

# Welcome to Georgia's Court System

Through its roles of interpreting law, administering justice, and regulating disputes, Georgia's Judicial Branch serves the state daily.

Every day our lives are affected by the business that is conducted throughout the judicial branch. The decisions that are made, both at the trial court and appellate levels, impact the citizens of Georgia.



## Did You Know?

There are two levels of court in Georgia: TRIAL COURTS and APPELLATE COURTS. Each court's jurisdiction – the power to hear and determine a case – is outlined in the



Find out more about your court system inside!!

Yet few citizens are familiar with the basic functions and responsibilities of the state's courts, the judges who preside over them, and the various professionals who work to ensure the business of the judiciary is fairly and efficiently carried out.

Georgia's courts hear both criminal and civil cases. Criminal proceedings are brought against those who are believed to have broken the law; civil matters involve disputes between individuals or corporations.

# Who's @ the Courthouse

The complex nature of the state's judicial system requires the expertise of many professionals whose roles are essential for the judiciary to function efficiently and properly. Here are a few of those professionals you are likely to encounter at your county courthouse.

**Court Reporter**  
records testimony at trials or in depositions.

**Judge**  
presides over cases and makes rulings based on evidence presented; renders verdicts in some cases.

**Court Clerk**  
preserves and maintains the records of the court.

**The Jury**  
Citizens are sometimes called upon to serve on juries for both criminal and civil trials. The jury's responsibility is to listen to testimony and arguments and consider evidence presented by each side in a case. The jury must determine guilt (criminal trial) or liability (civil trial) and pass sentence, if appropriate.

**Sheriff's Deputy**  
provides security for the courthouse and maintains order in the courtroom.

**Attorney**  
Represents the interest of a client in a case.

**PROSECUTORS**  
(District Attorney or Solicitor)  
Acts on behalf of the state in prosecuting those believed to have broken the law.

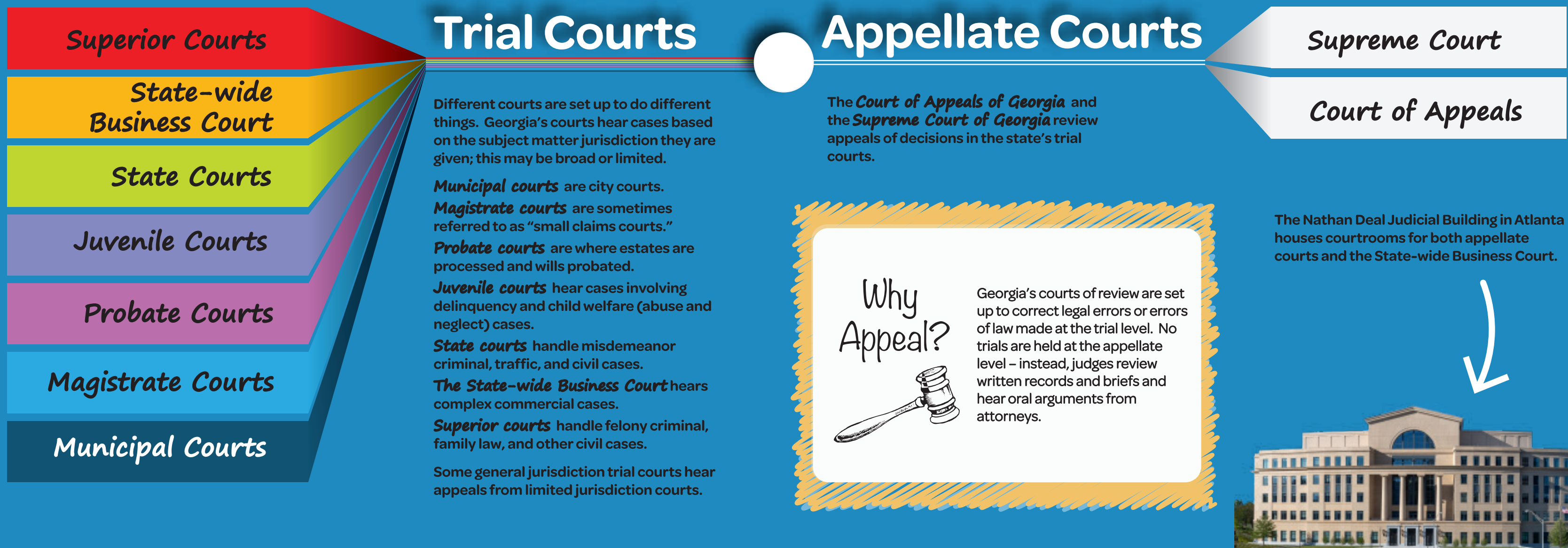
**PLAINTIFF'S ATTORNEY**  
Advocates for a person who brings a case to civil court.

