Front matter

University of Michigan Law School

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5 Things About 1859

The year was 1859. James Buchanan lived in the White House, abolitionist John Brown led a raid on Harpers Ferry, and the seeds of the Civil War were being sown. And in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a new law department enrolled its first students.

As we celebrate the Law School’s sesquicentennial, we wondered about the world in which those first students lived. Here are a few things that occurred a century and a half ago.

1. Charles Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, later condensed to a much shorter title: *The Origin of Species*. The book remains significant and controversial, indeed, *New Scientist* magazine recently called it “arguably the most important book ever written.” Interesting bit of trivia: It was not until the fifth edition, published 10 years later, that the phrase “survival of the fittest” was added to the book.

2. A daredevil named Charles Blondin makes the first successful tightrope walk across Niagara Falls. He crossed several more times, including one trek on which he pushed a wheelbarrow. “The greatest feat of the Nineteenth Century,” gushed the *Buffalo Republic*. “That mighty cataract of the world has been crossed by a human being on a tight-rope—he has drawn up from its bosom with a rope, a bottle, and drank its contents while sitting upon it. …What will not man do next?”

3. Big Ben begins keeping time and chiming. The clock, according to the official Big Ben website, was installed in the Clock Tower in April 1859. At first, it wouldn’t work because the cast-iron minute hands were too heavy. They were replaced by lighter copper hands, and it successfully began keeping time the following month. Officially, the Clock Tower’s bell is called the Great Bell, though it is better known by its nickname—which is thought to honor either Sir Benjamin Hall, First Commissioner for Works, whose name is inscribed on the bell, or Ben Caunt, a champion heavyweight boxer of the 1850s.

4. Construction begins on the Suez Canal. The canal connects the Gulf of Suez on the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and provides a short route between Europe and Asia without circumnavigating of Africa. The canal opened in 1869, after a decade of forced labor and the death of as many as 120,000 Egyptian workers. The canal—at times called the umbilical cord to the world, the lifeline of the British Empire, and the eighth wonder of the modern world—is a passageway for some 20,000 vessels a year.

5. The most massive solar superstorm in recorded history lights up the skies with red, green, and purple auroras. The storm is believed to have been caused by a medley of solar flares, accelerated protons, intensified electrical currents, and other astro-anomalies. Thanks to the off-kilter energy, telegraph systems failed in North America and Europe, but that’s nothing compared to the chaos that such a storm would cause now. “Were it to happen today, it could severely damage satellites, disable radio communications, and cause continent-wide electrical blackouts that would require weeks or longer to recover from,” according to a 2008 article in *Scientific American*. 
Katie Vloet is the new editor of the Law Quadrangle. She joins the Law School after stints as a writer and public relations representative at the Medical School and as editor of U-M’s faculty and staff newspaper. Prior to that, she was a newspaper reporter at the St. Petersburg (Florida) Times and the Cox Newspapers Washington Bureau. Katie is a Michigan native and a graduate of The George Washington University. She would love to hear your thoughts and ideas about the magazine, including letters to the editor for a new section in the magazine. E-mail her at kgazella@umich.edu.

Sheryl James is a writer in Brighton, Michigan, who won a 1991 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for a series of articles in the St. Petersburg (Florida) Times about a mother who abandoned her newborn child. She also worked at the Detroit Free Press and Hour Detroit magazine. She freelances regularly for several magazines and teaches journalism at Eastern Michigan University.

James Tobin is a journalist and historian whose books include Ernie Pyle’s War and To Conquer the Air: the Wright Brothers and the Great Race for Flight, both of which received national awards. A former reporter for The Detroit News, he is an associate professor of journalism at Miami University in Ohio. He is working on a book about Franklin Roosevelt’s experience of disability.

David Chambers is the Wade H. McCree Jr. Collegiate Professor Emeritus of Law. He taught family law and criminal law at the Law School from 1969 until 2003 and was the founder of the South Africa Externship Program. He also served as president of the Society of American Law Teachers and as a member of the Executive Committee of the Association of American Law Schools.

Terry K. Adams, ’72, is a senior research associate at the Law School and the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. He has worked with David Chambers on the University of Michigan Law School Alumni Survey since 1980 and is a founding member of the Executive Coordinating Committee of the After the J.D. Study of the American Bar Foundation, a national study of the careers of individuals joining the bar in 2000.
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