

# TRIBUTE TO THOMAS DEBEVOISE

The Honorable James L. Oakes\*

Thomas M. Debevoise was neither the first Dean nor the first President of the Vermont Law School; those distinctions were Anthony Doria's. It is completely safe to say, however, that the Vermont Law School would not have survived infancy had he not taken the reins as President on August 31, 1973, as Financial Officer in March, 1974, and as Dean on June 7, 1974. He, with the help of Trustees Franklin Billings, Frank Mahady, and Harold Berman (then a professor at Harvard Law School), was able to bring in Judge Sterry Waterman as President and Bernard Lisman as the fifth Trustee as of that date. Later, he was able to bring in people like Dean Norman Redlich to join the board. It was these individuals who guided the law school through ABA and AALS accreditations, as well as membership in the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and a measure of financial stability sufficient to enable first its survival and then its growth. They brought to the faculty, with the help of faculty retirement policies of other law schools, such luminaries as Grant Gilmore, Ralph Bischoff, and Norman Williams, and even without such help they attracted new leaders-to-be like Jack McCrory, Dick Brooks, Steve Dycus, David Firestone, Peter Teachout, and Stephanie Wilbanks, to name a few.

But it was not just with quality in teaching that Tom Debevoise had the foresight to imbue the law school. Perhaps because of his youthful membership in the Appalachian Mountain Club, his times at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, his time and association with Vermonter and Commissioner Charles Ross as assistant counsel to the Federal Power Commission (it was Ross, it will be recalled, who dissented in the FPC in *Consolidated Edison Co. of New York, Inc.*, to the initial grant of a license to Consolidated Edison Co. in connection with what came to be known as the *Storm King Case*<sup>1</sup>), his long-term friendship with Laurance S. Rockefeller, his love of Vermont, or a combination of these and more, that lead Dean Debevoise to found and nurture

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1. *Scenic Hudson Preservation Conf. v. FPC*, 354 F.2d 608 (2d Cir. 1965), *cert. denied sub nom* *Consol. Edison Co. of New York, Inc. v. Scenic Hudson Preservation Conf.*, 384 U.S. 941 (1966), which in turn was the precursor of the National Environmental Policy Act. *See Scenic Hudson Preservation Conf. v. FPC*, 453 F.2d 463, 492 n.32 (2d Cir. 1971) (dissenting opinion) (quoting COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY SECOND ANNUAL REPORT 160 (1971)), *cert. denied*, 407 U.S. 926 (1972).

the Environmental Law Center and watch it make Vermont Law School a national center for the teaching of environmental law. He also saw the law school become just that—its physical plant, its law review and moot court programs, its scholarship funds and clinical programs, its associations with, but independence from, other New England institutions. Eight years of his caring leadership—unceasing, far-sighted, aspiring, frugal but never sparing—saw what truly can be called his law school become the unique, sought-after, rural, and autonomous law school that it remains today. The seal, the graduation ceremony replete with its own academic gowns and singular music, and the awards, are simply marks of the sophistication and dedication of the man who lived, ate, drank, and slept (or didn't sleep) Vermont Law School for a decade and more.

A memorial tribute should give due credit to the person's entire career—in Tom's case his public service to Vermonters as Attorney General, to the nation as FPC assistant counsel, and especially to his private legal career. While he could have gone to New York City like his father and grandfather, who advised the Rockefellers and other captains of American finance and industry, he eschewed the siren call of vast wealth for the more rural pursuits of law and farming in Vermont. Yet, he could not but take up the challenge after his FPC days of starting his own highly successful, sixty-plus person utilities firm in Washington, D.C., only to find the academic challenge in Vermont more appealing. Others will have noted his numerous contributions to his community and region: his work for the Woodstock Foundation and the Rockefeller interests in Woodstock, the Billings Farm and Museum, the Marsh-Billings National Historical Park, the Norman Williams Public Library, the Ottauquechee Health Center, the Woodstock Country School, and many other organizations. To those of us associated with him over the years at the Vermont Law School, the building of that institution will be considered his major memorial, as Thomas Jefferson's founding of the University of Virginia was to him. Tom Debevoise's wife, Ann, who gave of herself so much in assistance to this end, and his family of course have many other things by which to remember him. The rest of us have Vermont Law School, and proud of it Tom may be.