

Then and Now

BY JOHN C. GREGORY JR.

When I last sat down to write my column, I was of an entirely different mindset. I recall that I was grappling with my incomprehension of how much damage a reckless, self-serving, narcissistic individual could do even within our democratic system when prone to ignore his own intelligence leaders and reason itself in conducting the daily duty of the President of the United States, leader of the free world. It is not a job for amateurs, or those incapable of acting with humility in the best interests of the country. Stay tuned, it doesn't sound as if it could get better any time soon. The trend clearly is that it could only get worse.

This time, I decided to take a different tack. I was going to use the opportunity to be more reflective. Reflective on my career as a lawyer and the environment in which I practice these skills. The notion to write something in this vein first struck me when I learned the Philadelphia Bar Association was going to sell its remarkable collection of portraits that had hung in the Jenkins Law Library.

I recall over 30 years ago, after passing the Pennsylvania bar exam, when I first came to live and work in Philadelphia. My first position as a lawyer required considerable research, a skill for which I felt a particular affinity, having enjoyed legal research and writing while in law school; clerking for a judge one summer; and participating in national moot court competitions. Much of my many, many hours in the law library was spent seemingly under the watchful gaze of the peering eyes of these interesting-looking men depicted in the collection of wonderful portraits of former bar leaders. I could not help but be impressed by this amazing collection of portraiture.

The Philadelphia Bar Association, formerly the Law Association of Philadelphia and originally the Law Library Company of the City of Philadelphia formed by 71 lawyers in 1802, started this collection of iconic portraits in 1825.

The Law Library Company and its many iterations have had many homes as it grew. Indeed, it was first housed in a room in Independence Hall and established tenancies in both the Athenaeum and City Hall. The last stop of this glorious collection was The Theodore F. Jenkins Memorial Law Library on 9th Street between Chestnut and Market. This is where I encountered these memorable figures.

These paintings were memorable for many reasons. For one thing, they were all large oil paintings. Additionally, the works were painted by some of the more important artists of their time, including Rembrandt Peale, Thomas Sully, John Neagle and Henry Inman. More importantly, they were of some of the most famous members of the bar, indeed, some of the most important citizens of Philadelphia. Among them were a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, many chief justices and other justices of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, governors of Pennsylvania and judges from every court in Philadelphia, from the municipal to county to state levels. Remarkable.

The names are names with which we are all familiar; Binney, Lewis, Read, Ingersoll, Sargent, Mann, Hare, Biddle and many more. They were the rock stars of their time, and this collection was like the lawyer "Hall of Fame." The list of accomplishments of this group was remarkable and noteworthy. I wondered, how could the Association part with such

an important collection that was so emblematic of our history and of all that the Association represents? At the end of the day, I am a traditionalist. I don't necessarily believe in change for change's sake, but I do recognize when progress should take precedent over tradition.

As it turns out, the real reason for the de-accession of the portrait collection had more to do with available space in what will be the seventh home of Jenkins Law Library. The move to 1801 Market St. was completed in December 2018.

Upon further reflection, however, it dawned on me that this





move to sell these painting was symbolic of something far more important. Think about it. For the most part, the job description and appearance of the heroes of today's Philadelphia Bar Association are strikingly different. Today's heroes are the lawyers who work hard outside the mainstream to create equal justice for all. They are modern pioneers dealing with contemporary issues.

As an Association, we are blessed with an abundance of lawyers who dedicate their professional skills to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves. Lawyers whose names might not be memorable and whose portraits might never be painted, toil in the most important trenches in some of the most important legal battles of our time. These gallant modern day members of our bar fight for immigrants, the homeless and those without the ability to pay for legal representation. They fight unfair jail sentences and the ramifications a criminal record will have on an individual post-incarcerated. They take on full dockets of pro bono work for veterans, the elderly, low-income tenants and those with disabilities. These are the lawyers worthy of recognition and distinction in our time.

During my time on the editorial board of *The Philadelphia Lawyer*, I have witnessed the first Chancellor of color, the first woman Chancellor and the first LGBTQ Chancellor. At the time, each

was an important, notable milestone. Today, without hesitation or a second thought, we recognize lawyers of every stripe, every background and nationality as the able practitioners of today. After all, there wasn't a single woman or person of color in the entire group of old portraits. This, too, reflects the symbolic nature of the sale of the old portraits. The times, they have a'changed!

These days, we don't expect to have our portrait done. In fact, even as Chancellor, the best one can hope for is an 8-by-10 photo to hang in the 10th Floor Board Room at the Association. Oh, well. A Thomas Sully oil painting it's not. Yet, somehow, it is still reflective of a special breed of legal practitioner; the *Philadelphia Lawyer*, among which I include myself. I urge all members of our Association to realize what is at the core of this appellation and to find the opportunity to advance our profession until the next symbolic change is noted and beyond.

By way of an epilogue, I couldn't help myself. Wishing to provide one of the original Association portraits a good home and having a distinct memory of how this individual used to challenge me as a new lawyer with the stoic encouragement of his patient observation, I contacted my friend, Sam Freeman, of Samuel T Freeman and Company, aka Freeman's Auction House (the oldest auction house in the country) and placed my winning bid for the portrait of George McDowell Stroud by Samuel Bell Waugh (top left). It was a way to bring my career in the law full-circle. He now hangs in my dining room and I get to repeat the essence of this editorial to my guests with each dinner party my wife and I host! ■

John C. Gregory Jr. (JGregory@streamlight.com), General Counsel for Streamlight, Inc., is Editor-in-Chief of The Philadelphia Lawyer.

The Philadelphia Lawyer (USPS #025-241), printed with soy inks on recycled paper, is published quarterly in March, June, September and December by the Philadelphia Bar Association, 1101 Market St., 11th floor, Philadelphia, Pa. 19107-2955. Telephone: (215) 238-6300. E-mail: tplmag@philabar.org. The opinions stated herein are not necessarily those of the Philadelphia Bar Association. All manuscripts submitted will be carefully reviewed for possible publication. The editors reserve the right to edit all material for style and length. Advertising rates and information are available from Shawn D. Phillips, Corporate Account Executive, Marketing Solutions, ALM, 1617 JFK Boulevard, Suite 1750, Philadelphia, PA 19103, (215) 557-2340. Periodicals postage at Philadelphia and additional locations. POSTMASTER: please send changes to *The Philadelphia Lawyer*, c/o Philadelphia Bar Association, 1101 Market St., 11th floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107-2955. As policy, we do not compensate our writers.

The Philadelphia Lawyer

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