

Joseph Ward (1883-1889)

Joseph Ward was destined to make a lasting impact in Yankton, South Dakota and the state as a whole. Born in Perry Centre, New York to Dr. Jabez and Aurilla Ward on May 5, 1838, Ward had an early fondness for education. After completing school, he moved to Wellsville, New York and opened a small schoolhouse. He taught eighteen students by the year's end, but teaching left Ward exhausted and short on funds. He then set his sights on becoming a minister.

Ward spent eleven years at Phillips Academy, Brown University, and Andover Seminary. His time at Brown University was eventful. During the Civil War, Ward served as a rifleman in Company D of the Tenth Rhode Island Regiment. A fever cut his service short, but Ward spent the remainder of the war with the United States Christian Committee caring for wounded soldiers and assisting army chaplains. After the war's end, Ward returned to his studies at Brown University and Andover Seminary. In 1868, Ward graduated from seminary and promptly married Sarah Francis Wood whom he met at Brown University.

On November 6, 1868, Joseph and Sarah Ward arrived in Yankton, Dakota Territory. Sent by the American Home Missionary Society, Joseph Ward was to be the missionary for the newly organized Congregational Church in the territorial capital. While the church was his prime responsibility, he was also given a second mission to establish a Christian education. When local citizens refused to give adequate tax support to the "Brown School" established by a group of dedicated women, Ward began teaching students in his own private school. An outgrowth of his school was the Yankton Academy of which he became president of the Board of Trustees. Later, it was turned over to public control and became Yankton High School.

Before his untimely death in 1889, Ward's many contributions to South Dakota earned him a lasting place of honor in the commonwealth's history. Among his many credits was authoring the official motto for his adopted state of South Dakota: "Under God the People Rule." A seven-foot marble statue of Joseph Ward was sculpted by sculptor Bruno Beghe' to honor Ward's notable history and donated by South Dakota to be on permanent display in Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol in 1963 where it remains on display still.

After Ward's death, his wife Sarah continued his mission. She served as a missionary pastor of the Lesterville Congregational Church. When the school needed financial aid, Sarah became an assistant secretary so she could contact friends of the college in the east. She was rightfully considered the co-founder of Yankton College for her assistance. Sarah passed away on November 22, 1908 at the age of 66 and was buried next to Joseph in the Yankton Cemetery. In her will, she left her inheritance from her father to Yankton College.