Hiram F. Stevens and the Founding of the St. Paul College of Law

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Publication Information

Repository Citation
Abstract
The St. Paul College of Law, one of William Mitchell College of Law’s predecessor institutions, was established by five attorneys in 1900. Especially prominent among these attorneys was Hiram F. Stevens (1852-1904), who served as the first dean and was also a legislator, teacher, scholar, popular orator, and a founding member of the American Bar Association.

Keywords
Hiram F. Stevens, St. Paul College of Law, legal education, American Bar Association

Disciplines
Legal Education | Legal History

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On November 23, 1900, five distinguished St. Paul lawyers signed a document that created, out of nothing, a night law school. In its first century, the law school would produce politicians, trial lawyers, office lawyers, judges, business executives and, like all law schools, a small collection of rogues. The graduates of the law school profoundly influenced the course of history, not only of the Twin Cities and Minnesota but, to some degree, the nation.

The St. Paul College of Law, soon to be designated "The Lawyers Law School," was to be a root to which would be grafted, 56 years later, the Minneapolis-Minnesota College of Law, successor to four evening law schools in Minneapolis, each with its own rich history.

Stories by the century
1900-2000

The college's first Catalog and Announcement says the school was created as a result of a meeting of a committee of Ramsey County lawyers, called together in the spring of 1899 by the president of the Ramsey County Bar Association. Lawyers saw the need for a night law school that would serve working students in St. Paul.

From that larger group came the five founding fathers. A faculty of about a dozen lawyers and judges, including several members of the original larger group, came together to begin teaching in the college. The catalog said classes would be held "on the top floor of the Court House," a fortress-like stone building occupying the block bounded by Fourth and Fifth, and Wabasha and Cedar streets, since replaced by the present Ramsey County Courthouse. The facilities, thanks to the cooperation of the Ramsey County board, were made available to the college free of charge.

The first catalog also noted: "The Faculty gathered together form a corps of able and experienced instructors, who are inspired by love of their profession and not lucrative gain. It is their aim to create a school where quality of instruction and not numbers, where merit and not influences, may be the controlling elements."

Working for a nonprofit corporation with no capital or property and offering a course to about 20 students, each of whom presumably paid tuition of $60 per year, the faculty indeed must have been inspired by love of the profession rather than any prospect of "lucrative gain." The five founders were all listed as faculty members. With one exception, all taught for several years. They were remarkable men. At least two held law degrees from distinguished universities. Four were well established; one was a young lawyer of promise. All had the love of the profession rather than any prospect of "lucrative gain."

student had been the muddy flats where Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant, described in one history of the city as the "lawless fellow...who felt the chief end of man was to drink and sell whisky," had settled at the mouth of Fontain Cave following his expulsion from the nearby Fort Snelling Military Reservation.

Indeed, there must have been still living in St. Paul at least a few people who had witnessed the erection in 1841 of Father Galinter's tiny log chapel that would give its name to the river-lending community, previously known as Pig's Eye, in grudging recognition of its most notorious, though not illustrious, denizen.

The incorporators of the college and members of its first board of trustees were Hiram E. Stevens, dean; Ambrose Tigue, treasurer; Clarence W. Halfbert, secretary; Thomas D. O'Brien; and Moses E. Clapp.

Halfbert, a graduate of the Yale Law School and, at 25, the youngest, in addition to teaching agency law, served as the college's secretary and acted as its representative at professional meetings and in negotiations of various sorts. He appears to have been the most active in the affairs of the college beginning about 1904, and he disappeared from the college's faculty and board about 1917, following unsuccessful negotiations for a merger of the college with the University of Minnesota Law School.

Moses E. Clapp, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin Law School and a former Minnesota attorney general, while remaining for 10 years a member of the board and for 13 a nominal faculty member, seems never to have taught a class at the college. The ink was barely dry on the incorporation documents when he was chosen in 1901 to fill the unexpired U.S. Senate term of the renowned Cashman K. Davis, who had died in office.

Although the 1901-02 catalog called him a "Special Lecturer," thereafter Clapp's name appeared on the list of faculty with the designation "Course omitted because of absence." It was never suggested he would be present to teach a course. Clapp, the independent-minded "Black Eagle," was, following a colorful Senate career, defeated by Frank B. Kellogg in the primary election of 1916. He remained in Washington.
for the rest of his professional life and he died there in 1929.

Thomas D. O'Brien, probably the sole Democrat in the group, was a member of a reputable family of lawyers and public servants. Born to Irish immigrants on Lake Superior's Madeline Island, he came as a small child with his family, first to St. Anthony, then to St. Paul, where, as a young man, he read law and was admitted to practice at the age of 21. His exceptional career included a term as Ramsey County attorney and a brief stay on the Minnesota Supreme Court. He taught corporations and Minnesota practice at the St. Paul College of Law and was the last of the founding trustees on the board of trustees, serving until his death in 1936. O'Brien served as well as the dean of the St. Thomas School of Law during its brief existence, from 1923 to about 1935.