**DEFENSE ATTORNEY**  
Advocates for persons accused of committing a crime or respondent in a civil case. Indigent defendants, those with limited financial resources, may be eligible for a PUBLIC DEFENDER.

**Court Administrator**  
manages the business and daily operation of the court.

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# What Do The Courts Do?



Trial Courts					Appellate Courts			
Municipal Courts	Magistrate Courts	Probate Courts	Juvenile Courts	State Courts	State-wide Business Court	Superior Courts	Court of Appeals	Supreme Court
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small Claims (\$15,000 or less)</li> <li>Violations of city ordinances</li> <li>Issuance of criminal warrants</li> <li>Preliminary hearings</li> <li>Traffic violations in city limits</li> <li>370 courts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small Claims (\$15,000 or less)</li> <li>Minor criminal offenses</li> <li>County ordinance violations</li> <li>Preliminary hearings</li> <li>Arrest &amp; search warrants</li> <li>Check fraud</li> <li>159 courts, each county has a magistrate court</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wills, administration of estates, appointments of guardians, involuntary hospitalizations</li> <li>Marriage &amp; weapons carry licensing</li> <li>Traffic in some counties</li> <li>159 Courts, each county has a probate court</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delinquent juveniles under age 18</li> <li>Child in need of services, abused, neglected, emancipation proceedings</li> <li>Juvenile traffic cases</li> <li>159 courts, each county has a juvenile court.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Misdemeanor violations - traffic &amp; civil actions</li> <li>Felony preliminary hearings</li> <li>Review limited jurisdiction court decisions</li> <li>73 counties have state courts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Over 17 statutorily-defined subject matters, including those arising under:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Limited Liability Company Act</li> <li>The Limited Liability Partnership Act</li> <li>The Uniform Commercial Code</li> <li>The Georgia Business Corporation Code, among others.</li> </ul> </li> <li>One court</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Felonies</li> <li>Divorce proceedings</li> <li>Title to land, equity</li> <li>Juveniles who commit serious felonies</li> <li>Correct errors from county courts</li> <li>159 courts, each county has a superior court</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appellate jurisdiction over lower courts in cases in which the Supreme Court has no appellate jurisdiction</li> <li>15 judges</li> <li>5 panels of 3 judges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reviews cases involving:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State court of last resort</li> <li>Death Penalty and murder</li> <li>Constitutionality of law</li> <li>Election contests</li> <li>Certiorari review of Court of Appeals</li> <li>Habeas Corpus</li> </ul> </li> <li>9 Justices</li> </ul>

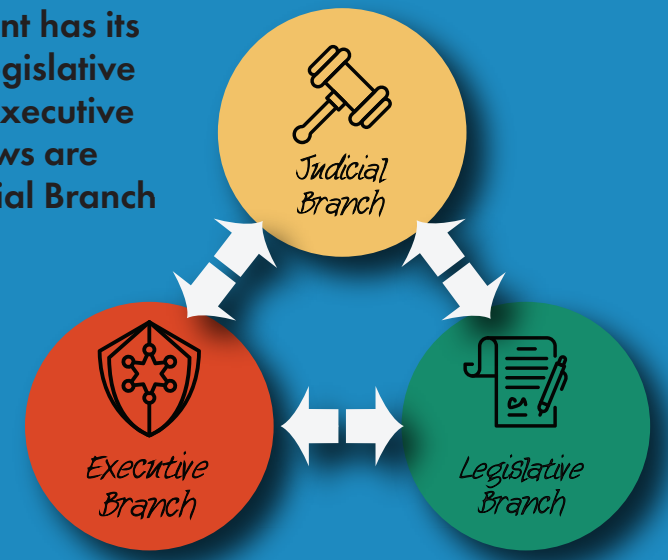
# Georgia's Court System

Just like the United States government, Georgia has three branches of government – Legislative, Executive, and Judicial. "The Third Branch," as the judiciary is often called, is an equal participant in the checks-and-balances system of government.

