A Legal Milestone:
Governor G. Mennon Williams, President Byron J. Brophy, and Judge Raymond W. Starr,
Woodbridge and Helen Gillespie Ferris
Founding, Saving and Building a Great University
Founders Day, August 28, 2014
President David L. Eisler

It is a pleasure to welcome guests from the Michigan Bar as we commemorate the story of how Ferris State University became a public institution. I want to extend my thanks to our faculty, staff, students and community members who have joined us here. It is fitting today’s legal milestone ceremony is on Founders Day, when we celebrate the legacy of Woodbridge and Helen Gillespie Ferris and the 130th anniversary of our institution.

Here at Ferris State University, there are two pivotal events in our history when, without extraordinary efforts by those involved, our institution in all likelihood would not exist and we would not be here today. The first of these is our founding on September 1, 1884 by Woodbridge and Helen Ferris. The second are the events of 1949 and 1950 when Ferris Institute was designated as a state institution, and then survived a fire which destroyed the Old Main building on February 21, 1950.

The theme that ties together our founding with the story of our becoming a state institution is one of people with a vision for the future coming together to make their dreams a reality in the face of extreme adversity. After fire destroyed Ferris’ Old Main building, it would have been easier for all involved to not rebuild. But a school founded to help people from all walks of life better their lives was an inspiring vision shared by many different people whose efforts helped Ferris Institute rise from these ashes that nearly destroyed it.
Much of this story focuses upon G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams, a dynamic Michigan Governor who on May 17, 1949 signed legislation to make Ferris a public institution of higher education, but this was not effective until July, 1950. His subsequent principled stand that this legislation remain in force even after the devastating fire was critical to our survival. Today, G. Mennen Williams Auditorium is one of our most public facilities and is just a short walk from where Old Main once stood.

There are two other people who played critical roles in this story. Michigan Supreme Court Judge and Federal District Court Justice Raymond Starr and Byron Brophy, president of Ferris from 1946 to 1952. Judge Starr understood what a resource Ferris was through personal experience – he was a 1907 graduate of the Ferris Institute, which meant he would have known both Woodbridge and Helen Ferris. President Brophy understood that for its long-term stability, Ferris Institute needed to move beyond its status as a proprietary institution totally dependent upon student tuition. He saw that, together, the Ferris Institute and State of Michigan could create a resource to serve a booming post-war educational need. And indeed it would.

Ferris Institute had previously been approved by the legislature to become a state school in 1943, but the bill was not signed by Harry Kelly, governor at that time. When Soapy Williams was elected governor in the fall of 1948, he and Judge Starr were empowered to act. Gov. Williams had served as an Assistant Attorney General under Raymond Starr and this relationship helped produce a successful outcome when this measure was again passed by the legislature in early 1949, and this time signed into law.

Judge Starr would become Chair of the Ferris Board of Control. His legacy is celebrated on our campus today with the Starr Classroom Building, which fittingly connects to Williams
Auditorium. In 1983 when the official State Bar portrait of Judge Starr was unveiled, Governor Williams, who by then was himself head of the Michigan Supreme Court, said this, “Ray Starr told me many times how he, as a raw lad from the farm up in northern Michigan, had come to Ferris. I’m not sure he had even finished high school. And they trained him up so that he could go on to the University of Michigan Law School. And I think that if it had been a choice, he might have resigned from the district bench of the federal court rather than give up Ferris Institute, because his heart was really in it.”

President Brophy’s foresight and tenacity go beyond Ferris’ designation as a state school. After the fire he did not wait to appoint a committee, develop a task force, or to seek assurances or clarification from Lansing, instead he acted. The next day he famously placed a blackboard in front of the Alumni Building with instructions for faculty, staff, and students. Most importantly his words declared, “Ferris Institute Will Go On.” His actions literally were true leadership under fire.

It took these people working together – President Brophy, Governor Williams, Judge Starr, along with committed members of our campus and local communities, and support from the state – to make the Ferris State University of today a reality. So what we really commemorate today is the shared vision of these public servants. Fittingly, on Founders Day this is a vision we trace back to Woodbridge and Helen Ferris, and the parallels are striking.

After founding this school, Mr. Ferris could have retired with significant achievements under his belt. Like President Brophy, Governor Williams and Judge Starr, he instead took on the challenge of public service, serving two terms as Governor of Michigan and one as United States
Senator. This commitment to elected office lasted literally the remainder of his life. He died in Washington, D.C. while serving as a U.S. Senator in 1928.

Helen Ferris, too, worked for others beyond what was required of her. She was not a figurehead at the Ferris Institute, but a teacher of great skill who built the Institute’s reputation. After her passing, Mr. Ferris described her this way in his eulogy, “If there is a teacher of teachers at the Ferris Institute, it is Helen Gillespie Ferris.”

Woodbridge Ferris believed in the universality of education, offering advice that is familiar to each of us who work here, “My plea in Michigan – and it will be my plea to the last breath I draw, and the last word I speak – is education for all children, all men, and all women of Michigan, all people in all our states all the time.”

Woodbridge was born in a log cabin in upstate New York. Governor Williams was heir to a fortune amassed by his grandfather who founded the Mennen Company, still known today for its personal care products. These were men of different generations with very different backgrounds, but who are indelibly linked in the history of this great institution. It was through working for a common purpose that they were able to forge this shared vision and to overcome circumstances that challenged the best of men.

Truly today we stand here on the shoulders of these giants, whose commitment to education, public service, and a better future created a great public university with now over 135,000 alumni - an institution that has shaped these lives through the dedicated efforts of faculty and staff, and the commitment of a community that has steadfastly supported this university.
On behalf of Ferris State University, our faculty, staff, and students past, present and future, I am honored to accept this commemorative legal milestone, which celebrates the efforts of these extraordinary people to build and save this remarkable school. This is a legacy we honor and celebrate every day through our efforts in behalf of education, the people of Michigan, and our shared, collective future. Thank you so very, very much.