Continuing the Tradition of Continuing Legal Education Excellence

In 1959, PBA's newly-formed Committee on Continuing Legal Education set out to provide high-quality affordable legal seminars for lawyers around the state. This step foreshadowed the establishment of the Pennsylvania Bar Institute, often referred to throughout its history as PBI.

In 1960, John Mulder, director of the American Law Institute-American Bar Association (ALI-ABA) Committee on Continuing Professional Education in Philadelphia, was retained as the director of the PBA CLE Committee and the first executive director of PBI. The committee presented its first courses that year. The headquarters of the PBA CLE Committee was in Philadelphia.

By April 1965, more than 4,000 lawyers were annually registering for CLE courses and, in that same year, the PBA Board of Governors replaced the Continuing Legal Education Committee by establishing PBI as a separate nonprofit arm to carry out the CLE mission.

In June 1965, the first co-sponsorships agreement was established between PBI and the Philadelphia Bar Association. The agreement would remain in place until January 1995.

In June 1966, PBI operations moved to space in Harrisburg's Payne Shoemaker Building, located on Third Street across from the Pennsylvania State Capitol Complex.

George Barco, a Meadville lawyer, was PBI's catalyst and first president. Barco, a cable television pioneer, knew that statewide CLE needed to be supported by technology. Initially, that took the form of reel-to-reel video projectors, but technology evolved through the years to cable, then satellites, videoconferencing and the internet. Barco was also a major donor to PBI, providing gifts and bequests totaling $225,000 between 1987 and 1991.

In 1973, the PBI offices move into the Fleming building, which had been purchased by the PBA. The Fleming Building is located on Harrisburg's South Street and adjacent to the PBA's main building, the Maclay Mansion. The two-and-a-half story mid-Victorian frame house was built about 1866. It is currently used by the PBA for staff offices.

PBI also had office space in the George J. Barco Continuing Legal Education Building, located at 115 South State Street across an alley from the Fleming building. In 1996, the Barco Building was purchased from PBI by the PBA and the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation. The purchase helped fund PBI's move to its new facility in Mechanicsburg in 1997. (The Barco Building was then renamed the Belden Building in memory of 1971 PBA President H. Reginald Belden and to honor Irene Belden, his wife, who was the 1965-66 president of the Pennsylvania Lawyers Auxiliary. Their son, H. Reginald Belden Jr., chaired the 1995 PBA Centennial Committee and would become the 2001-02 PBA president. The PBA and the foundation used the building as a revenue source, renting the space to a variety of tenants before selling it in 2015.)

In 1987, Frank B. Boyle, who served as the 1983-84 PBA president and who was the first president of the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation from 1984 to 1986, donated $50,000 to underwrite the Boyle Conference Center, a classroom/audio-video studio for PBI located on the ground floor of the Maclay Mansion. The Pennsylvania Bar Trust and other contributors provided an additional $40,000 for the project.

Also that year, the Pennsylvania Bar Trust provided a $50,000 grant to assist with the development of classroom and conference facilities at the Philadelphia Bar Association, and a $34,000 grant to renovate the Allegheny County Bar Association's auditorium.

In 1995, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania issued an order mandating all practicing lawyers to complete continuing legal education. PBI had grown to 43 full-time staff members and had in-house electronic publishing, printing and computer services, and extensive audio/visual capabilities, including its own television production facilities. Nearly 46,700 registrations were recorded for PBI's 1995 fiscal year and the annual operating budget exceeded $6 million.

In April 1996, PBI broke ground for a new building in Mechanicsburg and a dedication and official opening of new headquarters was held in March 1997.

A CLE co-sponsorship agreement was signed with the Philadelphia Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Bar Education Center. PBI assumed responsibility for the operation and management of the CLE Conference Center, office and staff of eight in the John Wanamaker building. This agreement remained in effect until January 2016.

In the year 2000, a major change would alter who could provide CLE in Pennsylvania. In September of that year, the Pennsylvania Rules for Continuing Legal Education were amended by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania to permit the accreditation of for-profit CLE providers. The marketplace would continue to change when, in 2005, the Mandatory CLE Rules were amended to allow lawyers to earn up to four hours of CLE.

continued on page 12
In his short history of the PBA printed in the January/February 2010 issue of The Pennsylvania Lawyer magazine, PBA Executive Director Emeritus Theodore Stellwag noted that during the 30-year tenure of then-recently-retired PBI Executive Director Roger Meilton, “PBI went from a mom-and-pop operation to a high-tech business that can instantly reach lawyers everywhere.”

Technology, including the ability to take CLE online, and a flurry of new providers entering the commonwealth, changed the professional education landscape and compressed PBI’s share of the CLE market.

Adjusting to the new realities, the Pennsylvania Attorney General’s Office and the Dauphin County Orphan’s Court early this year approved dissolving PBI’s separate 501(c)(3) status and allowing PBI to operate within PBA, a 501(c)(6) nonprofit organization.

PBI is again a department within the PBA as it had been 55 years earlier.

“We’re excited to bring PBI into the PBA’s organizational and management structure, and we are confident that PBI will remain Pennsylvania’s premier provider of CLE, just as it has been since its founding in 1965,” said 2019-20 PBA President Anne John at the time of the organizational change.

“The CLE marketplace is clearly changing and, to best serve Pennsylvania lawyers and judges, PBI is evolving with it,” John said. “Aggressive, nimble national CLE providers are flooding the Pennsylvania marketplace, and we are working to not only match those providers in how they reach lawyers and judges but to surpass them with meaningful and impactful course content.”

PBI’s greatest historical challenge is currently underway, the cause being the COVID-19 pandemic. For health and safety reasons, all live group programming was halted in March and it’s currently unknown when gatherings for educational purposes will be possible across Pennsylvania. In light of public health risks, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ordered that all required CLE requirements could be met through online courses and programs. PBI responded by ramping up its on-demand courses, particularly about legal subjects related to the pandemic, and reducing course costs to address challenges in the legal profession.


The PBA COVID-19 Task Force Resources Guide includes links to the courts, federal and state information to assist small businesses, mental health support services, CLE resources, articles, and legislation and governmental orders. Sections include the following:

- Connections to the courts
- Federal information and programs to assist small businesses
- State information and programs to assist small businesses
- Mental health support services for lawyers
- CLE resources for lawyers
- Reopening guidance for businesses
- Articles, blog posts and guidance for lawyers
- Legislation and governmental orders of interest to lawyers
- Pro bono service during the crisis