In 1876 he married Elizabeth Bass, a local girl, after having been engaged to her for several years. They had one daughter, Charlotte, who married William Hackett. They had no children. Mrs. Charlotte Cunneen Hackett died in the early part of this decade.

In 1874, John Cunneen was admitted to the Bar at Rochester and at once commenced the practice of law in Albion. He was Clerk of the Board of Supervisors from 1876 through 1880. He made two unsuccessful attempts to be elected Orleans County District Attorney. He also tried to establish a newspaper in Albion called the Weekly News. He helped organize the Orleans County Bar Association and served as its first secretary. His ability as an attorney marked him as one of the best trial lawyers in western New York. He remained in



practice in Albion until 1893 when he had an opportunity to join a law firm in Buffalo. When the firm failed, he opened his own law office employing several other lawyers.

In 1900, 1901, and 1902, Mr. Cunneen was chairman of the Erie County Democratic Party. In the fall of 1902 he was elected Attorney General of New York State and served on term from Jan. 1, 1903 to Dec. 31, 1904. He was defeated for his second bid to office. He is certainly one of the very few people from Orleans County to ever have been elected by statewide vote to such a governmental post.

On Feb. 21, 1907, John Cunneen died of Lobar Pneumonia. He was buried in old St. Joseph's Cemetery on Brown Road north of Albion, but when the new St. Joseph's Cemetery on East Avenue was opened in 1920 he was removed to the new cemetery. The Cunneen lot is the very first one on the right as you enter the cemetery. It is marked with a large black granite monument with the big letters, CUNNEEN. In small letters at the base it states "May his soul rest in peace." John's father was surely right that America is indeed the land of opportunity.

"Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed."

Booker T. Washington