

By [Brian Leaf](#)

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Rockford attorney Thomas Johnson was a gentleman, scholar

ROCKFORD — After hearing him speak, the story goes, people would joke that they wanted it written in their wills that upon death Thomas Johnson would deliver their eulogies.

It is Johnson who is being eulogized by friends and associates. He died Monday at home. He was 73. Johnson was an attorney and partner at [Williams McCarthy](#) in Rockford. A Harvard University Law School graduate, Johnson practiced estate and trust law. He was an Abraham Lincoln expert.

"Tom was not only a top-notch lawyer but also a respected and thoughtful person," said retired U.S. District Judge Philip Reinhard in an email. "While he was not a frequent litigator in court, he was well known in the legal community for his speaking ability and keen wit. He was sought after to serve as a moderator at community and legal meetings as well as a speaker at testimonials and eulogies for fellow lawyers. He was a class act."

Johnson was a Rockford native and 1960 East High School graduate who excelled in debate and oratory.

He graduated from Rockford University in 1964, earned his law degree and served in the Army from 1968-1970. He received the Meritorious Service Medal and on discharge returned to Rockford to begin a 46-year career at Williams McCarthy, including a 15 years as president of the firm.

"He was absolutely a decent human being," said Stephen Balogh, a partner at Williams McCarthy, who considered Johnson a friend and mentor. "I never heard him judge anybody. If you had a complaint, if there was something political going on in the firm, he would listen to all the arguments and make a suggestion. He would never direct. He would make suggestions."

Johnson's influence went beyond Rockford. He was on the Board of Governors for the Illinois State Bar Association. He was chairman of four national commissions of the American Bar Association and at age 33, testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee.

"He called himself a bar junkie," Balogh said.

Robert Lenz calls Johnson a fellow Abraham Lincoln junkie. Both Lenz, a Bloomington attorney, and Johnson were involved with the [Abraham Lincoln Association](#), a scholarly organization, and [The Lincoln Academy of Illinois](#), which bestows laureates to students and Illinois residents, past and present, who have brought honor to the state.

"It's fair to say that Tom was extremely well read," Lenz said. "Some Lincoln scholars would say unless someone has done original research and published 10 books that they aren't really a scholar. But you could call Tom an accomplished amateur scholar, and he would buy that."

Johnson chaired the [Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of Winnebago County](#) and in 2009 wrote a series of articles on Lincoln and Rockford. He was deeply involved in the Abraham Lincoln Courthouse Square project, which celebrated the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth with the dedication of a downtown Rockford park and a monumental bronze bust, "Iron Determination," by John W. McClarey.

Johnson's work was recognized a year later when he was a Rockford Register Star Excalibur award finalist. The Excalibur program recognizes people whose community service and excellence makes a difference in the Rock River Valley.

It was one of many honors Johnson earned over the years. But he wasn't about recognition. Lenz said Johnson, who was chancellor of the Lincoln Academy from 2010 to 2015, was modest.

"He admired Lincoln's human qualities of humility and magnanimity, and I think Tom embodied those things," he said.

Some of Johnson's eulogizers took to social media.

"Mr. Johnson was the personification of a gentleman and a scholar," wrote Christopher Pepe on Facebook. Pepe worked four years worked as an associate at Williams McCarthy.

"Always level headed, sitting tall behind his spotless desk, where nary a file could you find covering the dark brown oak of its surface. He would look at you, without judgement, and allow you the time needed to recount your side of the story, your interpretation of events. It wouldn't take long, but he would inevitably look through his round-framed tortoise shell glasses and steer you to the right answer. Without fail."

Pepe said he remembers Johnson as a simple man who rode an old school bike along the river, someone who could bring calm to a room with a glance or break the ice with a witty quip. He said Johnson was a patient mentor.

"I learned to always treat people with respect and to always listen with care," Pepe wrote. "To not stray into the grey areas, but find guidance in the black and white, for there you could always find the right answer. To never leave your office without your suit jacket on, and to laugh with grace and style with others and



Thomas Johnson, a 2010 Excalibur finalist, was a driving force behind the Abraham Lincoln Courthouse Square project. RRSTAR.COM FILE PHOTO

at yourself."

Memorial services will be announced later. Gifts to The Lincoln Academy of Illinois, One Old State Capital Plaza, Springfield, IL 62701; or Prairie State Legal Services, c/o Administrative Office, 303 N. Main St., Suite 600, Rockford, IL 61101.

Olson Funeral & Cremation Services assisted the family with arrangements.

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