## Judicial Circuits

For purposes of administration in the Superior and Juvenile courts, the state of Georgia is divided into 50 Judicial Circuits. Each circuit is made up of at least one county. Some circuits are made up of many counties.

Each branch of government has its particular function. The Legislative Branch makes laws. The Executive Branch makes sure the laws are being followed. The Judicial Branch interprets the laws.



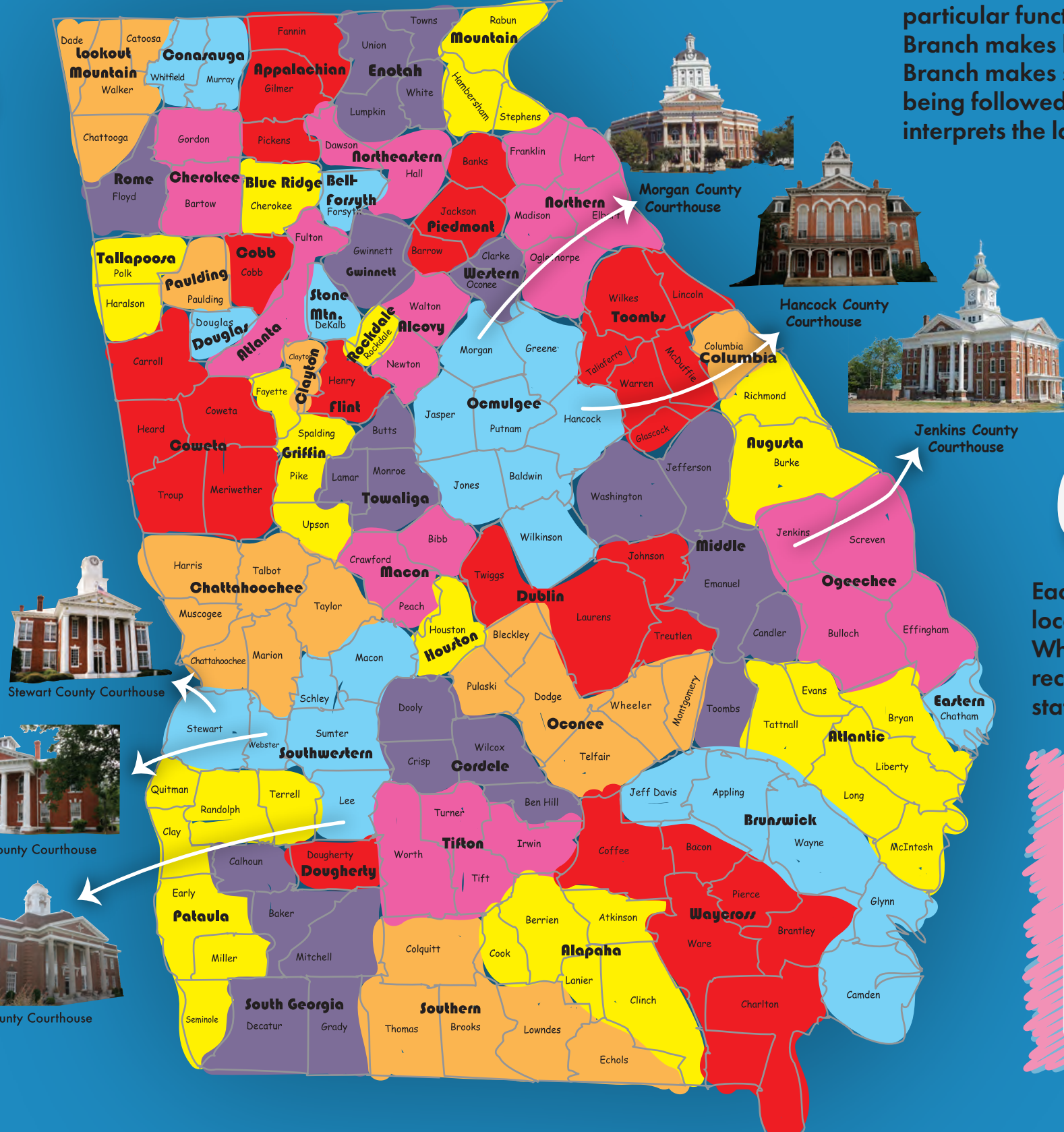
**About Your Circuit**  
Use the state map at right to answer these questions:

I live in the \_\_\_\_\_ Circuit.

