

## The Oldest Firm

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In many ways Bucks County offers a rich and interesting history. The names of important national political giants have on numerous occasions "slept here." Additionally there are many regional names which would be familiar to anyone who has business or family ties to the county. There are families which settled here, stayed and prospered. The prosperity was passed on to later generations. Early settlers paved the way to professions in medicine, business and law. The family names of Rufe and Grim are quite familiar. Later generations have built upon their accomplishments, providing inspiration and guidance.



Unfortunately, in our rushed society, we fail to fully take notice and comprehend the origins of things. We easily take a well-established business for granted. There are many examples: the local restaurant run by the second-or-third generation or a family-run hardware store (yes, they still exist). Much went into their development. Much has been contributed to their maintenance. The same can be said of law firms. Bucks County has many well-established firms. Which one is the oldest? It could be argued that there are two firms which can claim this distinction. It depends upon the method of measurement.

There are many ways in which to measure the age and longevity of a practice.

1. Look at family history. There are attorneys who have a long line of legal practitioners within their family. This is the most indirect measure of practice in that it is an acknowledgement of a commitment to the law by a family group. There could have been gaps in practice, where one generation replaced law with another profession such as medicine. Family history is important, and it is worth noting prominent families, such as that of John Ross, admitted to practice in 1736, starting in Bucks County and moving to Philadelphia. The last Ross practiced circa 1975, or 239 years from the first two. There are firms with long histories which were started by a family, but with the passage of time, there can be found no trace of the founder's descendants being part of the firm. This is noteworthy

from another vantage point. The founders have created an entity that survived through time. The firm may now be run by persons with no blood ties to the founders, but still has a deep history. This is another measure of practice.

3. A third measure of a firm is one in which it is founded by a family with a long history of law practice. Representatives of the family may have been practicing law in an unbroken succession, but there are gaps in the actual firm's history where the family practice became part of other partnerships and proprietorships. But gaps can be easily overlooked and are not so important when the history spans over 100 years.

4. The fourth measure of a firm is one in which there is a clear history of one generation after the next continuing the family enterprise. In essence, the keys to the shop are passed to family member successors. This is clearly a good measure. It is arguably the most defined.

### Which Measure to Use?

Even though criteria 1 and 2 are interesting from a historical standpoint, the measure must be made by using criteria 3 or 4. The differences between criteria 3 and 4 are more different than significant. One is not more important than the other. Both categories deserve to be lauded. The differentiation is more an intellectual exercise as opposed to one of practical substance.

The oldest law firm using criterion 3 is that of Eastburn & Gray of Doylestown. The firm's history can be traced through the shared histories of the Fox, Eastburn and Paxson families. They have the longest family history in the practice of law in Bucks County, totaling 131 years. Continuity of a family practicing law needs to be distinguished from the continuity of a legal enterprise. Eastburn & Gray finds its roots in a great family history. The firm's current practice can be traced to the 1940's. Eastburn & Gray is an admirable firm



and one which has been a formidable force throughout Bucks County and beyond. The accomplishments and history of Eastburn & Gray and the families upon which it is based are too vast and important for inclusion here and will be featured in a separate article.



The oldest firm based upon the fourth criterion is that of Grim, Biehn & Thatcher, with offices in Perkasié and Quakertown. Established May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1895, by Webster and Harry Grim, sons of Dr. George Washington Grim, the firm has continually operated as the same "legal shop" or practice for 113 years. (Law Offices of Webster Grim, 1889-1895, Grim & Grim, 1895-1945, Grim Cadwallader, Darlington & Clarke, 1946-1950, Law Offices of J. Lawrence Grim 1950-1960, Grim & Grim 1960-1989, Grim, Biehn Thatcher & Helf, 1989-1995, and Grim, Biehn & Thatcher, 1995-Present). The names on the door may have changed with time, but the door has always led to the same practice. Also, Grim, Biehn & Thatcher has the distinction of occupying the same law offices in Perkasié since 1904.

### Grim, Biehn & Thatcher

Upon his graduation from Jefferson Medical College, Dr. George Washington Grim began his career and new life in Bucks County, by settling along with his bride, Elizabeth Prizer Koons, in what is now known as Ferndale and later in Revere, Bucks County. The Grims raised a family of six sons and three daughters. Descendants include eight doctors, five Ph.D.s and 23 lawyers. From the lawyers came five Bucks County Bar Association Presidents, a Pennsylvania Bar Association President, four judges and a state senator (who later unsuccessfully ran for governor).

