

Charles D. Mahaffie goes to Washington, 100 years ago



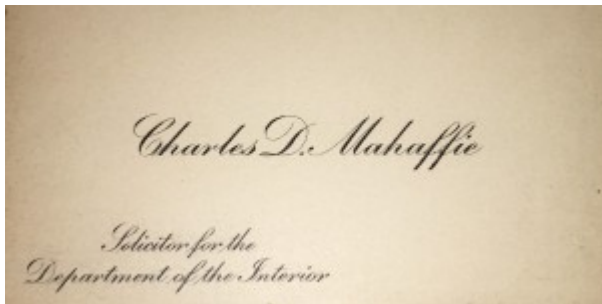
Charles D. Mahaffie, 1916: "A good mixer"

On Monday, September 18, 1916, Charles D. Mahaffie was sworn in as the Solicitor of the U.S. Department of the Interior. The Solicitor's office provided legal services to the entire Department.

The *Oregonian* newspaper wrote, "Twenty-Six attorneys under his direction are today telling him what his duties are." [*Oregonian*, September 19, 1916] He was now a Federal bureaucrat, serving a department now overseeing the brand-new National Park Service, and managing land issues including those involving Native Americans. The Solicitor would be a busy man.

Charles was 31, a graduate of Kingfisher College, Oklahoma and a Rhodes Scholar graduate of St. Johns College, Oxford. Still a bachelor, he moved his lodgings from the University Club, Portland, Oregon, to the University Club, Washington, DC, taking a residence with other single men in a club that had dining, commons spaces, and plenty of camaraderie. The Club was at 15th and I St., NW, on MacPherson Square.

Another paper said Mahaffie was a “bachelor and a tennis enthusiast” and a “public land specialist ... much interested in the conservation of the natural resources of the country.” [*The Oelwein Daily Register* (Iowa), November 17, 1916]



Interior was a good fit for the talents and interest of this young man who as a toddler was in the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889, was raised adjacent to Indian Territory, and was now steeped in matters of land use. [Note: those that remember him may struggle with the idea of Charles as a “toddler”.]

Charles had settled in Portland in 1911 to start a law practice. Over five years there, he had become enmeshed in city politics and other civic and professional activities. It’s likely, had he not been called to Washington by Woodrow Wilson, that he would have made his life in Portland, and perhaps entered elective politics there.

The sort of man he was

Three or four of Charles’ seven grandchildren are old enough to remember him as a gruff old man. In his marriage to [Isabel Cooper](#), an energetic, creative, busy, people collector, he seemed just a quiet backdrop. But his younger adulthood as a bachelor, rising in Portland City politics, shows a different side.

Earlier that Summer, Charles’ Oxford alumnae magazine gave his perspective on Portland:

The report from Charlie Mahaffie, Oklahoma and St. John’s, glows with an optimism truly Pacific. “We’re strong here,” he says of Portland, Oregon, “for preparedness. Preparedness to welcome the ‘prosperity wave’ which we hear is now just east of the Cascade Mountains. We have sentries out to locate it. Otherwise the coast is very ‘Pacific’; and Wilson looks like a good bet in this part of it. Prohibition seems very effectual, and sociability speaks in a subdued tone. But we are getting used to it

gradually, and if it does all that we were promised, everybody will be pleased." [*The American Oxonian*, July 1916]

He complained about Prohibition. (Prohibition lasted from 1920 to 1933 for the U.S. overall. But Oregon had voted to ban all alcohol in 1915). He told *The American Oxonian* that it would create financial issues for the University Club. [*The American Oxonian*, January 1916]

Some other of Charles' Portland activities

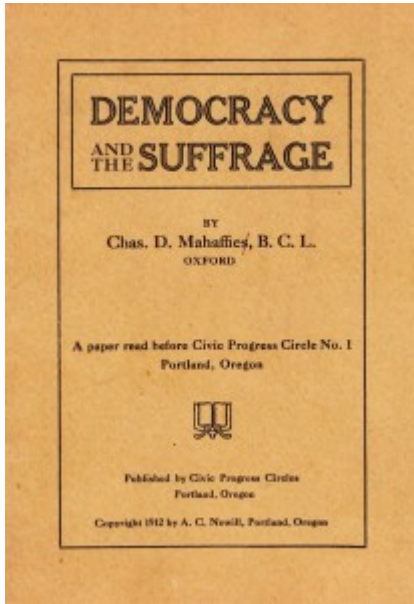
- Served as assistant secretary of the Oregon Conservation Commission
- Was advisory editor of the *National Municipal Review*, editing the department of Judicial Decisions Affecting Municipalities
- Served as Director, Douglas County Fire Patrol Association
- Served as Treasurer, Oregon Bar Association
- Served as secretary, University Club, Portland
- Played competitive tennis

Politics and opinion

Charles wrote an article in a Portland paper in favor of presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson, focusing on his brave reforms when President of Princeton. Charles had joined the faculty of Princeton University following his Oxford education, as an instructor in jurisprudence.

The issue in higher education as Charles reported it was, "so all-pervading has the craze for social honors become that the public itself wants to know of the recent graduate, not if he led his class or was a high honor man, but what fraternity or club he 'made'."

"Universities founded and supported for the purpose of preparing men for life in America were, consciously or unconsciously, coming to put the chief emphasis on matters destructive of the best ideals of American life. Most men not directly concerned saw the process with regret. Many of the keener academic authorities appreciated the danger by saw no effectual means of combating it. Woodrow Wilson was one of the first to diagnose the situation."



Among the steps Wilson had taken: eliminating fraternities and raising academic standards, despite strong pressures against those changes. [*The Oregon Daily Journal* [Portland], September 5, 1912]

Charles also authored and presented a paper, published also as a pamphlet, called "[Democracy and the Suffrage](#)," [links to full article] supporting the vote for women. He wrote, "In no important line of human effort, except politics, is the sex of the thinker considered of importance in estimating the value of brain product." [Charles D. Mahaffie, "Democracy and the Suffrage," 1912.] Women's voting rights were on the ballot that year in Oregon, and the referendum passed with 52% support. The United States didn't give voting rights to women until 1920.

"New solicitor is called a good mixer"

The Day wrote about Charles under the headline "New Solicitor is Called Good Mixer".

"Charles D. Mahaffie, of Portland, Ore., has arrived in Washington, DC. To take up his new duties as solicitor of the Interior Department. Both Senators Lane and Chamberlain of Oregon warmly urged the appointment of Mahaffie. He is popular throughout his native state, is known as a prominent attorney and is declared to be a good mixer." [*The Day*, October 6, 1916]

Illustrating the story was the photo above, showing Charles, the good mixer suited, wearing a homburg, and striding along what might be Pennsylvania Avenue or F Street, in Washington.