There are \_\_\_\_\_ counties in my Circuit.

How many Circuits have only one county? \_\_\_\_\_

Which Circuit has the most counties? \_\_\_\_\_



## Courthouses

Each of Georgia's 159 counties has a courthouse located in the city that serves as its county seat. While many counties have built new facilities in recent years, some of the courthouses around the state were built in the 1800s and are still being used.

**Why are there Judicial Circuits?**  
Originally judges would "ride the circuit" – a wide area made up of many counties – visiting each county seat to hear cases.

**How are Circuits Named?**  
Circuit names come from many sources: many are named for a county within the circuit, while others are named for rivers or other landmarks. Many have names derived from Native American culture.

**About Your Courthouse**

The courthouse for my county is located in: \_\_\_\_\_

It was built in this year: \_\_\_\_\_

Its architectural style is: \_\_\_\_\_

# Who Are Georgia's Judges?

There are approximately 1,500 judges that serve the State of Georgia. From Municipal court judges to Supreme Court justices, Georgia's judges come from all walks of life. Many of the men and women who serve on the bench are native Georgians. Others have moved here from different states or from other countries. The Justices of the Supreme Court of Georgia (below) have a variety of backgrounds and interests.

## Judicial Selection

A person can become a judge in one of two ways: **APPOINTMENT** or **ELECTION**.

**APPOINTMENT** – The Governor may appoint a qualified candidate to fill a vacancy on the appellate courts, superior court, or state court. To remain on the bench, an appointed judge must run for the office in future elections.

**ELECTION** – A sitting judge must run for re-election at the end of each term of office. Challengers may run against the incumbent for the seat. If a judge is retiring at the end of a term, the seat is considered "open," and a new judge will be elected from the announced candidates.

**Judicial Elections**

Most judges in Georgia run for office in elections which are nonpartisan, meaning candidates are not affiliated with any political party.

Justices of the Supreme Court and judges of the Court of Appeals are elected to six-year terms. Judges of the Superior, State, Probate, and Magistrate courts serve four-year terms.

**Justice Verda Colvin**  
Previously served on the Georgia Court of Appeals. Graduated from UGA School of Law.

**Justice Carla Wong McMillian**  
First Asian American to serve on a state's highest court in Southern United States. Previously served on the Georgia Court of Appeals. Born and raised in Augusta.

**Justice John Ellington**  
Previously served on the Court of Appeals. Lives on a family farm in South GA. Is an avid sportsman and enjoys agricultural pursuits.

**Justice Shawn Ellen LaGruta**  
Over 20 years of trial experience. Initiated and presided over Fulton's "My Journey Matters," a pilot probation program.

**Justice Andrew Pinson**  
Earned two degrees from UGA, which is known as being a "Double Dawg." Served as a Solicitor General of Georgia.

**Justice Charlie Bethel**  
Former State Senator and Dalton City Council Member. An avid beekeeper and enjoys visiting national parks and battlefields.

**Presiding Justice Nels Peterson**  
Earned J.D. from Harvard Law. Served as GA's first Solicitor General.

**Chief Justice Michael Boggs**  
Former State Representative and trial court judge. Founded Waycross Judicial Circuit Drug Court.

**Justice Sarah Warren**  
Worked in the White House. Argued a case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

## What Do Judges Do?



The judge's role in a **TRIAL COURT** is to review legal rulings about the law and determine admissibility of evidence as it is presented. During a **BENCH TRIAL**, the judge hears evidence then determines guilt and sentencing.

**APPELLATE JUDGES** must review materials from cases that have been tried in the trial courts and determine if legal errors have occurred and if a new trial is warranted.

**Who Are Your Judges?**

Superior Court: _____	Probate Court: _____
State Court: _____	Magistrate Court: _____
Juvenile Court: _____	Municipal Court: _____