

Donovan & O'Connor Celebrates 100th Anniversary

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NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — When Walter Donovan opened his private law practice on Park Street in Adams, he accepted any work he could get. He didn't know it would grow to become the biggest law firm in Berkshire County with 17 attorneys.

Donovan & O'Connor is celebrating its 100th year. From a small office in the Mausert Block in a time before income taxes and when its phone number was simply 2, to now having offices in Bennington, Vt., Pittsfield and North Adams, the practice has seen a lot of change in its history.



Attorneys Donald Goodrich, Chris Dodig and J. Norman O'Connor Jr. with staff member Arlene Vachereau.

"The income tax was ratified to the Constitution in 1913, the same year he opened his office," said current managing partner Chris Dodig. "The history [of the firm] has been handed down through the lawyers."

Donovan had graduated from Cornell University but worked at General Electric in Pittsfield until he passed the bar in 1913. He provided general counsel for whoever needed it and worked alone for years. It was in 1954 that J. Norman O'Connor Sr., who graduated from Boston College School of Law, became tired of living in the Boston area and joined forces with Donovan in Berkshire County. That's when things took off.

"It started as general practice, accepting anything that came through the door. Eventually the firm became litigation centered," Dodig said.

The firm started working for insurance companies and its reputation and demand for its services grew. Three new partners were added in the 1960s.

"I think it was engendered in a large part by my father, Norman's, rainmaking so to speak. He developed a really good client base and did a lot of work for insurance companies doing defense litigation. We represented all major insurers in Western Mass," said J. Norman O'Connor Jr., who followed his father's footsteps by joining the practice in 1975.

They divided the office in the Mausert Block until 1970, when they moved practice across the street.

The former Adams Supermarket had burned down and a new building was in its place, which is now Greylock Federal Credit Union. The law firm moved into the second floor there and in the 1970s added five more partners.

"I remember running all those library books across the street with a handcart. I was about 12 then," O'Connor said.

Staff member Arlene Vachereau has worked in every office since joining in 1964. She went from using stenography to computers.

"We went from an old typewriter to electric typewriters then we got the MT and STs and then went to a big mainframe. Once computers became the thing, we then went to computers," she said on Thursday.

Vachereau remembers the Mausert Block office being next door to the caretakers' apartment so "you could smell whatever they were cooking for supper." A dentist in the same building often used one of the attorneys and left false teeth with the firm to give away to customers.

Donovan died in 1976 at age 87 and O'Connor Sr. kept the practice going until his retirement in 1998. O'Connor died in 2006 at age 83.

The firm had moved in the 1980s to One Commercial Place — where Berkshire Arts and Technology school is now — when the profession began to change.

"Then most of the insurance companies started to hire in-house attorneys to handle the civil defense work. As a result we decided to shift our focus to representing the injured parties — the plaintiffs," O'Connor said. "We focused on developing many other practice areas with success."

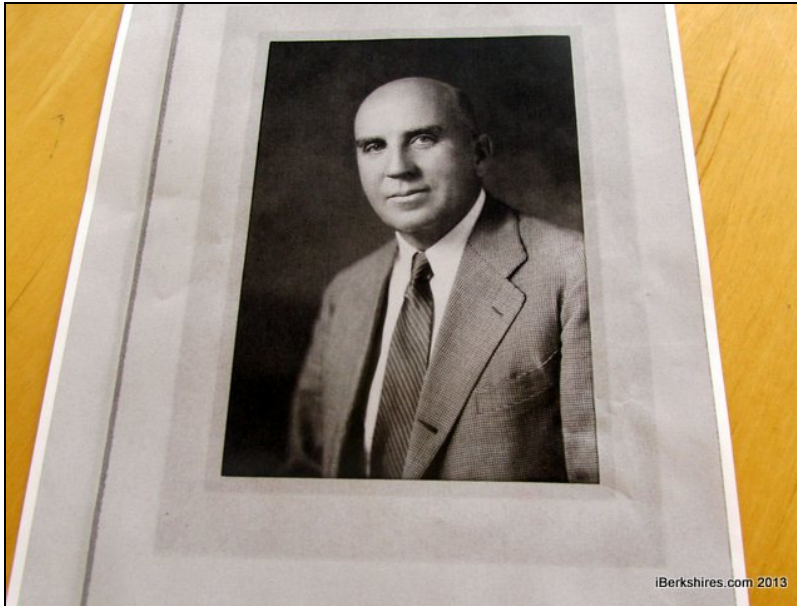
Now the firm focuses on real estate, commercial, trial work and family. But new attorneys still need to learn from the veterans in all fields before they choose a specialization, said O'Connor, who started there "carrying briefcases" for other attorneys.

