

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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JOHN CUNNEEN 1848 - 1907

(L. Monacelli photo copy)

John Cunneen was born near Ennis, Ireland, May 18, 1848 where his family lived in a cottage of sunbaked brick with a thatched roof. He was next to the oldest of seven sons who were all named after the Apostles. At the very early age of twelve he had saved enough money to pay for his passage to America. Sailing across the ocean in 1860 he was cold, hungry and seasick. Most of the voyage he spent huddled against the smokestack for warmth. Upon landing in New York he took the train to Albany where he made the rest of his trip by packet boat up the Erie Canal. With all his worldly possessions tied up in a grip slung over his shoulder, this lonely boy was met by a cousin in Albion.

For the next several years John Cunneen worked on a farm near Albion for his room and board. During the winter months he attended a one-room district school to further his 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-betterment. During the early 1870's he began the study of law under John H. White and Sanford E. Church in Albion. While studying for the bar in 1873, he taught at the District No. 5 Cobblestone School in Childs. 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.

John Cunneen was admitted to the bar at Rochester in 1874 and at once commenced the practice of law in Albion where he remained until 1890 when he moved to Buffalo and became associated with the firm of Tabor, Sheelar, Cunneen and Coatsworth. Later this firm dissolved and simply became Cunneen and Coatsworth until 1898 when Mr. Cunneen engaged in the practice of law alone.

During his time in Albion he was clerk of the Orleans County Board of Supervisors and was twice the Democrat candidate for District Attorney in Orleans County. In 1900, 1901 and 1902 Mr. Cunneen was chairman of the Erie County Democratic Party. In 1902 he was elected Attorney General of New York State and had the distinction of being the only Democrat elected to state office that year. He served only from January 1903 to January 1905 as he was defeated for his second bid to office.

In February 1907, John Cunneen developed a severe cold and died of Lobar Pneumonia. He is buried in Old St. Joseph's Cemetery on Brown Road near Albion. He was considered to be "a man of exceptional intellectual attainments and strict integrity."

As mentioned previously, John Cunneen taught at the District No. 5 Cobblestone School in Childs during 1873. On Sunday, Sept. 26 beginning at 1:00 P.M. the old Cobblestone School will be the scene of reminiscences and remembrances with a reunion of all former Alumni of Gaines District No. 5.