

ORVILLE C. PRATT

Orville C. Pratt was born in Ontario County, New York, April 24, 1819. He received his early education at Rushville in that county. He later supplemented his schooling by a course of classics and mathematics in two local academies, before reaching his seventeenth year, becoming thoroughly versed in those branches and a thorough English scholar. Shortly afterward he received from President Jackson an appointment to a cadetship in the United States Military Academy at West Point, which he entered as a member of the class of 1837.

He remained at West Point two years, but his ambition to become a lawyer overshadowing his military desires, and further reverses of the family making it imperative that he prepare to earn a livelihood, he entered the law office of a relative, Samuel Stevens, and in two years was admitted to the bar of New York (1840).

At the age of 21 he began his professional career at Rochester and his abilities were soon recognized, especially through his active participation in the Presidential campaign of 1840, as an advocate of the election of Martin Van Buren. He entered into partnership with Fletcher M. Haight, one of the leading practitioners of Rochester, under the firm name of Haight & Pratt, which partnership existed until 1842, when Mr. Haight withdrew on account of his wife's death. In 1843 he was attracted to the West and settled in Galena, Ill., soon building up a lucrative practice there. In 1844 he entered heartily into politics, as a friend of Polk, and attracted attention by his cogent discussion of the issues then uppermost, the annexation of Texas, and the Oregon question.

In 1847 he was elected to the convention which revised the first constitution of Illinois. After the close of the convention he was appointed by the Secretary of War one of a committee to investigate certain charges against an army officer stationed at the Arkansas River Fort, and while on this mission received a message requesting him to proceed to Mexico, California and Oregon to investigate confidential matters. He set forth for Santa Fe, thence to Los Angeles, to Monterey, San Jose and then San Francisco, or Yerba Buena, as it was then called. President Polk had meanwhile appointed him Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Oregon, and he came to Portland. He was the pioneer judge of Oregon, no other member having arrived as yet. Toward the close of 1848, General Joseph Lane, the first governor of Oregon, arrived and in the following March organized the first territorial government, Judge Pratt and the governor being the only two members at their posts. Later in the same month Chief Justice Wm. P. Bryant reached Oregon City and the first session of the Supreme Court of Oregon was held. Within a few months the Chief Justice resigned on account of ill health, and Peter H. Burnett, who had been appointed Associate Justice, declined to

accept and left for California. For nearly two years Judge Pratt exercised all the powers of the judiciary, holding all his own terms in court and those which should have been held by the Chief Justice, and in the meantime organizing most of the district and circuit courts in the counties. During this time he tried many important cases, among them being those of five Indian chiefs implicated in the Whitman massacre. The first Court of Admiralty within the present limits of Oregon and California was held by Judge Pratt at Portland.

He served as judge until 1856, when he removed to San Francisco and formed a partnership with Alexander Campbell, who had practiced in the courts of Oregon. He was afterward judge of the Twelfth Judicial District Court of the city and county of San Francisco, and of the county of San Mateo, for six years. In politics he was a persistent and zealous Democrat, but was devoted to the Union cause during the war.

His death occurred at San Francisco in October, 1891.