A Brief History of Pennsylvania’s First Senator and Builder of PBA’s Headquarters

The Harrisburg headquarters of the PBA was originally the home of William Maclay (1734-1804), Pennsylvania’s first U.S. Senator. The home was built shortly after Maclay left the First U.S. Senate in 1791.

Harrisburg newspaper columnist and historian Paul B. Beers wrote that “Maclay was a big, 6-foot-3 man with a caustic wit, nagging rheumatism and the Harrisburg tradition of being tight with the buck.”

Born to Irish parents at New Garden, Chester County, Maclay had been a soldier, lawyer, surveyor and state legislator before drawing the short two-year term established in the First United States Congress to stagger the election of senators every six years in the future.

Maclay was one of the first to turn against the new national government. Maclay had become convinced that President George Washington’s administration was unconstitutionally extending the executive power and increasing the power of the national government at the expense of the states. He criticized Washington, John Adams and their many supporters, believing their ways of running the Senate were inefficient.

Consistently on the losing side of Senate votes, he was not the most successful legislator. However, his journal (the only diary and one of the most important records of the First Congress) offers remarkable insights into the partisan struggles that emerged between the Federalists and their Democratic-Republican opposition during the First Congress under the new federal constitution. The historical marker erected opposite Maclay’s home on Harrisburg’s Front Street by the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission labels Maclay as the “Pioneer leader of Jeffersonian Democracy.” Beers wrote that “Maclay helped lay the intellectual foundations for the Democratic party” and that some cite Maclay along with Thomas Jefferson as the founders of that party.

After his service in the U.S. Senate, Maclay returned to the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1795, was a presidential elector in 1796, was a county judge from 1801 to 1803 and was again a member of the state House in 1803, where he sponsored a host of bills designed to bring roads and bridges to western parts of the state.

Maclay was married to Mary Harris, the daughter of Harrisburg’s founder, John Harris Sr. The couple had 10 children. Several of Maclay’s relatives were also politicians, including his brother, Samuel Maclay, and his nephew, William Plunkett Maclay.

In 1810, the Pennsylvania Legislature voted to relocate the capitol to Harrisburg (from 1799 to 1812, the Legislature resided in Lancaster) onto four acres of land originally given for the site of the capital by John Harris Jr., the son of Harrisburg’s founder and Maclay’s brother-in-law. An additional 10 acres purchased to become part of the capitol site had been owned by Maclay.

Sources of information for this article include histories by Paul B. Beers, a Harrisburg historian and writer; Theodore Stellwag, PBA executive director emeritus; and online resources.

PBA Officers to Begin Terms

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Committee and Finance Committee. He also serves on the Member Events and Engagement Task Force.

O’Boyle completed a two-year term as the Young Lawyer Division’s delegate to the House of Delegates. He previously served as a member of the House of Delegates representing lawyers from Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery counties.

At the county bar level, O’Boyle completed a three-year term on the Montgomery Bar Association’s board of directors and four consecutive one-year terms on its executive committee. He currently is the current chair and past editor of its Law Reporter, the co-chair of the association’s Civil Rules Committee and a member of its Trial Lawyers Section. O’Boyle is a past chair of the Young Lawyers Section. He serves on the board of the Montgomery Bar Foundation and is a foundation Fellow.

Outside of his legal practice, O’Boyle serves as a Discovery Master for the Court of Common Pleas of Montgomery County. In addition, he is a member of the Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania’s Hearing Committee.

O’Boyle graduated from Villanova University School of Law and the University of Scranton’s Special Jesuit Liberal Arts program with a dual degree in history and philosophy.

Paul D. Edger
Chair-elect, Young Lawyers Division

Paul D. Edger, managing attorney of the Carlisle, Chambersburg and Gettysburg offices of MidPenn Legal Services, will become the chair-elect of the YLD.

Edger has been involved in the YLD for over a decade. He served for two years as the YLD treasurer and for three years as a co-chair of the YLD’s Zone Three.

For the past year, he has served on behalf of the YLD in the House of Delegates. Edger has been a juror, attorney advisory and presiding judge in the Statewide High School Mock Trial Competition. He has offered free legal services as part of Wills for Heroes.

For the past six years, Edger has been a voting delegate in the House of Delegates. Since 2013, Edger has been a member of the Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee, and, since 2015, Edger has been a member of the Legal Services to the Public Committee.

Also active in the local organized bar, Edger served as the 2014-2016 chair of the Cumberland County Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, and currently serves on the Cumberland County Bar Association board of directors.

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