"Society is more complicated and as a result lawyers, like other professions, have to become more specialized. It's not the ability of lawyers to handle everything. I think the days of general practitioner are gone," he said.

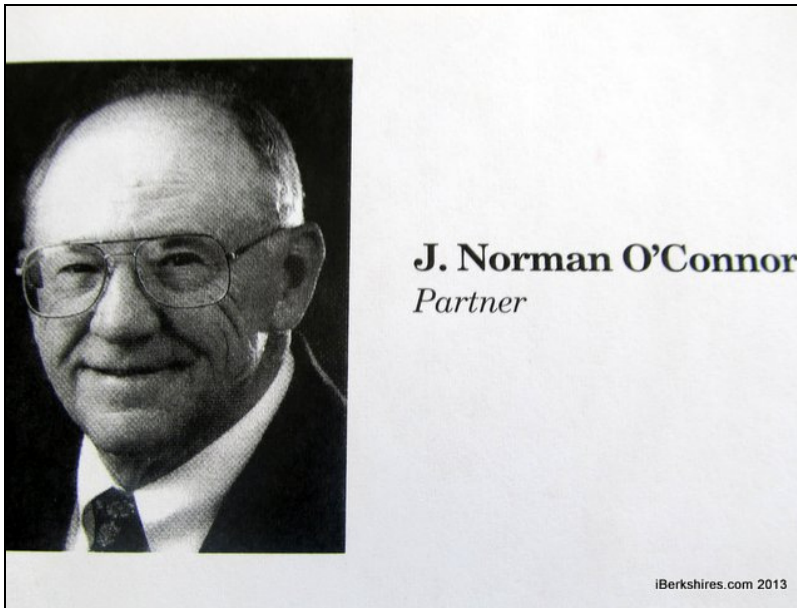
Insurance didn't go away completely. Attorney Donald Goodrich, who joined the firm in 1970, was immersed in a seven-year program reviewing coverage for one health insurance provider.

"In the second half of the 1980s, I did an enormous amount of insurance coverage interpretation and litigation work. I represented an insurer that had our firm — me and another associate — review all of the insurance coverage matters in Massachusetts. We wrote over 300 insurance coverage opinions over that period of time. We became completely immersed in insurance law for six or seven year," he said.

A second office was opened in Bennington and, in 2003, the practice relocated the main office to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Arts complex. The Pittsfield office opened in 2006. The firm has become the largest in the county and handles cases from all over the Northeast, though the majority are still local.



Above is the firm's founder Walter Donovan; below, J. Norman O'Connor Sr., who became his associate and later partner.



"We're in a situation where we have a large enough team. Instead of having one lawyer trying to have the knowledge of the entire gambit of problems that confront people, we have a variety of people who have specialized in those field," Goodrich said. "I am a litigator but if I have an issue that involves trusts and estates, involved real estate, involving banking, I've got partners here who I can talk to and can help make decisions."

Over the past 100 years, the firm's attorneys have been in the middle of many highly publicized cases. They were called on to provide legal advice for the flood chutes in Adams, O'Connor was involved in two major homicides, they defended the preschool against civil suits in the Bernard Baran case and represented the gas company after an explosion at Berkshire Bank.

Recently, Dodig was involved in a case in Syracuse, N.Y., in which the trial verdict awarded his client \$7.9 million for medical malpractice. And they've followed cases all the way to the state Supreme Judicial Court.

The firm's anniversary was highlighted this past week by the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce and its planning to celebrate by holding giveaways at community events and holding a party in September.

"We do have a series of events planned throughout the year," Dodig said.