

Big Law Has a Big Birthday: Hunton Turns 120 Years Young

by Deirdre Norman

What is a big birthday if not a time to reflect on past achievements, set new goals, and look toward the future with hope, optimism, and gratitude for still being here?

With 120 candles on its cake, Hunton Andrews Kurth has weathered two global pandemics (the Spanish Flu and COVID-19), the Great Depression, and two world wars. And in 2018, Virginia-based Hunton & Williams (founded in 1901) merged with Texas-based Andrews Kurth Kenyon (founded in 1902), and two old firms became one new firm with a storied past and its eyes on the future.

With offices in Richmond, Norfolk, and Tysons Corner, Hunton Andrews Kurth is the second-largest firm in Virginia. And though some were surprised when the venerable Hunton & Williams merged with a Texas firm, Doug Granger, managing partner of Hunton's Richmond office, pointed out Hunton's preexisting connections to the Lone Star State.

"We were already a Texas firm," Granger said. "We had offices in Dallas, Houston, and Austin. They had offices in New York and D.C., so we had overlap. They had a very, very similar culture and history in the way that they were created and grew. Their oil and gas practice complemented our electric power and renewable energy practices, which made it a nice fit business wise and strategically."

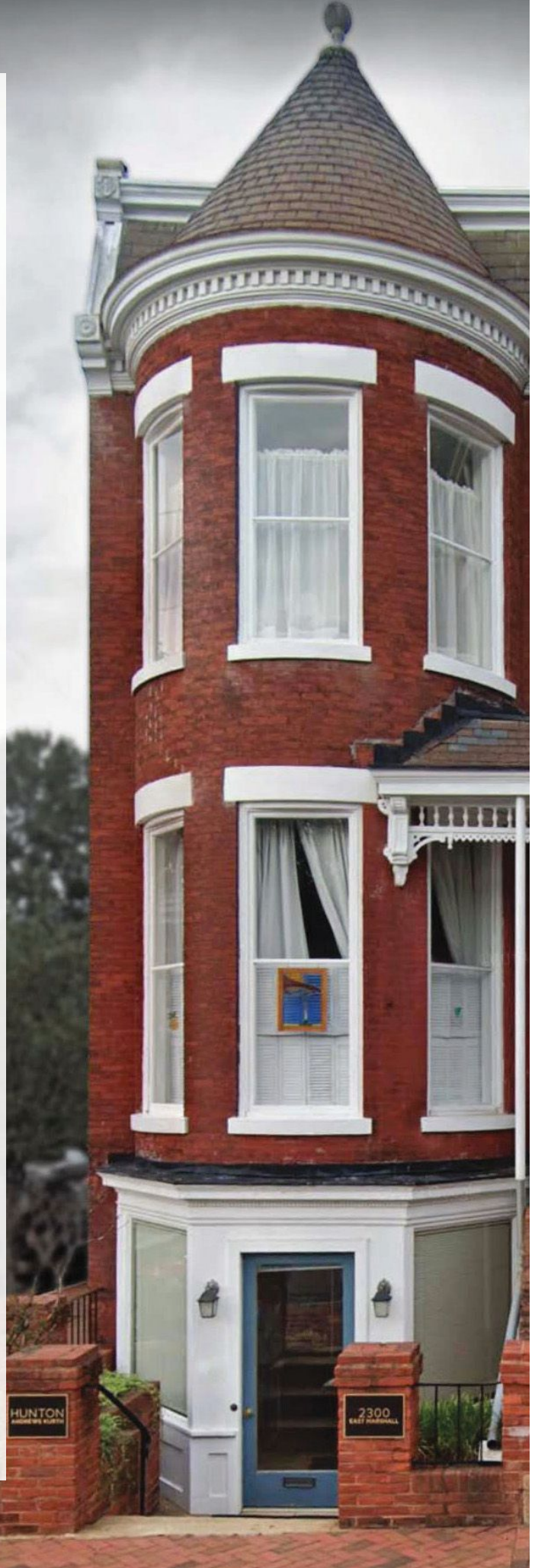
George Howell, chair of Hunton's executive committee, concurred. "During the negotiation of the merger, as I got to know the lawyers at Andrews Kurth, it felt like they were our doppelgangers. They had the same spirit of teamwork, collaboration, and respect for the individual, and they valued pro bono and community service."

The merger, like many law firm mergers of the past two decades, provided the two already sizable firms with an even bigger footprint and economies of scale that benefit the firm and its clients in an increasingly global marketplace.

Today, Hunton has more than 200 lawyers in Virginia and approximately 900 across the United States and the globe. But despite massive growth and decades of change, Hunton remains true to the partnership agreement it drew up over 120 years ago. Said Howell, "If we go back to our original partnership agreement in 1901, it begins: 'Law is a service to society.' Those are the very first words in the partnership agreement."

