

Virginia Lawyer

VOL. 70/NO. 4 • December 2021

VIRGINIA LAWYER REGISTER

The Official Publication of the Virginia State Bar



VIRGINIA LAW SCHOOLS



A Special Place to Study Law

by Michael W. McLaughlin, Alumnus of The Washington and Lee University School of Law

“**T**he adequate protection of our environment requires the thoughtful application of both engineering and the law.” So began my law school application essay in 1975 as I was wrapping up my environmental engineering degree at Virginia Tech. I applied to several Virginia law schools, but my first choice was Washington & Lee University School of Law. W&L had Professor Andrew McThenia (“Uncas”) on its faculty, and Uncas was a member of the Virginia State Water Control Board and taught a second-year course in environmental law.

I met Uncas at the first-year reception in August 1976 on the back patio of the Alumni House. A gin and tonic in my hand, I told him that he was the reason I was attending W&L. “Well, Mr. McLaughlin, I don’t know how to tell you this. I’ve decided I’m not going to teach that class anymore. Too much politics involved.” Uncas explained that Fairfax County and its response to providing sewer to its residents were what he had in mind. But he assured me that there would still be a second-year course in environmental law; he just wouldn’t be teaching it. As it happened, a brilliant lawyer from Hunton & Williams in Richmond, Turner Smith, taught the class. And it was all anyone could have wished for—practical and thoroughly up-to-date, particularly in the area of clean air regulation.

W&L is and was a special place to study law. Our class was the first to attend classes in the new Lewis Hall. The law school had started admitting women several years earlier (I think our class of 120 included six women), but both the undergraduate school and Virginia Military Institute next door were all-male. Our law class was and remains close—W&L has a tradition of comradery.

Our professors were legendary. Dean Roy Steinheimer had served on the Uniform Commercial Code Committee of the American Bar Association, and in

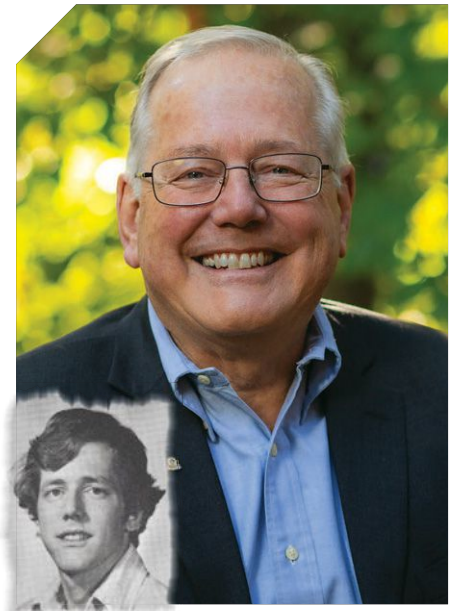
commercial transactions he taught us that whenever we were feeling low, we could remember that “your bank is your debtor.” Uncas taught contracts and later suretyship and mortgages. Professor Roger Groot, a Marine veteran who served in Vietnam (we could only imagine), taught us real property and the importance of seisin in feudal conveyances. Professor Joe Ulrich taught torts using the Socratic Method—on our feet. “Alright, Mr. McLaughlin, you’ve made a monkey out of me; now it’s my turn.”

Professor Eddie Graves taught Virginia procedure (he wrote the book on the subject) and estate planning. The law came alive as he described helping clients and helping New York lawyers understand the Virginia way of doing things. Eddie would invite several of us at a time to Sunday supper at his home in Lynchburg. He played the piano while we literally sang for our supper.

Road trips were important to our social life. I served as social chair in our second year and convinced Dean Steinheimer that we needed to increase our budget because lawyers needed to be able to network while drinking responsibly. We bought an industrial-strength sound system and we traveled to Mary Baldwin, Sweetbriar, Randolph-Macon Women’s College, Hollins, and to what was then called Southern Seminary in Buena Vista. When I met my wife (the former Barbara “Prince” Clark) at Sweet Briar, there were at least a dozen classmates with me at the time—Dave Heilberg, Kevin Cosgrove, Jeff Crabtree, Mark Sharp, Herb Donica, Stu Nibley, and Mike Hubbard among them. They all went on to become great lawyers, but I had the best fortune that evening, as I met Prince.

Sometime later, she came to W&L for a weekend and joined me in class on a Friday afternoon—it might have been Uncas’ suretyship and mortgages class.

“**We bought an industrial-strength sound system and we traveled.**”



CLASS OF 1979

He asked a question and didn’t like the answers he was getting. “You all are working too hard.” He asked Prince the question, and she had the proper response.

I joined an environmental engineering firm, SCS Engineers, upon graduation, and have been there ever since. My law school experience has served me well. At least two classmates from W&L Law, Channing Martin in Richmond and Phil Hinerman in Philadelphia and Napa, became famous environmental lawyers, but I think I am the only one who spent my entire career in the field. As it turns out, the adequate protection of this planet’s environment does indeed require the thoughtful application of both engineering and the law. And many other disciplines. I’ve been fortunate to see that firsthand over the last 40+ years. 🍷