

Brief History of the Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission

The Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission was established in 2007 to assist and advise the Supreme Court of Illinois in acquiring, collecting, preserving, and cataloging documents, artifacts, and information relating to the Illinois judiciary. Long-time Jenner & Block attorney Jerold Solovy was named the Chair of the nine-member Commission. Successive chairs included John Simon in 2011, Governor Jim Thompson in 2012, and currently Joseph A. Power Jr. in 2020.

The Commission was not staffed until 2009, hiring an Executive Director, Director of Administration, Director of History Programs, and Director of Communication. One of the first activities of the Commission was to create the George N. Leighton Award, giving the award to George Leighton himself. The next awards were given to former Illinois Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Miller, U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, attorney Thomas Sullivan, federal judge William Bauer, and the Theater School of DePaul University.

Much of the early work of the Commission focused on oral histories. Commission staff captured oral histories of retired Illinois Supreme Court and appellate court justices, circuit judges, and prominent attorneys across the state. The Commission also began partnering with other institutions, most notably the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, to present the History on Trial series. The Commission produced the Retrial of Mary Surratt, the Insanity Retrial of Mary Lincoln, the Habeas Corpus Hearings of Joseph Smith, the Alton School Cases, and the Chicago Black Sox. Each of the productions occurred in both Springfield and Chicago to large crowds and widespread acclaim. The Insanity Retrial of Mary Lincoln was even nominated for a regional Emmy award.

More early work centered on the creation of several traveling exhibits that toured the entire state to educate the public about the judicial system, court cases, and important people that worked within the Illinois legal system for the common good.

The Commission also focused on publications. In addition to staff writing articles for law reviews and historical journals, they also published two books. The first book was *Prairie Justice: A History of Illinois Courts under French, English, and American Law* in 2016. This book highlighted the development of law in Illinois from the 1720s to the 1880s. The second book was *Adjudicating Illinois: Justices of the Illinois Supreme Court* in 2018. This book provides short biographies on all 117 people, as of 2018, who had served on Illinois's highest court. With several new members on the Court since 2018, this book is due for a second edition. The Commission also authors a short article on Illinois legal history in the Supreme Court's monthly e-newsletter, *Courts Connect*.

In addition to publications, the staff of the Commission are frequently invited to be keynote speakers at bar association meetings, history conferences, MCLE programs, civic groups, and schools that help to promote the work of the Commission and convey the importance of legal history.

Another major activity for the Commission has been preservation and conservation. The Commission maintains a small archive and has collected photographs, documents, post cards, and other ephemera related to the Illinois judiciary.

In 2022, the Commission received a federal grant to digitize all of the Illinois Supreme Court case files from 1818 to 1865, about 8,000 cases in total. This work is largely completed with staff currently in the final stages of creating the user interface. At the same time, the Commission hired additional staff to begin conservation work on case files after 1865. Conservation includes hydrating, flat-filing, cleaning, and repairing documents in order to eventually digitize them as well.

Staff of the Commission have become experts on the Illinois Supreme Court Building. In addition to serving in an advisory capacity for the major restoration of the Building in 2014, the staff frequently leads tour groups through the Building to show people a hidden jewel in Springfield. Tours highlight the architecture, artwork, and history of the 1908 structure.

These tours and previous traveling exhibits led to the creation of a Learning Center in 2023. The Learning Center in the Supreme Court Building provides an experience for visitors to see how the judicial system in Illinois operates and how it impacts the lives of Illinois citizens and to learn about important cases in the Court's history, including a controversial case display that allows visitors to agree or disagree with the Court's decision. The Learning Center gained national exposure as other state supreme courts and federal courts have solicited advice from Commission staff about their own planned educational centers.

The work of the Commission is important. Preserving legal history is preserving the state's history. Legal history encompasses all of history, as economic history, family history, social history, and political history are found in court cases in all 102 Illinois counties.