

Audio Transcript, Stop 3: 1859-1900

Welcome. My name is Brittany and I'm the Special Collections Digitization and Archival Services librarian at the law school. I work with our old and rare collections, including the law school's archives.

To me, Northwestern Law is a place of incredible history, both in terms of those who pass through these halls as well as the halls themselves.

You're standing in front of Lincoln Hall, named in honor of Illinois lawyer and eventual president Abraham Lincoln.

In 1859, an entire week's worth of classes was canceled so that students could hear Lincoln's argument in *State of Illinois v. Illinois Central Railroad Company*.

If you peek inside the hall, you'll see a large portrait of Abraham Lincoln at the back of the room. In the portrait, Lincoln sits contemplatively in a wooden chair. The floor beneath him is red.

The painting was completed by Chicago artist Christian Abrahamson. Abrahamson produced nine portraits of early officials of the law school, with whom he enjoyed a warm relationship.

John Henry Wigmore, the first full time Dean of Northwestern Law, commissioned these portraits from Abrahamson and described the artist as “a man of high ideals in the philosophy of art.”

Abrahamson returned the compliment, writing the school nearly 50 years later to encourage additional celebration of Wigmore's legacy. During his tenure as dean, Wigmore transformed the institution into one of the leading law schools in the United States, expanding its campus and curriculum.

Dean Wigmore wanted people to understand the dignity, permanence, and wealth of the Northwestern Law community, so early portraits of famous alumni, faculty, and school founders were commissioned to adorn the interiors of the new school.

A prestigious medium, oil paintings were very expensive.

The commissioned portraits paid tribute to the alumni and faculty depicted, and were intended to inspire future generations of students, as well as fill a decorative function.

Collections stewards instructed one artist chosen for the portrait project that the school could “stand all the color that you're willing to put in.”

As you look around the hall, you'll notice the colorful stained glass framing three sides of the room. Dean Wigmore designed this display to memorialize and celebrate each cohort of Northwestern Law students. Many of the panes of glass feature class years, starting with 1861, the first graduating class.

Try to find the pane for 1878, the year Ferdinand Lee Barnett graduated. Barnett later became Illinois's first black assistant state's attorney, founded the Chicago Conservator, and fought as an anti-lynching activist with his wife, Ida B. Wells.

Or find 1890, the year Franklin Dennison became the first black valedictorian in Northwestern Law. Denison later became the first black American soldier to rise above the rank of colonel, and Illinois's first black assistant attorney general.

It can be confusing when people talk about the early alumni of Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, because the law school started as part of another university in the 1850s.

When Northwestern University was founded, legal education wasn't as formal as it is now. Most people became lawyers through the apprenticeship model. Chicago University founded the first law school in the city in 1859. 14 years later, Northwestern University formed its first legal department by merging with the existing Chicago University Law School. The program was renamed to the Union College of Law of the Chicago University in the Northwestern University.

When Chicago University encountered financial difficulties in the late 1880s, Northwestern assumed sole control of the college. All past students were granted Northwestern Law alumni status.

None of those students took classes in this building, but their impact on our community continues to be celebrated through the stained glass tradition.

In your opinion, how does the physical environment of Lincoln Hall invite us to engage with the narratives of the past and consider our place within the continuum of institutional tradition?

In what ways can we honor the contributions of past generations, while also embracing the evolution and diversity of experiences within our academic community?

If you're inside the classroom, please return to the hallway outside and face the opposite direction towards the north wall to continue the tour.