It is the tradition of Western Michigan University’s Thomas M. Cooley Law School to name each entering class after a former justice of a state Supreme Court or of the United States Supreme Court. Today’s entering class is named in honor of the Florida Supreme Court Justice Thomas Douglas.

Thomas Douglas was born at Wallingford, Connecticut, on April 27, 1790. The son of a shoemaker and farmer, he received a public school education, where he was taught reading, writing, grammar and arithmetic. His aunt, who was a teacher also tutored him, providing Douglas educational advantages that he later acknowledged gratefully. Douglas remained in Connecticut and on September 26, 1814, he married Hannah Sanford. The following year the couple moved to Madison, Indiana in search of greater opportunity. There Douglas established a button and tin factory. The young couple also opened a general store. During this period, he also acquainted himself with local leaders, counting as friends Indiana’s first governor, United States senators, and Indiana’s congressional representative.

The financial crisis following the Panic of 1819 undermined the Douglas family fortunes and led Douglas to pursue a legal career in order to pay his debts. He read two hundred pages of law each day, along with an equal number of pages from the bible. In recognition of his hard work, community leaders asked him to run for office as an associate judge. He did so and was successful before he was even licensed to practice law. As a result, Florida’s first Chief Justice began work as a judge before he could even work as a lawyer! Afterward, Douglas continued reading the law and eventually was admitted to the Indiana state bar on November 12, 1822.

Thereafter, Douglas at the suggestion of his mentor, Judge Davis Floyd, who had been appointed by President John Quincy Adams to be a commissioner of land claims in East Florida, traveled to Florida. He found it to his liking and decided to make it his permanent home. He was admitted to practice in Florida on May 28, 1824. His advancement in Florida came at a rapid pace. In 1826, President John Quincy Adams appointed Douglas United States District Attorney for East Florida. He served in this post during six presidential administrations and while serving in this capacity Douglas handled a massive deluge of litigation including 130 claims involving title to millions of acres of land in East Florida.

Because of his strict upbringing, Douglas found St. Augustine’s easygoing atmosphere difficult to accept and sometimes hostile. He held his religious commitments and beliefs firmly, and he judged others by the standards of those beliefs. Especially, Douglas disapproved of alcohol consumption at a time and in a place where drinking to excess formed a way of life for many and he soon learned that danger lurked in the moral condemnation of others. During the first ten years of his residence in Florida, assassins tried to kill him 3 times. The first incident occurred shortly after his arrival, when someone shot into his bedroom during the night. Several years later two similar attempts on his life were also unsuccessful.

In 1845 Florida Governor William D. Moseley appointed Douglas East Florida’s Circuit Court Judge. During the years 1846-1851 East Florida’s circuit court judge served on the supreme court. In 1851 the Florida Supreme Court received an identity separate from the circuit courts. Douglas continued as a circuit judge until 1854 when he was elected to the Supreme Court. During his tenure as a supreme court justice the court maneuvered through a myriad of problems to lay a foundation for the court’s independence and to lend it credibility in the wake of political crisis, personal differences, and many other challenges.

Death from pleurisy cut short Douglas’s second period of service on the Supreme Court. His passing occurred in Jacksonville on September 11, 1855, four months after he fell ill during a trip from Tallahassee to St. Augustine. After receiving news of his death, a local newspaper stated that “He … led a life of astonishing activity and usefulness, and has died in a ripe old age, covered in honors, and bearing the regrets of his fellow citizens.”