Ambrose Tighe taught "Elementary Law," municipal corporations and, for a time, insurance law and practice at the age of 21. His exceptional career included a term as Ramsey County attorney and a brief stay on the Minnesota Supreme Court. He taught corporations and Minnesota practice at the St. Paul College of Law and was the last of the founding trustees on the board of trustees, serving until his death in 1936. O'Brien served as well as the dean of the St. Thomas School of Law during its brief existence, from 1923 to about 1935.

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College's representative. In 1902, he participated in a vigorous debate about the desirability of including "Elementary Law" in the law school curriculum. The St. Paul College carried a course with that title in its curriculum for several years, and Stevens, while modestly disclaiming any deep understanding of the issue, favored the retention of the subject in the first-year curriculum.

No representative attended AALS meetings in 1904 or 1905. Clarence Halbert, the college's secretary, appeared on the college's behalf in 1906 and again in 1907. After that, nobody represented the St. Paul College of Law at the meetings. In 1910 the association accepted "with regret" the St. Paul College's resignation.

Although in the early 1920s the college had some discussion with AALS officials about the possibility of becoming a member, nothing then came of the idea. In 1982, William Mitchell College of Law, the St. Paul College's successor, sought and was granted membership in the organization.

Stevens was known as an expert in real property law, the subject on which he had lectured at the University of Minnesota Law Department in the late 19th century. A member of several law firms during his years of practice, he also represented for some years the St. Paul Title Insurance and Trust Company. Many of his appellate cases involved issues relating to claims against or title to real property. He seems often to have been called upon to participate in the appeal even though he had not tried the case. His classroom teaching at the St. Paul College of Law focused on real property.

He appeared as dean of the college before the Minnesota Supreme Court to present a petition seeking to have the school certified as meeting statutory requirements so that its graduates could be admitted to practice without taking a bar exam. The legislation said that in order to qualify, a law school had to offer a course of study of at least three years in "the principles and practice of law under the tuition of a corps of not less [sic] than ten competent and experienced instructors in active attendance upon such college." In spite of the fact that the St. Paul College candidly acknowledged in its published catalog that "no member of the faculty devotes his entire time to the school and there are no professional teachers among them," the Supreme Court, on April 4, 1901, issued an order certifying that "the St. Paul College of Law, its corps of instructors and course of instruction are approved as being in accordance with the terms" of the legislation.

On June 16, 1902, the minutes of the court note that Raymond A. Jackson "came into court this day and presenting his Diploma from the St. Paul College of Law of St. Paul Minnesota" and, having demonstrated that he met the other modest requirements for admission to the bar, was admitted to practice, thus apparently becoming the first of the college's graduates to take advantage of the diploma privilege — admission without examination.

A few days later, the entire 20-member graduating class of 1902 was admitted under a similar order of the court. That list included the name of Jackson, who thus seems to have been admitted twice.

DEATH SNATCHED STEVENS AWAY on March 9, 1904. Stevens, who had been in apparent good health, was stricken by an intestinal blockage. He underwent surgery, got an infection — not uncommon in those days — and quickly died. Thus ended an illustrious career of service to the profession, legal education, and to the public.

Local newspapers mourned his loss. One called his death "a particularly sad event." The newspapers carried glowing tributes to Stevens's personal character as well as to his professional skill. The St. Paul Pioneer Press observed that Stevens had succeeded "notably as an instructor and interpreter of law."
The Ramsey County District Court adjourned on the afternoon of the funeral "in respect to the memory of the deceased." Federal and state judges, famous lawyers, law students and "a large gathering of relatives and friends" filled St. Paul's Episcopal Church "to overflowing" for the funeral service.

The Minnesota Historical Society, of which Stevens had been a member, sent a delegation led by General John B. Sanborn. Other organizations sent delegations, and there were even "several representative citizens from Minneapolis." The pallbearers included Halbert and Armand Albrecht, who had for some years been Stevens's law partner.

At a special memorial session of the district court following Stevens's death, one alumnus of the four-year-old St. Paul College of Law described Stevens as an ideal dean who was "truly the young man's friend."

Stevens's body was returned to St. Albans, Vermont, for burial. His widow seems to have returned to the East, for her name does not appear in city directories thereafter.

Thus ended the 24-year, shining Minnesota career of Hiram F. Stevens. He devoted his life to the betterment of his adopted city and state, and the impact of his law practice, his legislative accomplishments, and his teaching remain with us today.

At the time of his death, Dean Stevens was working on a volume of historical biography of Minnesota lawyers, History of the Bench and Bar of Minnesota. He had previously written several articles about the history of the bench and bar of Ramsey County, and his lectures on real property had been published, but this work — completed and published two years after his death — was to be his largest and last scholarly effort. The two-volume work, interleaved with steel-plate etchings of portraits of many of Minnesota's famous lawyers, contains general historical information about the bench and bar of Minnesota from territorial times and biographical sketches of the state's lawyers and judges. The frontispiece is a portrait of Associate Justice William Mitchell of the Minnesota Supreme Court.

William Mitchell College of Law, Stevens's most enduring legacy, continues nearly one hundred years later to enrich the state, the profession, and society with the men and women who have been able, through the foresight of Stevens and the other founding fathers, to become lawyers and to take their places among the leaders of the bench and bar.