The firm has seen change in the world and has, of course, changed form and size over the past 113 years. It is both refreshing and gratifying to see a business of any type weather life's changes and prosper for such a length of time. There are not very many clear examples. There is a close analogy to Corning Incorporated of New York. Established in

(Continued on Page 10)

## The Oldest Firm

(Continued from Page 8)

1851, by Amory Houghton, Sr., the firm has not only survived, but has prospered to become the world leader in specialty glass, including fiber optics. There is still a Houghton who only just recently stepped down as CEO, but retains a place on the Board of Directors. The firm is publicly traded, but the Houghton family has played and continues to play an important role in Comings' development and future. There are similarities to the firm of Grim, Biehn & Thatcher. Larry Grim is a direct descendant of Dr. Grim. Larry Grim has been with the firm from 1960 to the present and is still at the helm.

It is with pleasure that I had the opportunity to talk with Larry Grim and John Grim, (both third generation shareholders) and Larry Grim's son Gregory Grim.

What is your earliest memory of the law?

Larry Grim: "My earliest recollection was my father's exuberance at my passing the bar."

John Grim: "My earliest recollection is this conference room where we are today. All of the space of the firm was occupied and there was little choice but for me to come here. This was the conference room where real estate settlements were held. And so I became the real estate attorney because there was no other space for me to go."

When was it that you knew that you wanted to be a lawyer? Was there an expectation on the part of the family that you would become a lawyer?

Larry Grim: "I can remember asking my father what he did when my eye level was at the height of his belt. He said he was a lawyer. I said what did your father do? *He was a lawyer.* What did his father do? *He was a doctor.* What did his father do? *I don't know...a farmer I guess.* I never

seriously considered other alternatives."

"When I went to college, I found the English and French Departments at the University of Virginia to be fun, exciting and challenging. The Political Science Department was exceptionally boring. I knew my father wanted me to take political science as a prelaw course. I dutifully struggled through it and graduated from the Political Science Department, but my heart was in France. I had been to Paris for a summer. When I graduated from college, my father said, *Pursue French on your own at your own expense or I will put you through law school.* That was an overwhelming case for law school! The professors of the University of Virginia Law School were fun and exciting and I never looked back from that moment on. I had the same Constitutional Law text book as I had in college, but the difference was that the Constitutional Law course was taught by the Dean, and he was an exceptional teacher and made the subject come alive!"

John Grim: "I never felt pressured. I wanted to continue onward from college to law school."

Larry Grim: "As the third generation, we had it easy. My son and his son are lawyers here. Perhaps by the fourth generation the pressure is mounting. They each have children. I suspect that the fifth generation is where the pressure will really mount!"

How would you describe the practice of law early on in your careers?

John Grim: "I think all lawyers back in the era we started did everything, and not that you did it well or not that you liked it, but you were pretty much forced to do it, including criminal law. If a court appoints you to a case, you had to see it through."

How has the size of the firm changed over the years?

Larry Grim: "The firm went from two brothers to two brothers and two sons and is now up to 18 or 19 attorneys."

John Grim: "The real growth in the early years was not lawyers but staff. My father was incredible at finding really talented people. We probably had paralegals before the word even came into existence doing tasks that most law firms have lawyers doing now."

Larry Grim: "It is true today. There may be 18-19 lawyers, but there may be 50 employees, including the secretaries."

How does an older firm compare with a newly established firm?

Greg Grim: "Seventy five percent of our new clients come from referrals from existing clients. I just had someone yesterday who said they came in through the Yellow Pages. It is still good to see that we are getting results from advertising."

Older firms provide a model to new firms. Society tends to put too much emphasis on the fast pace. Tradition, values and work ethic are important. Continuity and recognition of history and heritage create the foundation needed to support our complex and sometimes dysfunctional world. Grim, Biehn and Thatcher is an example for future firms. A firm just starting today, given time (a lot of time) may also be the focus of an article. This author acknowledges: Bucks County Courts & The Bucks County Bar Association, published in 2003 for source material. Published by the Bucks County Bench Bar Memorial Fund and the Bucks County Bar Association, the book offers a wealth of facts and insight into Bucks County law. The names you know in the profession have more history behind them than you might have contemplated.