

Augustus Woodward

Augustus Brevoort Woodward was born in New York City in 1774. After college, he became the first practicing lawyer in Washington, D.C. An acquaintance of President Thomas Jefferson, Woodward was appointed as a territorial judge in the Michigan Territory, arriving in Detroit just days after the 1805 fire. Emulating Washington, D.C.'s hub-and-spoke street plan, Woodward laid out a striking vision for his new hometown, including a main thoroughfare that bears his name.

When the British occupied Detroit during the War of 1812, most American officials departed. Woodward remained, advocating for fair treatment of the town's citizens. Following the conflict, in addition to his court docket, he endeavored to establish a university, laying the groundwork for the University of Michigan.

Woodward's personality made him a lightning rod for criticism and he made powerful enemies. After 19 years in Detroit, he was assigned to a judicial post in the Territory of Florida. He died there in 1827, a lifelong bachelor.



Augustus Woodward's Detroit

In 1796 the British army ceded Detroit to American troops. Roughly 2,200 inhabitants of French and Scotch-Irish descent lived in a small stockaded village and on farms along the river. Visitors described the settlement as poor and roughly built. Fire destroyed the entire village in 1805.

Out of the ashes grew a modest American town, with wider streets and a plan for expansion. However, population growth was stagnant. Settlers were discouraged by sporadic Indian attacks and the farmland had a poor reputation. Additionally, lax sanitation caused periodic epidemics of cholera and dysentery. The fort was briefly lost to British troops during the War of 1812, further lowering morale.

The region's fortunes began to change in 1818, when regular steamboat service was established between Detroit and Buffalo. By 1825, the town had a water system and the newly opened Erie Canal helped bring thousands of new residents to the region.



Hero?

Augustus Woodward's leading biographer, Frank Woodford, observed that during his lifetime, the judge was "loved and revered by the vast majority of the humble people among whom he lived and worked."

He endeared himself to many Detroiters during the British occupation of 1812-1813. Most of the city's leaders left town, but Woodward remained and served as the legal advocate for American citizens. A memorial signed by friends and enemies alike acknowledged his "exertions in favour of ...every individual in the Territory."

Supporters noted his abilities as a jurist, including his sense of fairness, knowledge of the law, painstaking research, political courage and impeccable moral character. Thomas Cooley, one of Michigan's most important nineteenth-century legal minds, thought Woodward's ability was "very considerable, and, in some respects, very substantial."

Known for his intellectual curiosity and support of education, Woodward was a leading advocate for the creation of a state-sponsored university – which eventually became the University of Michigan. In addition, many praised his visionary foresight, including his plan for rebuilding Detroit after the 1805 fire. Frederick Law Olmsted, the famous architect, believed that "nearly all of the most serious mistakes of Detroit's past have arisen from a disregard of . . . [Woodward's] plan."

Others have recognized his early advocacy of American expansion across the North American continent. One historian claims "that his mind worked half a century in advance of most of his countrymen."



Villain?

Although Augustus Woodward's detractors were relatively few, they tended to be influential and their charges potent. Lewis Cass, Michigan's territorial governor, defended the judge, yet still criticized him for having "a mind miserably inert and notoriously the willing dupe."

Frequent public references noted his apparent eccentricity, slovenliness and peculiarity of mind. Contemporaries described him as sarcastic and a bit pompous.

His plan for the state-supported university that would eventually become the University of Michigan was ridiculed, and Woodward himself was criticized for being too lofty in his goals. Critics also attacked his lack of overt piety, deeming him "irreligious" and "un-Christian."

Those who disagreed with his judicial decisions sometimes attacked him on the street, both verbally and physically, charging that he was vindictive and had little respect for established law. As a judge, Woodward was twice threatened with impeachment by the people of Detroit.

In the midst of several fierce political campaigns, his enemies charged him with corruption, drunkenness and having committed treason during the War of 1812. Although he would eventually clear his name, his legacy remains clouded by these charges.

