

## MINNESOTA HISTORY

# Decades apart, they crossed color line

CURT BROWN

One was a Republican lawyer and skilled orator, originally from Maryland. The other: a Kansas veterinarian and ardent Democrat.

John Francis Wheaton arrived in Minnesota in 1893 — nearly 70 years before Bert Robert Lewis. Their deaths, 57 years apart, came early and surprised those who knew them. Wheaton killed himself at 55, inhaling lethal gas in New York City. Lewis suffered a fatal heart attack at 47 in his Golden Valley home.

Between their moves to Minnesota and those sudden deaths, the two men carved their names into state political history. Wheaton, a descendant of slaves, was the first black man elected to the Minnesota House in 1898. Lewis became the first African-American elected to the state senate 74 years later.

Even before joining the Legislature, Frank Wheaton, as he was commonly known, had earned respect as the first black graduate from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1894.

"Confronted with all the obstacles of race prejudice, John Francis Wheaton has climbed a rugged path such as few men have successfully surmounted and won for himself a record and a name that would be envied by any man," the Minneapolis Journal proclaimed in an 1897 collection of profiles called "Progressive Men of Minnesota."

Born in Hagerstown, Md., in 1866, Wheaton shined shoes and milked cows to earn money while attending college in West Virginia to become a teacher. At only 22, he served as an alternative delegate at the 1888 Republican National Convention in Chicago.

A popular stump speaker, he landed a clerkship in Congress while studying law at Howard University. When Republicans came to Minneapolis for their national convention in 1892, renominating President Benjamin Harrison, Wheaton must have liked what he saw.

"Tiring of his continual struggle against the disadvantages imposed upon men of his color," the Minneapolis Journal said, he moved to Minnesota in 1893 and attended law



Minnesota Legislative Reference Library (left); Minnesota Historical Society (right)

## PIONEERING PAIR

Nearly 75 years separated the first black members of the Minnesota House and Senate.

**First in House:** John Francis "Frank" Wheaton, at left. Republican attorney and orator elected for one term in 1898 from Minneapolis. Born May 8, 1866, in Hagerstown, Md.; died Jan. 15, 1922, in New York City.

**First in Senate:** Bert Robert "Bob" Lewis, at right. DFLer, veterinarian, elected in 1972. Born Nov. 2, 1931, in Hutchinson, Kansas. Died April 25, 1979, in Golden Valley.

school at the U while working as a hotel waiter and railroad porter.

He and his wife, Ella, had two sons and Wheaton was soon earning \$5 a day as a clerk at the Capitol. He kept confronting racism, though, being denied service in one restaurant in 1895 and then getting falsely accused of stealing a white man's wallet at St. Paul's Metropolitan Hotel in 1897.

He sued and ran for the Minnesota House from the Kenwood area of Minneapolis. Despite fewer than 50 black adults among the district's 9,000 voters, he won.

He introduced 15 bills during his one term, including an expansion of the kinds of businesses forbidden from discriminating based on race. In 1890, he wowed fellow attendees at the state Republican convention.

The Minneapolis Times said he

was able to "hypnotize the convention with oratory." And before "delegates had time to pull up the lower jaws," another newspaper said of his oratorical prowess, he successfully nominated himself for a symbolic delegate spot at the national convention.

Just as Wheaton was ascending in Minnesota politics, he left — moving to Chicago to help found an insurance firm. He said he loved Minneapolis "better than any place on earth" and hoped to return someday.

"I got my start here," he said before he left. "I owe a great deal to the people of the city, where everyone is accorded 'equal rights' without regard to race."

Instead of returning, Wheaton headed to New York City and became a leading figure in the Harlem scene. In 1921, one of his legal clients skipped

bail, leaving Wheaton on the hook for the \$10,000 bond. Distraught over the debt and impending financial ruin, he killed himself Jan. 15, 1922.

Lewis, his Minnesota Senate barrier-breaking counterpart, was born about a decade later in Hutchinson, Kansas. A Korean War veteran, he studied animal husbandry and veterinary medicine at Kansas State.

In 1962, Lewis moved to St. Louis Park. An attendant at the Texaco station remembered his white '62 Chevy pulling in.

"It being St. Louis Park, he may have been the first black man I had ever talked to," Paul Linnee said on the town's historical society website (slphistory.org). "He was new in town, needed gas and wondered if there was a pet hospital in town."

Linnee pointed him to Fitch's Pet

Hospital, which Lewis purchased. He'd driven up earlier and been refused a chance to buy or rent another property.

When he moved into his St. Louis Park neighborhood, unloading a U-Haul with a friend, neighbors misread the situation.

"My friend and I arrived and began unloading the furniture, and the neighbors, I assume, thought we were just workmen unloading the furniture," he said in a 1967 interview. "They had no idea that a Negro was moving in next door."

He said a neighbor circulated a petition protesting his arrival, but only one person signed it. He promptly landed a spot on the St. Louis Park school board in 1966 and then won a seat in the state senate in 1972 when only about 26 black residents lived in the suburb.

He sponsored legislation to help victims of family violence and expanded catastrophic health insurance. Twice married with two children, Lewis' stature in the Senate climbed in the 1970s — along with the stress.

During the 1979 session, he served as finance chairman of a health and welfare subcommittee — becoming an abortion-rights advocate in the process.

When he died April 25 in the final month of the session, his widow blamed the fatigue of round-the-clock hearings for the heart attack. Margaret Sandberg later filed a workers' compensation claim, saying the pressures of his job killed him. She testified that he loved his early days in the Senate but grew disillusioned as his responsibilities grew, lobbying intensified and more conservatives were elected.

Since 1980, the Minnesota Public Health Association has given out the B. Robert Lewis Award to leading politicians, including Paul Wellstone, George Latimer and Walter Mondale.



Curt Brown's tales about Minnesota's history appear each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at [mnhistory@startribune.com](mailto:mnhistory@startribune.com). A collection of his columns is available as the e-book "Frozen in History" at [startribune.com/ebooks](http://startribune.com/ebooks).