To that end, Hunton has determinedly stuck to an admirable goal of encouraging 100 percent participation in pro bono endeavors and was the first law firm in the country to open a law office exclusively for pro bono clients. Located in Richmond's Church Hill neighborhood, Hunton's pro bono office was the manifestation of recently deceased Hunton partner George

Hunton Andrews Kurth's dedicated pro bono office in Richmond's historic Church Hill, the first of its kind in the country. ▶



Hettrick (see page 43 for his obituary), who, after overcoming personal obstacles that initially sidelined his active corporate law practice, became a fierce advocate for lawyers suffering from addiction and mental health issues, as well as a devoted pro bono attorney, chairing Hunton's pro bono committee for 30 years.

Decades ago, some firms may have seen an attorney struggling with addiction and chosen not to support that lawyer on the long, often bumpy road to recovery. Hunton did just the opposite. Said Granger, "George Hettrick is a great example of the partnership and of the investment that we make in people and how it gets repaid. Hunton gave him support when he needed it. And he spent the rest of his life paying it forward, both to other lawyers and to the community at large."

Said Howell, "When I think about our firm's culture, there are three key components. The first is collaboration and teamwork, which we're well-known for. Second is respect for the individual. And third is community service." To that end, Hunton was also one of the first firms to offer billable credit hours for pro bono service, for diversity efforts, and for disaster relief.

"When your culture has a high focus on pro bono and community service, you tend to draw lawyers who value those things. And so that's why it's been a self-sustaining situation over 120 years," Howell concluded.

Virginia State Bar Access to Legal Services Director Crista Gantz has worked with Hunton for years and said, "Hunton has built a strong culture where the expectation is 100 percent participation in pro bono, and it shows. The firm's leadership has consistently led by action in this area, and the commitment to service is reflected at every level of the organization. Hunton's attorneys and legal support staff have increased Legal Aid's bench in critical areas, and its independent pro bono office provides much-needed services to Central Virginians who can't get services anywhere else, particularly on family law matters."

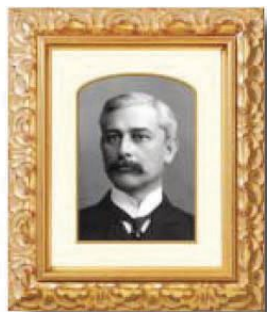
The VSB's most prestigious pro bono award is named after former Hunton partner and Supreme Court of the

United States Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr., who helped create a national network of legal aid programs before becoming a justice. Hunton won the Powell award as a firm in 1998 for attaining 100 percent attorney involvement in pro bono, and Hettrick won the award in 2015 for his decades long commitment to helping underserved Virginians attain justice.

Less widely known than its pro bono efforts are the firm's early and ongoing efforts in diversity. In the early 1920s, Hunton hired Elizabeth N. Tompkins as a summer clerk. Tompkins was the first woman to graduate from the University of Virginia School of Law and one of the first to practice law. Though the reasons behind her hiring are lost to time, it should be noted that Hunton founder Beverley B. Munford was the husband of women's rights and civil rights activist Mary-Cooke Branch Munford, who fought (but lost) the fight for the University of Virginia to admit women in 1916, but who eventually became a member of its Board of Visitors in 1926.

In 1943, during World War II, Hunton hired two women to work as attorneys at the firm: Sarah Geer Dale and Nan Ross McConnell. Dale worked in labor law before retiring after getting married. McConnell was attorney of record, along with firm founder Henry W. Anderson and Lewis F. Powell Jr., on a case that appeared before the Supreme Court of the United States in 1947 representing Institutional Group for Boston Terminal Bonds against a debtor.

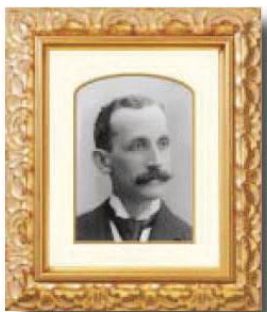
In 1975, Hunton hired John Charles Thomas as an associate, the first Black lawyer to join the firm. Thomas climbed the ranks, working primarily in energy law and nuclear litigation, making partner in 1982. Thomas made national news at the time as the first Black lawyer to enter as an associate at a traditional Southern law firm and go "up the line" to partner. A year after making partner, Thomas was appointed to the Supreme Court of Virginia, the first African American to sit on the Court. In his essay, "One Journey in a Century," Thomas notes that it was his colleague, Alan Rudlin, who joined Hunton as an associate the same year



Eppa Hunton, Jr.



Henry Watkins Anderson



Beverley B. Munford



E. Randolph Williams

▲ The four founders of the law firm that would grow to be Hunton & Williams.

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Doug Granger (left) and George Howell
(right) on the stairs of Hunton's law
library in the Riverfront Plaza building.

as Thomas, who had written a letter to then-Governor Charles S. Robb suggesting Thomas for the role.

Wrote Thomas in 2002, “Hunton & Williams has that way about it. It puts together in one place people of diverse backgrounds often in pressure-cooker situations and out of such comes the special relationships of lawyers who have been through it together.”

