

Michigan Lawyers in History

Julius H. Amberg

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

In the summer of 1948, with the primary for the Michigan 5th congressional district bearing down on Grand Rapids, Julius Amberg, a senior partner at Butterfield Kenney & Amberg, informed a young associate desiring to unseat incumbent Representative Jonkman that he could “come in to the office for one hour a day, and spend the rest of the time campaigning.”¹ The firm would hold Jerry Ford’s place.

Julius Houseman Amberg was born February 27, 1890. His father, David, was the son of a German clothing merchant. After the Civil War, David moved from Ohio to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he had the good fortune to marry into one of the city’s most illustrious families. Hattie Houseman was the only daughter of Julius Houseman, a successful lumberman who served two terms as mayor and eventually made it to Congress. David moved through the ranks of west Michigan society, eventually serving as a vice president for a local furniture company and the “director of the Grand Rapids National Bank.”²

Julius was the couple’s last child, born three years after the unexpected death of their 10-year-old son, Melvin. As the only boy, all hope of carrying on the Amberg-Houseman names rested on Julius.

After graduating first in his class from high school in 1908, Julius attended Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. He quickly became a leader among his classmates, working as “editor-in-chief of the college weekly as well as of the college annual,”³ serving as president of the debate club, and winning first place for an essay in Latin. Not surprisingly, he graduated first in his class in 1912 and was admitted to Harvard Law School.

Amberg’s academic career at Harvard was outstanding. He was “note editor of the Harvard Law Review” and won the Joshua Montgomery Sears Jr. prize two years in a row. At graduation, he was honored as valedictorian and received the Samuel Phillips Prescott Fay diploma in 1915 “as a mark of his position as highest in the class.”⁴

He probably could have named his price at any firm in the nation, but he returned to

his hometown of Grand Rapids. This was his life in a nutshell: he would journey to influence and advise presidents, Supreme Court justices, and cabinet secretaries, and then return to Grand Rapids.

Amberg was admitted to the bar on October 15, 1915, and joined the law firm of Butterfield and Keeney. Less than four years later, the firm became known as Butterfield, Keeney & Amberg. By that time, Amberg had married Callie Sutherland Smith and was a father.

He had also been called to serve his country. Several of his Harvard classmates and professors who had moved to Washington, D.C., for jobs and to support the war effort remembered the brilliant student from Grand Rapids. One professor, Felix Frankfurter, who was working with Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, contacted Amberg in 1917 to request help with “legal work in connection with labor disputes”⁵ affecting war production. Amberg also enlisted in the Navy; he was honorably discharged in 1918.

Again, he returned home to Grand Rapids. He and his wife had two more children,



State Bar of Michigan presidential photo of Julius Amberg

and the Ambergs continued to lead the community's social scene. While building his practice, he served as a trustee of Butterworth Hospital, director and president of the Grand Rapids Community Chest, and chairman of the Committee of One Hundred, which surveyed and implemented changes to Grand Rapids' delivery of relief services.⁶

Amberg also joined the voluntary state bar association, where he served on the Committee on Legal Education and Admission to the Bar which, at the time, was discussing the need for educational and character regulation within the bar. As the voluntary bar moved to mandatory status, Amberg served first as a director and then a member of the freshman Board of Commissioners under Bar President Roberts P. Hudson. To no one's surprise, Amberg was elected State Bar president in 1939. Only five years into its existence, the integrated Michigan bar association was already becoming known as a national leader.

By September 1940, when Amberg handed over the presidential mantle to Glenn C. Gillespie, it was obvious that the

United States was going to be drawn into another conflict. One of Amberg's classmates, Robert P. Patterson—who had also won the Joshua Montgomery Sears Jr. prize while attending Harvard—was serving in the War Department and, like Frankfurter, recalled his former classmate. On January 9, 1941, Amberg was appointed special assistant to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, working directly with Patterson, Stimson's undersecretary.

Amberg returned to Grand Rapids after World War II with the Presidential Medal for Merit for his service, which at the time was the country's highest civilian decoration; other notable recipients included physicist Enrico Fermi, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, and entertainer Bob Hope. Also returning home were a slew of young attorneys, many of whom took advantage of the Veteran's Post-Graduate Law Institute offered by the State Bar of Michigan with the help of the state's law schools.

One veteran—a Navy man named Gerald R. Ford Jr.—joined Butterfield, Kenney & Amberg. Ford's old law partner, Philip Buchen, joined the firm before the war and made partner in 1943. Rather than re-form their old partnership, Buchen lobbied Ford to join Butterfield. Ford met with Amberg, who promised to train the young man "to be a good lawyer"⁷ and eventually make him a partner in the firm. Ford couldn't have asked for a better teacher: Amberg was nationally known as a brilliant jurist.

Of course, Ford never made partner at Butterfield, Kenney & Amberg (which now goes by the name of Law Weathers). He won

the 1948 election and left the law firm for Washington, D.C. The Fords and Ambergs met at least once for dinner in the nation's capital before Amberg's death in 1951.

Nearly a quarter of a century later as a new president was being sworn in during a turbulent time, Gerald Ford recalled Amberg fondly, remembering him as "a superior legal mind, the best I ever knew."⁸ ■

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ENDNOTES

1. Cannon, *Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p 49.
2. Kent County Michigan Genweb Project, *Julius H Amberg* <<http://kent.migenweb.net/biographies/local/ambergJulius.html>> [accessed May 20, 2015].
3. Fisher, ed, *Grand Rapids & Kent County Michigan: Historical Account of Their Progress from First Settlement to the Present Time* (vol 2) (Chicago: Robert O. Law Company, 1918), p 21.
4. *Id.*
5. *Id.*
6. The Michigan Trust Company, et al v Simmons Company: *Julius Amberg Shocks the Simmons Company for Its Looting of the Berkey & Gay Furniture Company*, 9 Stereoscope 13 (Summer 2011).
7. Cannon, *Gerald R. Ford: An Honorable Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013), p 62.
8. *Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History*, p 49.