Liberty County, Superior Court, State Court and Juvenile Court

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LIBERTY COUNTY CLERK'S OFFICE LEADS WAY IN COURT TECHNOLOGY

I was hired on November 13, 1983 as chief deputy clerk of the Office of the Clerks of Liberty County (i.e., "Clerk's Office), having served previously for almost three years as administrator of the Atlantic Judicial Circuit of Georgia's public defender program and earlier for five years as a high school mathematics educator. I readily realized how technology could be used in the office to automate redundant and laborious clerical tasks and to increase efficiency of work performed by office staff. At the time, to my knowledge, there were less than five superior court clerks' offices in the state that utilized technology and, in those offices, software applications were primarily limited to rudimentary accounting and jury selection.

Liberty County had begun urbanizing as the result of population increases caused primarily by the growth of Fort Stewart. Thus the demand for services from the Clerk's Office grew likewise, yet exponentially. The volume of real estate and court documents being filed in the office was at a rate estimated as 1,200 times greater than in the previous decade. So, I realized, that without development and utilization of technology, office staff could not keep pace and continue to perform clerical duties essential for the local courts to function or to properly and legally record and archive real estate and personal property records unless more and more staff was employed and more office and records storage space was provided.

In 1984, the county commission permitted me to utilize the county commission's recently acquired IBM 3270 computer for selecting juries. The process previously required the clerk to type names of potential jurors on paper, clip with scissors each name from the sheet on which it was type, and to place slips containing "eligible names" into a locked wooden box. The judge and clerk would unlock the box in open court and the judge would "pull" the requisite number of paper slips containing jurors' names from the box. The clerk then had to type the list, with the names of jurors on the list kept in the order drawn. To create a program for selecting juries, I worked with Tailored Business Systems (TBS), a Statesboro company that programmed computer applications for IBM systems.

The first jury was selected by computer in August 1984. The process required 'cranking up' the computer and inserting a disk that 'booted' the jury selection program, which took about 15 minutes. Then, to actually select a jury, parameters had to be entered and the 'start command' executed. It was the first time in the county's or court's history a jury was selected using automation. It took almost an hour to select 100 persons for jury service. Looking back, that was a momentous event in the office's history because it was the springboard for all other technological advancements in the office that lay ahead. The process for selecting a jury now takes less than a minute.

The County Commission soon thereafter purchased an IBM mainframe (System/36) for use by all county offices. Johnny Harris, a Liberty County native and a graduate of Georgia Southern University's technology program, worked with TBS and provided support to the Liberty County Clerk's office. In 1986, Harris later created his own company, Harris Custom Programming (HCP), and acquired TBS's court software. HCP soon developed a plethora of other applications for the office, including accounting, case management, and real estate management, eventually producing a comprehensive computer-based system for running and managing superior court clerks' and other court clerks' offices. Every clerical task was automated except capturing images of documents for archival purpose, which still required microfilming each page of every document filed in the office. In 2004, I partnered with HCP to create one of the state's first local-area-networks (LANs) for clerks' offices enabling capturing and storing of digital images of all court and land records.

Bob Wilkinson, a Coastal Utilities (now CenturyLink) marketing specialist, and I collaborated almost 20 years ago to develop one of the nation's first court websites, which I have maintained since. The website (www.libertyco.com) provides a plethora of online services—including online access to real estate (deeds, liens, and plats) and Uniform Commercial Code records; local court documents (superior, state, and magistrate court), court calendars and dockets, juror information, and directories; office services; and many other invaluable and informative resources. From the website, deed and liens and civil petitions and pleadings for superior, state, and magistrate courts can be electronically filed with the clerk.

The office also maintains a Facebook site, *Liberty County Clerk of Courts*. As a service to citizens and the legal community, I continually update the site with notices for jurors and other timely information about the office and local courts. Persons who "like us on Facebook' are immediately able to receive notices about local court events and to find out what is happening in the local courts.

In 2013, Replitek, an information systems company, created JusticePath, an application that enables users to view on an iPad or iPhone local court schedules, calendars, and dockets. JusticePath can be downloaded for free from the Apple store. The JusticePath information system is also used in the Liberty County Justice Center to provide on television monitors the same information to the public and legal community.

The office strives to be one of most efficient clerk's offices anywhere. Creation and utilization of technology has been vital to our success. It has enabled us to keep pace with growth and to operate with proficiency, while keeping costs to taxpayers minimal. However, what has made us so successful is that, during the past three decades, we have been blessed with great employees who are willing to work hard and, using technology provided to them, to professionally and proficiently do all the work that has to be done.

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