

Quick Trip to Princeton (1947)

*John Q. Barrett**

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With the confidence of youth, Princeton University junior Ben Baer placed a long distance telephone call to Washington, D.C., on a Saturday in late April 1947.

Justice Robert H. Jackson, working in his chambers at the Supreme Court of the United States, took the call. Mr. Baer explained that he was president of a newly-created group of Princeton upperclassmen, the Pre-Law Society. He told Jackson that men whom he knew, Professors Edward S. Corwin and Alpheus T. Mason were, respectively, the Society's honorary president and its faculty adviser. Baer told Jackson that the group wanted to honor Jackson for his work during 1945-46 as U.S. chief prosecutor at Nuremberg. Baer invited Justice Jackson to speak to the group in the coming weeks, before the end of the academic year.¹

Justice Jackson no doubt told Mr. Baer that the Supreme Court was in the final months of its annual Term—the Justices were issuing many decisions, still hearing oral arguments in new cases, and working on many opinions that needed to be completed before their summer recess. Jackson asked Baer to check on trains that Jackson could take up from Washington and back on the same day.²

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¹ See Letter from Ben K. Baer to Honorable Justice Robert Jackson, "Monday" [Apr. 1947]. This document and the others cited herein are in the Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 44, Folder 12.

² See *id.* at 1.

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In subsequent letters and telegrams, Princeton students informed Justice Jackson that there were such trains. He agreed to come to Princeton on Saturday, May 17, 1947.³

On that day, Justice Jackson travelled by train from Washington's Union Station to Philadelphia, and from there to Trenton, New Jersey.

At 4:00 p.m., Ben Baer and another student, Thomas O. Canby, the Society's president-elect, met Jackson at the Trenton station and drove him from there to Princeton (about twelve miles).⁴ Because time was tight, the students took Jackson directly to the Nassau Tavern on Palmer Square, a block from the campus.



³ See Letter from Robert H. Jackson to Ben K. Baer, Apr. 30, 1947 (unsigned carbon copy of typed original); Letter from Thomas O. Canby to Honorable Justice Robert Jackson, May 5, 1947; Letter from Robert H. Jackson to Thomas O. Canby, May 7, 1947 (unsigned carbon copy of typed original);

⁴ See Telegram from Robert H. Jackson to Thomas O. Canby, 71 Little Hall, Princeton University (sender's carbon copy) & Telegram from Thomas Canby & Ben K. Baer to The Hon Justice Robert H Jackson, both May 16, 1947 (confirming their plan to meet in Trenton).

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At the Tavern, Justice Jackson attended and spoke, extemporaneously, at the Princeton Pre-Law Society's inaugural banquet. He spoke a bit about the Supreme Court and, as the students had requested, primarily about his 1945-46 work as U.S. chief prosecutor in Nuremberg of Nazi war criminals. Following Jackson's talk, he took student questions.

By about 9:00 p.m., Justice Jackson was out of time. The students drove him from the Nassau Tavern to catch "The Constitution," a Pennsylvania Railroad train. He was back at Union Station in Washington just after midnight, home at Hickory Hill for the rest of that Saturday night and for Sunday, and on the Supreme Court bench on Monday, May 19th, a decision day.

In Princeton that day, Ben Baer typed and sent this letter of thanks:

Dear Justice Jackson:

On behalf of the members of the Pre-Law Society I should like to take this opportunity to thank you for coming to Princeton to speak to us last Saturday evening. We feel deeply honored that you made a special trip up to be with us at our final banquet, and are most appreciative.

I can truthfully say that the banquet was the high spot of the year's activities. We have had several interesting speakers, but none who spoke so forcefully, or who answered our questions so directly. Your analysis of the Nurnberg trials was without a doubt the finest speech that we have heard.

I am very sorry that you did not get to see much of Princeton. Connections were very close, and in order to carry through our pre-arranged plans it was necessary to go right to the Tavern. I hope that someday in the future, it will be our pleasure to entertain you in a more leisurely fashion, and to extend to you more fully the real Princeton hospitality.

Again may I thank you for what you have done; your visit to Princeton, insignificant as it may seem to you,

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provided us with a rare pleasure, and one that we will not forget for some time to come. I often feel that one of the measures of greatness of a man is his willingness and thoughtfulness to inconvenience his work in order to give pleasure to others. By this standard, and certainly by many others, the Pre-Law Society was proud to honor you at our first banquet. I hope that someday we may in some small way repay you for your kindness in speaking to our group.

Most sincerely yours,

/s/ Ben K. Baer⁵

⁵ Letter from Ben K. Baer to The Honorable Justice Robert H. Jackson, May 19, 1947.

Ben Kayser Baer did become a lawyer. He was a native of Charlestown, West Virginia, a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy and, from 1944-46, an ensign in the United States Navy. After graduating in 1948 with highest honors from Princeton's School of Public & International Affairs (which was, in that same year, renamed the Woodrow Wilson School of Public & International Affairs), Baer attended and graduated from Yale Law School and then practiced law in Charlestown. He later became chairman of Allenberg Cotton Company and Allenberg International Cotton, one of Memphis, Tennessee's leading companies, and he served as president of the American Cotton Shippers Association and the Southern Cotton Association. He died in 1999 at age 73. See Memorial, PRINCETON ALUMNI WEEKLY, Nov. 3, 1999, available at https://paw.princeton.edu/memorials/41/53/index.xml?undergraduate_class=1948.