

## Longest Serving Member of the VSB Honored at Eastern Shore Event

by Claudia Turner Bagwell

For a good part of the twentieth century and into this one, one lawyer has been a member of the Northampton County bar. He started modestly, spent fourteen years as the county's commonwealth's attorney, and has had a remarkable seventy-four-year career. Retired Circuit Court Judge Glen A. Tyler called him "The Dean of the Bar" every time he entered his court room, an honorific he has well earned. That lawyer is Baxley Trower Tankard.

On October 24, 2012, the Eastern Shore Bar Association gathered at the Eastern Shore Yacht and County Club to honor Tankard, who retired in July.

The mood in the room was warm, and some good-natured ribbing was thrown into the mix.

"I was here to see the advent of the fax machine and personal computer," C. A. (Bert) Turner III, president of the Eastern Shore Bar, said. "Mr. Tankard was here to see the advent of electricity in our offices."

Levity aside, Turner said Tankard actually had quite a bit to do with the advent of electricity on the Eastern Shore. He was the first attorney for the Eastern Shore's rural electric cooperative, now Accomack & Northampton Electric Cooperative, and remained in that capacity for more than sixty years. Before its inception, Shore residents living down the rural necks got their power from generators.

Croton Gordon, Tankard's long-time partner and now the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court judge for Accomack and Northampton counties, recalled the Tankard rule: local attorneys could borrow any of the books from Tankard's extensive library — as long as they didn't use it against Tankard's clients.

Jon C. Poulson, former Accomack commonwealth's attorney, recalled being up against Tankard in a case involving the electric cooperative. Poulson found a case that was not favorable to his argu-



Members of the Eastern Shore Bar Association honored Baxley T. Tankard for his long service to the bar at an event October 24. Among the many attending were, from left, the Honorable Gordon S. Vincent, Tankard, the Honorable Croton Gordon, and the Honorable W. Revell Lewis III.

ment, but it was a rather recent case and he thought Tankard wouldn't be familiar with it. Tankard began his argument citing the case.

Herman B. Walker talked about the local bar's collegiality and civility, of which Tankard was a leading example, as did Virginia State Bar President W. David Harless.

Harless, who combined the occasion of his annual visit to the Eastern Shore's bar with the opportunity to recognize Tankard, said he had done some research on the honoree. Tankard passed the bar in July 20, 1937, making him the lawyer with the longest tenure of any officer of the Supreme Court of Virginia.

Bar numbers were not given the year Tankard passed the bar. It wasn't until the following year that the practice began, and Tankard was a charter member of the Virginia State Bar when it was formed in 1938, making him the longest-serving active member.



VSB President W. David Harless spoke of Tankard's devotion to the bar and to mentoring young lawyers.

Harless said Tankard was a good example of qualities important to being an exemplary attorney: collegiality, civility, and practicing law as a calling and profession, not just a career. In his written remarks, Harless said that, "as evidenced by the numerous testimonies that we have heard here this evening, perhaps your most enduring contributions and legacy has been your selfless devotion to sharing your time, your wisdom, and your guidance with all of the judges and lawyers gathered at this assembly."

“You have devoted your professional life to mentoring younger lawyers, and in doing so, improving the quality and availability of legal services to the citizens of the Shore and the commonwealth. Such service is now in great demand, but in low supply, and we should be reminded by your example of our collective need to mentor those who follow us in the profession.”

Meeting recently with judges, law school administrators and attorneys, Harless said he has observed that young attorneys know a lot about law but not how to come to a point that would bring the case to a conclusion advantageous to their client. Tankard was an example of a seasoned attorney who was not only a good lawyer, but a good lawyer who could bring the case to a point, a good lawyer for his client.

Fees were low when Tankard began his practice in 1938, generally around \$10 for most court appointed work, which covered time spent researching the case, chasing down witnesses, and appearing in court.

His first big jury trial involved a man and woman had been living together under circumstances that were unclear. When the man died, the woman asserted she should be paid for working

as his housekeeper and she sued to collect wages. Tankard won the case, and the woman was awarded \$650. “That was a lotta money, a lotta money. I took the whole rest of the day off to celebrate.”

Lawyers weren’t always paid with cash. Tankard recalls one Accomack County lawyer, nameless out of professional courtesy, who was on his way to woo a girl and stopped to collect a fee. “I haven’t got a thing in the world to pay you with,” said the client, “but I have got some pigs if that would help.” The lawyer chased down a pig and threw it in the trunk of the car, then proceeded to his date. He forgot the pig until his romantic overtures were shattered by its grunts and squeals from the trunk.

Gradually Tankard built his practice. He ran for commonwealth’s attorney in 1954 and served in that capacity for fourteen years and was appointed for an additional two years when the sitting commonwealth’s attorney was drafted.

The atmosphere in Eastville was collegial, and lawyers could often be found eating together in several small establishments around town. Tankard has seen members of the bar change, judges change, rules change. Even the courthouse has moved. But certain traditions remain — the collegiality among those

who practice law in the small county seat and a lawyer’s knack to spin a tale or two. Tankard is a master at both.

Rumor has it that a few years ago an individual visiting the Northampton County Clerk’s Office was engaged in conversation with Tankard. After a few minutes of pleasant exchange, the visitor asked “How old are you, Mr. Tankard?” “Can you keep a secret?” Tankard replied. “Yes, of course,” came the eager response. Tankard leaned in to speak softly into his listener’s ear: “So can I.”



**Claudia Turner Bagwell** works as a title examiner for her brother, C. A. (Bert) Turner III. Baxley Tankard practiced in the Eastern Shore bar with her grandfather, father, brother, and daughter.



# Make Your Connection.

Over 12,000 times each year, we connect lawyers with clients from the general public, businesses, and legal professionals seeking lawyer to lawyer referrals. We can do it for you. Visit VLRS.net and find out how.

The Virginia Lawyer Referral Service.

Connecting the public with lawyers for more than thirty years.



VA Lawyer Referral Service