

Founding Fathers

Born during a meeting in 1895, the CLLA was created to reflect the changing times—and continues to change as needed.

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The CLLA's start came from a meeting held in 1895—much like the conference recently held in Chicago, and the one planned for November in New York.

In 1895, the need for a League like the Commercial Law League was clear. As League founder William C. Sprague said at the time, the founding members lived “in a commercial republic and in a commercial age.”

And indeed they did. According to “A History of the Commercial Law League of America,” written by Morris Weisman in 1976, the League's beginning came about as the result of the development of the credit system in the U.S.

As industry began to expand, sellers and buyers were not necessarily just friends and neighbors anymore. Corporations were forming—a movement first notable in the amalgamation of constituent companies into the United States Steel Corporation in 1898.

Buyers and sellers were, in essence, becoming strangers in many transactions. To reduce potential losses from extension of credit, trade associations were formed.

The trade associations “made it possible to accumulate the actual ‘ledger experience’ of their associated members with customers,” according to “A History of the Commercial Law League of America.” Combined with other payment records, that information helped sellers assess a buyer's reliability.

When lawyer, author and publisher Sprague called for a meeting in Detroit between lawyers, collection agents, credit professionals and law list and directory publishers, roughly 400 attended.

Discussion of founding a league led to a heated debate about whether or not membership should be restricted to lawyers. (According to Sprague, even the waiters who were present took sides.)

The founders named the organization, drafted by-laws and a constitution—both of which have been amended over the years but still remain largely intact—and elected officers.

A new organization was born; and more than 115 years later, it's still going strong. ■

