

School is in Session

As I write this month's article, it is the first day of school for most of the schools in Jefferson County, both private and public. The roads are teeming with yellow buses full of excited (and perhaps some not so excited) children and the carpool lines are slowly creeping their way to the front doors of the school buildings to drop off their precious cargo.

Social media is chock full of photos of my friends' children geared up for the first day of school, with smiles on their faces and the now ubiquitous signs declaring what year of school they have started. I have to think that most of the kids are smiling because they are going back in person, which no doubt feels like a treat after a year and a half of NTL. I noticed, however, that the biggest smiles are on the faces of the high school seniors and the kindergarteners, each on different ends of their school journeys.

When I was in grade school, the first day of school generally started the day after Labor Day. I can remember being excited about back-to-school shopping for supplies and I was a public school kiddo, so there was an annual fall pilgrimage for new shoes and clothes. As an adult, I can certainly appreciate the ease and practicality a school uniform provides for parents, teachers and the kids. School supplies weren't quite the list they are now, but the tussle with my mom over whether to get the Crayola 64 pack with the built-in sharpener on the back is something I still remember. Then there was the Trapper Keeper debate—enough said.

Old habits die hard, I guess, and I still consider September to be the real start of Back-to-School season. In my mind, these couple of weeks in August are just a warmup for the real school season that starts September 7.

Last week in the Bar Center I was looking at the photo composites—which are like a grade school class photo—of the Louisville Bench and Bar from the 1940s that are hanging in the seminar room. As I was looking at those photos of our past members, noticing the familiar names that still grace many of our local law firms and city streets, I was struck by the fact that there were no women or persons of color present in the composite. I knew that there were African American and female attorneys in Louisville not only at the time the composite photos were taken, but also several decades prior, so I went on a bit of a history hunt for more information. Where did they attend law school and how did they become attorneys?

It turns out that Louisville was at the forefront of the movement to educate African American lawyers. According to the University of Louisville's website, Nathaniel R. Harper, one of the first two African Americans to be admitted to the Kentucky Bar in November 1871, established the Harper Law School within his law office shortly after he became licensed to practice. In 1890, the Harper Law School was absorbed into the Central Law School, which at that time was one of only four law schools in the entire country that accepted African Americans as law students.

Nathaniel Harper went on to become Judge Harper in 1895, Kentucky's first African American judge. The KBA's Young Lawyers Division offers the Nathaniel R. Harper Award to recognize his pioneering spirit to promote diversity and pave the way for other underrepresented groups in the legal profession.

The other three law schools in the United States that accepted African Americans in 1890 were Howard University, Walden University of Law, and Shaw University. Howard University School of Law, in Washington, D.C., is a well-known and prestigious HBCU and continues to educate promising African American and other minority students. Charles W. Anderson, Jr., a 1930 Howard University School of Law graduate, became a leading civil rights attorney in Louisville and is the namesake of our local chapter of the National Bar Association.

Walden University of Law was a co-ed HBCU located in Nashville, originally called Central Tennessee College, which closed in 1925 due to financial difficulties. Shaw University, a HBCU founded in 1865, is located in Raleigh, North Carolina. While it no longer has a law school, Shaw University does have a social work, political science and justice studies program.

Central Law School operated in Louisville until 1941, when it closed because of financial constraints. It had a three-year course of study and offered special legal courses for women. It was solely supported by African American citizens. In total, Central Law School graduated over 100 individuals over the course of its 50 years of operation.

Sally J. Seals White, from Louisville, was the first woman to graduate from Central Law School and was the first African American woman admitted to the Kentucky Bar in 1904. The second African American woman admitted to the Kentucky Bar 55 years later, was Alberta O. Jones, the first African American female prosecutor in Kentucky.

When Central Law School closed, there was no other law school in the Commonwealth of Kentucky that accepted African Americans as law students. It wouldn't be until 1951, as a result of desegregation, that the University of Louisville accepted its first African American enrollees into its School of Law—three men and one woman, Hortense Houston Young.

In 1940, there were a total of 22 African American attorneys in Kentucky, 17 of whom were in Louisville. U.S. Census documents indicate that there was a total of 31 female "lawyers and judges" (that's how the occupation was categorized) within the entire Commonwealth, five of whom lived in Louisville. As an interesting side note for my STEM friends, Louisville had one female mechanical engineer listed in the 1940 census.

Other than an obscure history lesson (after all, this is an article about back to school) and some possible trivia fodder, what is my point? The adage goes that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. I think that may be why I am so interested in history and going down these informational rabbit holes—I want to understand what we have done in the past so that we can do better in the future.

The 1940 LBA Bench and Bar photo composite is a part of our organization's history. We shouldn't throw it away or relegate it to a closet. It can serve as a reminder of where we have been and where we should go. I do not pretend to know or understand the reasons why African Americans and women were not represented in the group photo. But just like in tennis, I plan to keep my eye on the proverbial legal ball and do my part to ensure that we do not repeat that bit of history.

By the way, during my internet travels, I came across the interesting story of Sophonisba Breckinridge, who was the first woman admitted to the Kentucky Bar in 1895. I couldn't let this month's page end without briefly sharing her fascinating story.

Born in 1866, a native of Lexington and first cousin of John C. Breckinridge, who served as Vice President of the United States, "Nisba" graduated from Wellesley College in 1888, obtained both a Ph.M. and a Ph.D. in political science and economics from the University of Chicago and was not only the first woman to graduate from the University of Chicago Law School but was also the first woman to be admitted to the Order of the Coif. A suffragette and social scientist, she wrote and published several books focused on social issues and public policy affecting working women, children, African Americans and immigrants. I can't help but think what an incredibly interesting dinner party guest she would have been....

History class is officially adjourned.



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Be well,

Deena G. Ombres
LBA President