

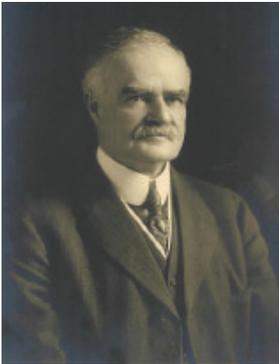


# Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society Corporate Sponsor Feature

**Kerr Russell & Weber, PLC**

## Kerr Russell & Weber: 150 Years and Counting

*provided by Kerr Russell & Weber, PLC*



**James T. Keena**  
(1851 - 1924)



**Clarence A. Lightner**  
(1862 - 1938)



**Walter E. Oxtoby**  
(1876 - 1934)

Since 1874, Kerr Russell has set the standard for innovation in the legal landscape. If you do the math, you know that 2024 marks the firm's 150th anniversary. The firm prides itself on a singular continuous heritage, as James T. Keena is credited with founding the firm in Detroit, shortly after graduating from the University of Michigan's law program. Born in New York in 1850, Keena moved to Detroit at seven years old. He attended Detroit Public Schools, and prior to his legal studies, he served in the U.S. Navy.

Keena's hard work and connections led to a steadily growing practice. By 1906, partners Clarence Lightner and Walter E. Oxtoby placed their names on the front door. Lightner was heavily involved in banking matters and became President of Peoples State Bank of Detroit. For years, he essentially ran the State Board of Bar Examiners overseeing admissions to the Michigan bar. During this time, the firm was known as Keena, Lightner & Oxtoby. When Oxtoby's brother became a partner in 1913, it became Keena, Lightner, Oxtoby & Oxtoby.

Real estate expertise is traceable to the firm's earliest years, and real estate law developed into a mainstay of

the firm's practice. Around 1914, the firm assisted a client in the acquisition and consolidation of various parcels in Dearborn, which became Henry Ford's Rouge Complex. Donald N. Sweeny's addition to the firm in the early 1930s resulted in significant expansion of the firm's real estate practice group. By the 1950s, the firm played a key role in many land development projects in Metro Detroit. Later, the firm was involved in the survival and remodel of

the Fox Theater and David Whitney buildings. Today, the real estate practice serves diverse clients such as municipalities, investors, and developers pursuing projects around Michigan and nationwide.

The banking connections Keena and Lightner initiated over one hundred years ago have endured for decades. Sweeny, a longstanding senior partner of the firm, served Detroit's largest bank, First Wayne National Bank, as its president in the 1930s just before joining the firm. The firm still possesses a sheet of uncut U.S. five-dollar bills carrying Sweeny's signature as bank president, a practice common before enactment of the banking reforms of the Depression era. Building on Keena's, Lightner's, and later Sweeny's base, the firm continued to represent aspects of the savings and loan industry until the 1980s. To this day, Kerr Russell still serves a variety of lending institutions in financial and real estate concerns.

In the 1940s, the firm first began its relationship with the medical and dental professions when Lester Dodd, who joined Keena's firm around 1918, began representing organized medical associations affiliated locally and statewide with the American Medical Association. This led to a growing expertise within the firm involv-



**A. Stewart Kerr**  
(d. May 5, 1990)



**Robert G. Russell**  
(1928 - 1997)



**Richard Weber**

ing medical, dental, and other health care interests. Continuing into the 1970s and 80s, the firm became an early leader in related insurance matters, managed care issues, and the multifaceted group of legal disciplines that ultimately were recognized as the field of health law. In the 1970s, the firm also incorporated (and still serves) what is today one of the largest insurers of professional liability risks in the country. At the time, no mutual insurance company had been formed in Michigan in twenty years. The chosen format became a pattern followed in other states as solutions were sought nationwide for the then-current shortage of certain professional liability coverages. Kerr Russell now proudly represents medical and dental professionals locally and statewide. Consequently, key Michigan health legislation and appellate matters vital to the health care field often directly reflect input from the firm’s attorneys.

Stewart Kerr joined the firm in 1947 after being head of the U.S. Justice Department’s Antitrust Division office for Detroit, where he had successfully prosecuted key antitrust and War Price Act cases during World War II. Kerr was among the founders of the American Bar Association’s Antitrust Law Section in the early 1950s and the State Bar of Michigan’s corresponding group later that decade. He went on to establish an important place for the firm in the complex field of antitrust law. He served on the prestigious U.S. Attorney General’s Antitrust Commission in the mid-1950s and his involvement in antitrust law continued until his retirement in 1985.

Other firm attorneys have followed Kerr to become members of the ABA Section’s national governing council and committees, and chairs of the State Bar’s Antitrust and Trade Regulation Section, including long-

time Kerr Russell member William “Bill” Sankbiel, who joined the firm in the 1970s. Sankbiel was a highly regarded litigator of national reputation, primarily practicing in the areas of complex litigation and antitrust. A fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers and a recipient of the Federal Bar Association’s Cook-Friedman Civility Award, Sankbiel served on Kerr Russell’s Executive Committee for decades.

Bob Russell was another pillar in the firm’s outstanding tradition of trial practice. His many achievements include serving as one of the faculty founders of the Wayne Law Review after graduating with honors from the University of Michigan Law School. During the span of his forty-plus year career, Russell was listed among the counsel of record in nearly every major federal and state court case in the Detroit area. Russell also served as President of the Detroit Bar Association in the early 1970s.

James Keena would likely be astounded by the growth of the law firm he founded. Kerr Russell’s clients now include businesses headquartered in Europe with manufacturing facilities in South America and offshore captive insurance companies located in countries that did not exist in his time. Its expertise has expanded to include areas such as employment and labor law; bankruptcy and restructuring; data privacy; immigration law; estate planning; and taxation. However, the firm’s values remain the same: Kerr Russell’s culture is strong and proud – some would say traditional in work ethic and attention to detail – but undoubtedly contemporary in professional standards and emerging practice areas.



**KERR RUSSELL**

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**150 YEARS**  
**OF LEGAL INNOVATION**

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