

# Lunch with Legends: Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



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John F. McBurney, Jr. has worn many hats throughout his career but, no matter what his role, his life's theme is serving others. Born in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1925, Mr. McBurney graduated from high school in 1942, and attended Providence College for a brief period before World War II. Mr. McBurney served in both the Army Air Corps and the Infantry, fighting in France, Germany, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Italy, and Austria, and honored with the Bronze Star and the French Legion of Honor for his courage and valor.



John F. McBurney, Jr., Esq.

Following his distinguished military service, he returned to Rhode Island, graduating from Providence College and earning a teaching degree from Rhode Island College of Education. Mr. McBurney's service continued as a teacher at Pawtucket West High School (now Shea) while running the Collins Electrical Shop. He continued teaching night school at West while attending law school at Boston College, gaining admission to the Bar in 1951.

He initially worked as a solo practitioner in Pawtucket, handling both criminal and civil cases and briefly served as Pawtucket's Assistant City Solicitor. In 1958, he was elected and served as a Rhode Island State Senator, a post he held until 1974 while maintaining his thriving private practice. We spoke with Mr. McBurney about his diverse and notable career, and the following excerpts are from our interview.

*Your long service as a State Senator while sustaining your private practice is remarkable. How did you manage to do both of those things and do them so well for so long?* Extra time – I was no genius. I had to spend a lot of time on cases too, you know, to get ready for court.

*Did you find your two roles, as a lawyer and a legislator, intersected positively?* Oh, I recommend lawyer[s] try for public office...it helps your practice, and you can help the people.

*In the 60 years you've been practicing law, what do you think is the biggest change you've seen in the legal profession or in the practice of law here in Rhode Island?* Well, contributory negligence is out. And, advertising.

*When you say advertising, how has that been a change?* Well, we weren't allowed to advertise until about 1968, I guess. And, I'm death on advertising. I think it's hurt the profession.

*What has been the biggest challenge or hurdle or obstacle of the course of your legal career?* Well, for 16 years, contributory negligence was tough. After that, things got easier.

*What is some of the best advice that you ever received as a lawyer?* [Former Speaker of the House Harry F.] Curvin, who wasn't a lawyer, would advise me: rehearse your case; marry your client completely; and write it out, type it out, and everything. He had a fourth grade education at St. Mary's, but he was pretty, pretty sharp.

*What advice would you give to new lawyers?* You've got to know your case, and you've got to know it as good as the other side, otherwise, you're going to go down.

*What challenges to do you foresee for newer members of the Bar?* Advertising. I would advise them not to do that. And then lately, it's become personal, vindictive, one lawyer against another...we didn't have that in the old days. Everybody got along, even though you were on opposite sides.

*If you had to hire a lawyer to represent you, who would you hire?* Well the sharpest one in my days would be Judge Selya. He knew the law of the case. And, of course, if you're on the other side of Judge Selya, you better have a dictionary with you.

After speaking with John McBurney, soldier, electrician, teacher, lawyer and elected official, we quickly learned that he is the consummate serviceman. Mr. McBurney tends to divert discussion of his accomplishments, as he's every bit as modest as he is uniquely skilled and capable. Notwithstanding his seeming reluctance to accept credit, the authors believe his service to our Bar, our State, and our Country warrants gratitude. To that end, thank you, Mr. McBurney, for all you have done.