

City's oldest law firm begun in 1865 by a Union officer

BY CHRISTIAN CONTE
STAFF WRITER

JACKSONVILLE — After serving as a Union officer during the Civil War, Col. Horatio Bisbee chose Jacksonville, where he was stationed briefly during the war, to open his own law firm in 1865.

Despite the obvious setback of being a Yankee in a Southern city, Bisbee thrived in Jacksonville, establishing himself as one of the best lawyers in the state and serving as U.S. district attorney, a member of Congress and as president of the Jacksonville Bar Association.

One hundred and forty-eight years after his arrival the firm - Bedell, Dittmar, DeVault, Pillans & Coxe PA, as it is now known - is the oldest in the state.

While the legal industry has changed dramatically in the last two decades, with large regional and national firms buying up small boutique firms throughout the nation and in Jacksonville, the Bidell firm is one of four based in Jacksonville that have been practicing law continuously for more than 100 years. Marks Gray PA is 114 years old. Rogers Towers PA is 108 years old and Moseley, Prichard, Parrish, Knight & Jones PA is 107 years old.

All four of those firms have tried famous and infamous cases, their partners have served as civic leaders, and, while the world has changed dramatically around them, these firms have all remained close to their roots.

Peter Goplerud, the dean at Florida Coastal School of Law, said law firms with that type of history are rare in any city, much less four of them in a city of Jacksonville's size.

"In today's legal profession with the changes that have gone on it's remarkable for a firm to have that kind of a history," Goplerud said.

But it's not a surprise to some of the partners of these long standing firms, including Jim Moseley, of Moseley, Prichard, Parrish, Knight & Jones PA.

"Jacksonville is the perfect place for old time firms to continue existing," Moseley, who started as a law clerk at the firm in 1959, said. "It's the type of people who practice in Jacksonville. They seem to get along with each other."

Charles Pillans, a director and one of the longest tenured attorneys at the Bedell firm, said Jacksonville's strength as a legal community can be traced back to its days as the economic epicenter of Florida.

For much of the 20th century and up until their acquisitions to companies in other states in the '80s and '90s, Florida's three largest banks and its largest insurance companies were based in Jacksonville.

Even after their departure, several of the Jacksonville's oldest law firms have been able to maintain their independent identity, but John DeVault at the Bedell firm said it hasn't been easy as more large law firms are choosing to try their own cases instead of farming them out to boutique firms like his.

Gerald Weedon, the managing partner at Marks Gray PA that was founded in 1899, said that firm has evolved in its areas of practice over the years to meet the evolving needs of the community.

One of the founding attorneys of Moseley, Prichard, Parrish, Knight & Jones PA came to Jacksonville from Brunswick, Ga. in 1906 to



JAMES CRICHTON

John A. DeVault III and Charles P. Pillans, III of Bedell, Dittmar, DeVault, Pillans and Coxe, PA.

serve as the legal counsel for Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. One hundred and seven years later, the firm still does work for large railroad companies CSX Corp. (NYSE: CSX), Norfolk Southern (NYSE: NSC) and Amtrak. The firm also started doing maritime work before World War I and still does, with Crowley Maritime as one of its clients.

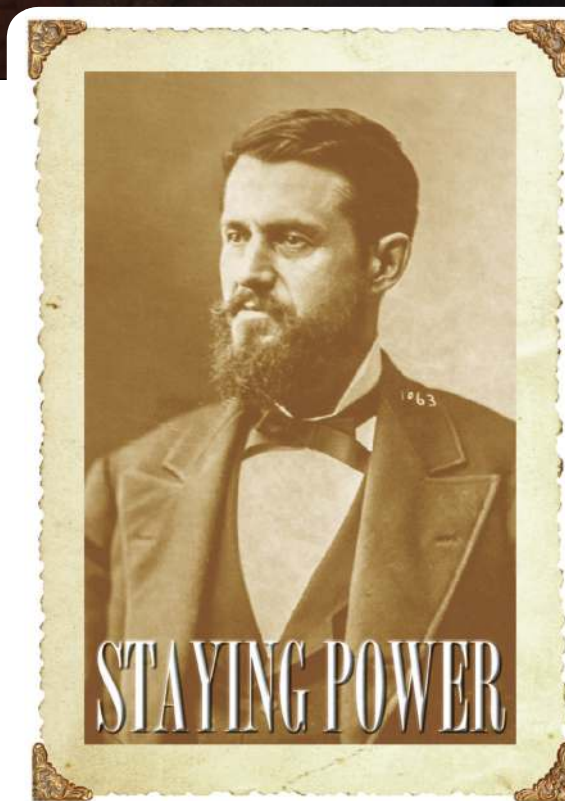
Firms as old as the four in Jacksonville are rare, and the lawyers who work at those firms are proud of their heritage. All of them have photos on the walls and keep some of the time honored traditions that started with their founders.

At the Bedell firm hangs portraits of George Bedell, who joined Col. Bisbee to create Bisbee & Bedell in 1898, and the second generation of Bedells - Chester and Nathan - who were managing partners and mentors at the firm for decades. Because Chester Bedell never actually obtained a law degree, and instead learned the profession from his father, he never had a law diploma to hang in his office.

Because their mentor had nothing to hang, DeVault and Pillans never felt right about hanging their own diplomas, and neither have any of the firm's other lawyers, to this day.

Rogers Towers, which was founded in 1905, is the largest of the four firms with a total of 81 attorneys in seven offices.

"Our longevity results from a culture that val-



ues relationships, service to the community and a commitment to professional excellence and integrity," said Fred Franklin, the managing partner of the firm. "While we are Jacksonville's largest law firm, we continue to maintain a strong family ethic in everything we do."

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