In 2021, Hunton became one of just 28 law firms from across the country to belong to Bloomberg Law’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Framework. The framework allows firms to establish diversity metrics, gather the data, and then work to meet or exceed the threshold they set for themselves. Regularly recognized on “Best Places to Work” lists, Hunton says its diverse employees are almost 57 percent female and 41 percent minority.

When asked what he sees as the future of Hunton, Howell returned to the importance of maintaining the three pillars of the firm: teamwork, respect for the individual, and community service. And, of course, serving the firm’s clients.

“Well, we always follow our clients, right?” Granger concurred. “So, the idea is we serve our clients, whether they’re paying or pro bono. And we are going to go where the clients need us to go. The key, though, is maintaining the culture, maintaining those three pillars. And we absolutely do that.”

Both Howell and Granger noted that Hunton has encouraged its lawyers to seek out and develop practice areas that they see as emerging trends years before they become routine areas of the law. By way of example, they pointed out Hunton’s early forays into asset securitization, cybersecurity, and data privacy issues—none of which were buzzwords when Hunton lawyers began developing expertise in these areas.

Added Howell, “The development of these former niche areas is a great example of where, yes, we follow our clients and do what our clients need, but we also need to anticipate, we need to think about what our clients are going to need five years from now, and 10 years from now, not just what they need today.”

Granger, who has done much of his work for clients based in the United Kingdom, said the continuing globalization of the firm’s clients “has created a challenge of how you spread out where you do your work and, at the same time, continue to devote resources to the community where you live and remain relevant. That’s a challenge, but that’s something that I think that we want to continue to focus on. Even if we’re working with people that are in California or overseas, how do we still get our people engaged in doing

things that make this community better?”

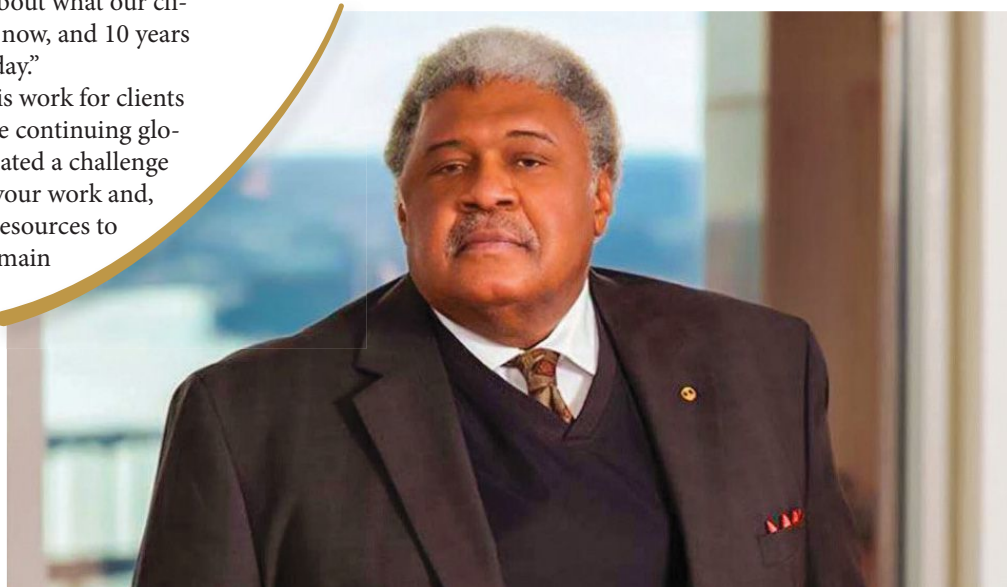
In fact, Hunton has been an active supporter of the Bar and its efforts in the Commonwealth for many decades. According to Director of Bar Services Maureen Stengel, who has helped run the VSB’s Professionalism Course, Annual Meeting, sections and conferences events, and awards for over 30 years, “Hunton has always been financially supportive of our events and programs but, more importantly, has not just allowed, but encouraged, its attorneys to share their time, talent and expertise volunteering with the Virginia State Bar. Their participation has been invaluable.”

When they are not serving their clients, volunteering for pro bono causes, and working to improve the legal profession and the communities in which they live, Hunton attorneys try to stay balanced and healthy. The firm continues to look for ways to make sure its lawyers and staff are fulfilled, healthy, and cultivate outside interests to cope with the stresses inherent in legal work.

Both Howell and Granger speak enthusiastically of colleagues who write poetry, perform in bands, and run marathons. Said Granger, “What we’ve learned from COVID is that a flexible work environment helps people work better across offices and teams, which, in turn, allows us to continue delivering quality and reasonably priced service to our clients.”

Howell added, “The key to us is how do we best support our lawyers and our staff so they can best serve our clients?”

Perhaps the 120th birthday of Hunton can best be summed up by the words of Justice John Charles Thomas, penned on the firm’s centennial birthday: “This firm has been and remains a leader because it knows how to grow and evolve and expand and change while holding onto the bedrock principle that each lawyer must always give his or her best and that working together we are much more than we could be working separately.” ☞



The Hon. John Charles Thomas (ret.), first Black justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia and former Hunton partner