



UNC
SCHOOL OF LAW

NORTH CAROLINA LAW REVIEW

Volume 73

Number 2 *The University of North Carolina School of
Law: A Sesquicentennial History*

Article 16

1-1-1995

(Sesquicentennial) A Time of Transition: The Deanship of Ronald C. Link (1988-89)

Judith Welch Wegner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.unc.edu/nclr>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Judith W. Wegner, *(Sesquicentennial) A Time of Transition: The Deanship of Ronald C. Link (1988-89)*, 73 N.C. L. REV. 652 (1995).
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.unc.edu/nclr/vol73/iss2/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Carolina Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Carolina Law Review by an authorized administrator of Carolina Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact law_repository@unc.edu.

A TIME OF TRANSITION: THE DEANSHIP OF RONALD C. LINK
(1988-89)

JUDITH WELCH WEGNER

Ronald C. Link was named Acting Dean of the University of North Carolina School of Law effective January 1, 1988, while the search continued for a permanent successor to Dean Kenneth S. Broun. As the *Law Alumni Newsletter* noted at the conclusion of Dean Link's term in the summer of 1989,

Ron . . . brought eloquence, insight, courage and distinction to the School of Law. Under his stewardship, all [members of the law school community] were able to take stock of the progress . . . made under the leadership of Ken Broun and to begin to develop new hopes and dreams for the years ahead.¹

As was true of his predecessors in the deanship, Link's tenure as dean reflected his personality, values, and talents. He pledged to be as active as possible in order that the faculty not feel that the school was treading water, and he accomplished this goal. Among his notable achievements were his efforts to strengthen the student body by implementing the Chancellors Scholars program, a merit scholarship program designed to fill the gap created by the decision of the Morehead Foundation to focus Morehead Scholarship awards at the undergraduate level. He assisted in recruiting five outstanding faculty members, and represented his colleagues in memorial services marking the passing of two all-time faculty greats, Albert Coates and Henry Brandis. He articulated the law school's needs for building improvements and a stronger financial base and paved the way for the transition to Judith Wegner's deanship beginning in July 1989.

RONALD C. LINK: A DEAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Link was born in Kansas and reared in Illinois. He attended high school in Champaign-Urbana, where he met his wife Sue. He attended the University of Illinois, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa,

1. Judith W. Wegner, *A Letter from the Dean*, LAW ALUMNI NEWSLETTER (UNC School of Law, Chapel Hill, N.C.), Fall 1989, at 2.

and received his A.B. in Chemistry in 1961. He subsequently received an M.A., also in chemistry, from the University of California at Berkeley. Tiring of life in the laboratory, he returned to Illinois, enrolled in the University's law school and received his J.D. in 1965. He was elected to membership in the Order of the Coif, and served as Associate Editor of the *University of Illinois Law Forum*.

Link practiced for three years with the firm of Sidley & Austin in Chicago, concentrating primarily in the area of wills and trusts. He then entered teaching at the University of Georgia. Three years later, in 1971, he joined the UNC law faculty. His teaching interests include trusts and estates, estate planning, and property, and he is well regarded as a teacher of clarity, wit, and humanity. He maintains strong ties with the practicing bar, and has served in many capacities with the American Bar Association's Section on Real Property, Probate and Trust Law, as well as with other professional organizations. He was chosen as an academic fellow of the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel and as chair of the North Carolina General Statutes Commission Trusts Drafting Committee. In recent years, he has devoted intensive energy to questions of lawyers' fiduciary responsibilities in the context of estate planning, issues raised in representing the elderly, and recent developments concerning the right to die.

Link served as Associate Dean from 1982 to 1984. When the law school needed an experienced and able steward during a time of transition, Link unselfishly agreed to assume the dean's mantle. As he noted, with characteristic grace, wit, and generosity of spirit, in a farewell message to law alumni:

It was the quickest eighteen months of my life. It was the longest eighteen months of my life.

It began with a lost soul who wrote from Los Angeles, contending that a doctor at the UNC Medical School was exerting mind control over her to force her to sleep with Johnny Carson. It ended with a man who called from Fayetteville, believing that mysterious forces had set up a laser field around his business to repel his customers.

It was unforgettable. I learned that I had reserves of patience which my beautiful wife, Sue, has never seen. I found that at age forty-nine I could work harder than I did in law school.²

2. Ronald C. Link, *From the Acting Dean*, LAW ALUMNI NEWSLETTER (UNC School of Law, Chapel Hill, N.C.), Summer 1989, at 2.

