

# A BRIEF HISTORY

## Of the University Law School

### Its Distinguished Professors and Graduates

(By Wm. C. Jemison, Class of 1873-4)

The law school of the state university, as is generally known by the members of the bar, was founded by Henderson M. Somerville prior to his going on the supreme court bench in February, 1873. When attending the supreme court in December, 1872, he was requested to go before the board of regents of the university, who were then in session at Montgomery, and to formulate a plan of organization for them, based on the condition of his accepting the position of dean of the school. He drew up the ordinance, which was passed by the regents at the meeting, leaving the name of the sole professor of law to be filled by the board. At that time all the members of the university faculty were receiving salaries of \$2,500 each, and the regents offered Judge Somerville the same amount to take sole management of the school. Foreseeing that the enterprise must necessarily commence on a small scale and be of slow growth he went before the regents and stated that they could not, in his judgment, wisely pay so much, in view of the public prejudice that would be aroused by the per capita cost of educating the few law students who would at first attend the school, and that a high salary to begin with would imperil the success if not insure the failure of the school. He offered to undertake the responsibility if they would strike out the proposed salary of \$2,500 and substitute \$500. This was done accordingly, and the law school of the state university today owes its existence to this act of self-denial on the part of one of her alumni.

The first lecture ever delivered to the school by Judge Somerville was in the lecture room, known as the chemical laboratory, in the northwest corner of the old building. The school was organized in that room about the middle of February, 1873. The first class was composed of the following: Wm. C. Jemison, Shepherd Prince (now deceased), Thos. H. Wotts, Frank S. Moody and Isaac Hamilton Prince.

The growth of the school was steady, the number of students increasing almost in arithmetical progression every year, Judge Somerville, in the meanwhile, continuing his connection with it until he was appointed in July, 1890, to his present position on the national board of customs, in New York. Since that time he has every year lectured to some extent to the law students. Connected with this work in the school the following distinguished men have been associated with him at different periods of time: Captain John M. Martin, Hon. Burwell B. Lewis, General Sterling A. M. Wood, General Henry D. Clayton and Hon. Andrew C. Hargrove, all of whom have passed away from the sphere of earthly activity. To this galaxy of great names may be added as co-adjutors, General Richard C. Jones and Captain John D. Meeden, Adrain T. Vande Graff, Esq., Judge Wm. L. Thorington and Ormond Somerville, Esq., come later on the list of the law faculty, the last two being now professors in the school.

The university is proud of her alumni, which constitutes about one-third of the bar of the state, and fill some of the highest federal and states offices, as congressmen, chancellors, circuit, city and probate judges and legislators, including also state prosecuting attorneys. Among these

hundreds of talented young judges and lawyers, now scattered over a dozen states the writer has heard Judge Somerville declare with pardonable pride that there was no single one of them who was not his personal friend, and that no part of his busy life was more pleasant than the hours spent with his old law students in the lecture room.