The Court Archive:
Technological Improvements

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October 2023

Everyone in the court system has dealt with timesaving technological advancements, including Zoom court, work-from-home laptops, and perhaps even ChatGPT. In the nineteenth century, circuit clerks were always looking for ways to save time in preparing the many writs, summonses, subpoenas, and fee bills needed for the smooth running of the court's business.

Cephas Arms was elected circuit clerk for Knox County in 1856. The growing trend among circuit clerks was to order pre-printed documents for clerks to enter names and dates only, rather than writing the same formulaic legal document over and over and over. Arms ordered pre-printed writs with blanks for names and dates totaling $75, which he paid for himself. Arms submitted the bill to the Knox County Board of Supervisors to be reimbursed, but the county refused to pay because the law allowed the clerk a fee on issuing writs and other process and that he is paid for the labor of preparing them and must perform it. The County also questioned whether pre-printed legal documents were "stationery" under the statute.

Arms sued Knox County to recover the $75 and other expenses not related to the pre-printed forms. One of Arms's witnesses was a former circuit clerk for nearby Henderson County. He testified "I have assisted the clerk of Knox Circuit Court for five or six terms; that the said blanks in said bill of plaintiff are necessary for said clerk; in order to transact the business of the office, it is necessary that the clerk should be furnished with blanks, and he could not do the business of the office without them; the saving of paper in getting blanks, would more than pay for blanks or printing of blanks; one man with blanks, can perform more than ten men without blanks."

The jury found for Arms, and Knox County appealed the decision to the Illinois Supreme Court in *County of Knox v. Arms*, 22 Ill. 175 (1859). In his opinion, Justice Sidney Breese affirmed in part and reversed in part. Justice Breese examined the statute in question, which called for the county to pay for "articles of stationery, necessary for their respective courts.…" Breese continued by defining "stationery" and since stationery included quills, inkstands, and paper, then it must include fill-in-the-blank pre-printed documents. Breese added that if the clerk can save time and labor, the county shouldn't complain. The Supreme Court affirmed the judgment for Arms but reversed the decision pertaining to payment—Arms can be paid directly from county treasury funds; he did not need to have a writ of execution issued.

While many historians consider railroads and farm inventions as major time savers for the transportation revolution and agricultural economy, something as simple as a pre-printed document saved significant time for clerks, lawyers, judges, and other professional jobs of the nineteenth century.