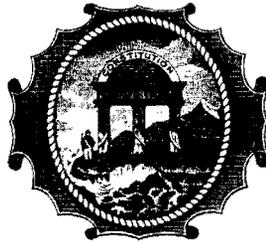


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EASTERN JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF GEORGIA

March 21, 2012

Editor, Savannah Morning News

There was a time when life was not so different from that portrayed in the fictional town of Mayberry on the old "Andy Griffith Show." The sharing of information about our neighbors was carried out primarily in the barbershop, church, courthouse or diner. The information discussed was about who had a baby, who was sick, who was visiting whom, and how the local high school sports team was doing.

Times have changed. Within minutes any law abiding person can find volumes of information about all of us on the internet. The lawless can find that information and more. They can be well on the way to stealing your identity before you know it is in jeopardy.

Each year I am asked to put more court documents on the internet. My response is always the same, "Not as long as I am Clerk of Superior Court." Court records are public records except those held confidential by Georgia law, like adoptions, and those things specifically sealed by a judge. While I fully support the public's access to public records I sometimes shake with fear at the information disclosed therein. Within minutes a person could have your full name, address, date of birth, driver's license number, account numbers, credit card numbers, social security number, the bank you primarily use, a listing of your assets and liabilities not to mention unsubstantiated inflammatory comments that may be listed in a court action. All you need is one traffic ticket and one divorce.

The legislature made it a misdemeanor to include account numbers and social security numbers on any documents that are open for public inspection. While most attorneys are very good at not including these items, the proliferation of pro se filings has resulted in much more confidential information being disclosed. We, in Chatham County, do not have the computer software to redact confidential information nor can we obscure the information on the original document without altering a public record and committing a crime ourselves.

Record keeping is moving to a digital world and the courts are following the trend. Several years ago I stopped printing books of real estate transactions because of the expense and the lack of room to store paper documents. Last year was the first full year of electronic filing of child support cases. This resulted in a positive impact on both space and budget which was quick and dramatic. We have also scanned all court pleadings for the last several years as part of our disaster recovery plan and in preparation to becoming a paper on demand office. But these actions have also resulted in an increased demand to have those documents displayed over the internet. Last year nearly two thousand four hundred pieces of paper were filed with this office each day. Our library of images now numbers over seven million.

Because you elected me custodian of your records I pledged to safely keep your records. They are indeed much safer now than when they resided only in paper form. Part of that safety is to provide public access while maintaining as much security over your personal information as the law allows. Yes, someone could possibly steal your identity by coming to the courthouse but I will not allow people living anywhere in the world to easily use your local records to steal your identity from the comfort of their home.

Each day various background reporting companies are in this courthouse and courthouses across the country gathering information for their clients. Sometimes that information is reported incorrectly, is not complete or is not updated in a timely manner. Every state should take steps to compel the reporting agencies to disseminate accurate information and hold them accountable to the citizens if they do not.

Daniel W. Massey