How the PBA Began

It is impossible to say for certain who first hatched the idea that became the Pennsylvania Bar Association.

In 1880, the Centre County Bar Association sent letters to other local bars suggesting a statewide organization. Nothing much came of it.

In 1888, some Philadelphia lawyers decided to start a Pennsylvania Bar Association. They even wrote an impressive charter, which turned up 40 years ago in the attic of the Maclay Mansion, the Harrisburg headquarters of the PBA. Henry Thomas Dolan, the lawyer and legal historian who in 1970 told the story of the first 75 years of the PBA in his Diamond Anniversary History, did some research and found this was a largely fraternal group that wanted an excuse to get together for lunch.

Then, on Sept. 19, 1894, five lawyers met in the office of Edward P. Allinson of Philadelphia, publisher of The Legal Intelligencer, to try to give shape to the notion of a state bar association. George Wharton Pepper, who would become a U.S. senator and a giant figure of the early state bar, was there. Also present was Judge William Hargest from Dauphin County, who would remember that day. “It ran true to form as a meeting of lawyers,” he recalled. The lawyers present “discussed — may I say wrangled — all day over somewhat insignificant details, but there emerged this organization.”

A call went out for an organization meeting to be held in Harrisburg on Jan. 16, 1895. Allinson promoted the meeting in his newspaper, and he took the extraordinary step of traveling to every county to urge attendance. Over the years, Allinson has been given credit as having been “chiefly responsible” for bringing the PBA into being. He later became the PBA’s first secretary.

There were 39 local bar associations at the time, but they mainly promoted social functions and maintained law libraries. Each county “administered the mechanics of practice before their courts, and their standard of professional discipline, with more than a touch of vigorous independence,” Dolan wrote.

But, in 1895, the state Legislature was gearing up to regulate legal practice and no local bar would have been able to turn the legislative tide. It called for a statewide effort. “There were proposed in the General Assembly … just a few less than 100 bills looking to the reform of law governing forms of actions, service of process, and practice before the courts. The profession stood to arms; the barbarians were hammering at the gates of the citadel,” Dolan wrote.

And so the lawyers, some 200 strong, came to the January meeting in the Supreme Court chambers in Harrisburg.

The meeting accomplished two things. First, the legislative assault was blunted by diplomacy rather than attack. A “Committee of 21” was chosen and the General Assembly was asked to refer all law-related bills to that committee for review. Second, the lawyers who squeezed into the ornate courtroom approved the formal steps for creation of the PBA. A charter was written dated July 1, 1895, with 592 charter members listed.

The photo with this article is the most famous image in PBA history; it captures the attendees at the Pennsylvania Bar Association’s first meeting. The location is the Bedford Springs Hotel. The date is July 10, 1895.

The first PBA meeting was at the Bedford Springs Hotel on July 10, 1895.