

The State Bar of Michigan will unveil a "Michigan Legal Milestones" plaque, on Thursday, Aug. 28, at 11 a.m. on Ferris State University's Campus Quad, commemorating the May 17, 1949 signing of the Smith-VanderWerp Bill by Gov. G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams. In 1949, what was then known as the Ferris Institute was a private school. The Smith-VanderWerp Bill paved the way for Ferris to become a public institution on July 1, 1950.

Ferris' transition to becoming a part of Michigan's system of public higher education includes some remarkable twists and turns. On Feb. 21, 1950, fire swept through Ferris Institute's Main Building, destroying the majority of the school's infrastructure. Since the fire took place in between the bill's signing and its effective date, Ferris' bid to become public could have been derailed by legal interpretations which viewed the fire as rendering the Smith-VanderWerp Bill null and void. The Michigan Legal Milestones plaque notes the proactive role that Williams took in assuring that the bill in fact took effect, assuring Ferris' place in the state system.



Speaking at the event will be 49th Circuit Court Judge Ronald Nichols, President of the Mecosta-Osceola Bar Tyler Thompson and Ferris President David Eisler. State Bar President Brian Einhorn and State Bar Executive Director Janet Welch will share the duties of master of ceremonies. The unveiling coincides with the university's annual Founders' Day events, commemorating Ferris history and celebrating the start of the new academic year.

"It's an honor to have the State Bar of Michigan recognize the events that led up to Ferris becoming a state institution," Eisler said. "Woodbridge and Helen Ferris founded their school 130 years ago this year, and we have been a part of the state system for 54 of those years.

"Our university lives the heritage of our founders, so it is truly fitting to have this aspect of our history highlighted as part of our 130th anniversary celebration," he added.

Michigan Legal Milestones recognize legal cases and people of historical significance across Michigan. A new milestone is dedicated each year. Previous plaques have highlighted President Gerald R. Ford, a 1927 State Supreme Court decision upholding the 1885 Michigan Civil Rights Statute, and Michigan's 1961-62 Constitutional Convention. The plaque commemorating the Smith-VanderWerp Bill is the program's 39th such marker.

In addition the Michigan Legal Milestones plaque, the events of 1950 are outlined in an article by attorney and Ferris alumnus Steve Savickas that appears in the August issue of *Michigan Bar Journal*.