He commented on the quality of the law school, its faculty's high aspirations for the school's future, and his pleasure in working with alumni. In every respect, he was a faithful and gifted leader who brought immense talent and enormous care to his oversight of the lives, resources, and reputation of the school that he held in his charge.

SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

During the late 1980s, law schools across the nation faced a significant increase in applications from talented prospective students. This rising tide provided opportunities for many schools to recruit ever-more-talented students. Link seized the opportunity in important ways that will redound to the school's benefit for many years to come.

Link recognized the need for the school to present itself more effectively to prospective students and other external audiences. He worked closely with Assistant Dean for Admissions Beth Furr to improve the quality of UNC's admissions literature and encouraged other efforts to enhance the image of the school. Because of his relatively short tenure and scarce financial resources, many of his ideas could not be fully implemented at the time. In ensuing years, however, the school has developed much more impressive background materials to assist applicants for admission, and upgraded the full range of its publications in an effort to communicate more effectively with the world beyond Chapel Hill.

Link was also responsible for the creation of the Chancellors Scholars Program. This program was established in Spring 1989 to attract students of superior character, academic achievement, and potential. Modeled after the Morehead Fellowship program long associated with The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Chancellors Scholars program sought to draw talented students from across the state and nation to Chapel Hill. Since the program's inception, Chancellors Scholars have enriched the intellectual climate for all students at the law school and have served as important symbols of the excellence of legal education at Carolina.

The Chancellors Scholars program also signifies the long association the law school has had with outstanding University Chancellors who have been noted educators and skilled administrators. Among those honored through this program are law faculty members and former Chancellors William B. Aycock (1957-64),

Nelson Ferebee Taylor (1972-80), as well as incumbent Chancellor (and future faculty colleague) Paul Hardin.

Link also led the faculty in recruiting outstanding new colleagues. Among those joining the faculty during his tenure were Michael L. Corrado, a former philosophy professor, who combined his enduring interest in that field with a distinguished career in law. Louis D. Billionis was recruited to teach in the area of criminal law, bringing outstanding academic credentials and significant experience in law practice. Professor Nancy Rhoden was recruited from Ohio State University, where she had gained national renown as a scholar in the field of bioethics and the law. Steve Devine brought expertise in the areas of comparative law and international business transactions, before returning to practice in San Francisco.

The faculty also suffered a number of losses during this period. Professor Norman Lefstein left to become dean at Indiana University-Indianapolis School of law. Marianne Smythe returned to Washington, D.C., to resume a distinguished career with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Ted Haas returned to practice in New York City. Long-time and well-beloved faculty colleagues Henry Brandis and Albert Coates died during the winter of 1989. Link delivered eloquent eulogies at memorial services held on campus and wrote movingly about their many contributions to the profession and the state.³

Link also made a considered effort to document the school's continuing need for improved physical facilities. He sought to educate University leaders about the remarkable, unforeseeable changes in legal education that had occurred over the twenty years since the construction of Van Hecke-Wettach Hall. He explored a variety of creative options for building configuration and financing, including possible links with the Institute of Government, and various approaches to public-private partnerships to provide an income stream that could help finance the project. He charged a faculty committee to begin work on a statement of specific needs for physical facilities. At the same time, he pursued specific initiatives designed to alleviate particularly pressing problems relating to student computer support, leading to the creation of a student computer laboratory located in the law library, and renovations of the administrative suite (generously supported by the family of John Manning).

3. See Ronald C. Link, *Albert Coates and Legal Research*, 67 N.C. L. REV. 749-50 (1989); Ronald C. Link, *Henry Brandis*, 67 N.C. L. REV. 1021-22 (1989).

Link's deanship was thus marked by significant accomplishments that moved the law school forward in measurable and long-lasting ways. Link's intangible contributions are equally important, but less easily articulated by writers less gifted than he. Link will be remembered for his dedication, his eloquence, his kindness, and his integrity. He will also be remembered as remaining his own man, a man for all seasons, throughout the challenges of the deanship—retaining his deep affection for Bruce Springsteen and the Talking Heads, his playfulness in charging the organist at the close of commencement exercises (“Now, Mr. Organist, let’s have some rock and roll”), and his courageous grace under pressure.