

Law School Commencement (1912)

*John Q. Barrett**

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Albany Law School, an affiliate of Union University, held its 1912 commencement exercises in Odd Fellows Hall, just one block from the school in the heart of New York State's capital. An alumnus, Josiah Henry Benton, Jr., a Civil War veteran, Boston lawyer and civic leader, and the newly-elected head of ALS's alumni association, was the principal speaker. The Reverend C.A. Richmond, Union's chancellor, conferred diplomas on the graduates (65 men and 1 woman) and also delivered a speech (criticizing then-prevalent demands for recalls of judges and judicial decisions).

Three other students had, like the graduates, completed very satisfactorily Albany Law School's academic program. Two were twin sisters, Clara and Clarissa B. Pritchard of Tivoli, New York. The third was Robert H. Jackson of Frewsburg, New York. Each was not yet twenty-one years old.

To the surprise and consternation of these three students, Albany Law School had decided late in the Spring 1912 semester that it would not award degrees to anyone who was too young to satisfy the New York Court of Appeals age limit (21) for admission to the New York State Bar. On June 6, 1912, ALS thus gave to each of these students only a "diploma of graduation," not an actual law degree.

Following his commencement (of sorts), Robert Jackson returned to his native west (of sorts—western Pennsylvania and western New York State). He spent a week visiting his maternal grandmother, Parthena Mariah Gregory Houghwot (born 1843), and other relatives in Fairbanks Township, Pennsylvania. (A year or so earlier, when Jackson told his Grandmother Houghwot that he was considering going to Albany to study

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law, she asked where Albany was and how far it was from her farm. After Jackson answered, she opined that she never knew any good “to come to them that go roving around.” His June 1912 visit perhaps reassured her that a year so far away had not ruined him.)

Robert Jackson then returned to Jamestown, New York. He resumed working as an apprentice, as he had during the year preceding his year at Albany Law School, to Jamestown attorneys and law practice partners Frank H. Mott and Benjamin S. Dean.

In 1913, Jackson, age twenty-one, was admitted to the New York State Bar and began his own law practice.

In 1941, Albany Law School gave to Jackson, who then was the Attorney General of the United States, his 1912 LL.B. degree on what he subsequently described, with amusement, as “a sort of *nunc pro tunc* basis.”

For an article that covers these events in greater detail, [click here](#).