Litchfield Hills Judge Diane Blick, left, and Shelton Chief Clerk Lori Michalak help revise probate forms during a meeting of the procedures review committee (see page 10).
Dear Colleagues,

After a disappointing end to the legislative session in June, we have used the summer to build a strategy for restoring general fund support for the Probate Courts. Even though the 2016 legislative session is still five months away, it’s not too early to formulate the next steps in our campaign to help executive and legislative leaders better understand the vital responsibilities of our courts and the need for fair, reliable and sustainable funding.

To start us down that path, I wrote an opinion piece in early summer in which I listed our objections to the massive increase in fees on decedents’ estates (see page 12). Several newspapers published the Op-Ed, and it generated numerous articles, radio and television spots and an editorial in The Hartford Courant. Continued efforts are needed to keep heightening awareness of the issue.

Next came a meeting of the Probate Assembly’s public information committee to discuss a communications strategy for judges. Committee members will be composing a template opinion piece for dissemination by judges to local media outlets. The committee is updating the display panels to help judges educate community groups about the Probate Courts. A central theme of the committee’s work is encouraging fellow judges to discuss the new revenue scheme during appearances at senior fairs, libraries and other venues. The committee will also assist judges in arranging meetings with legislators on a regional basis to call more attention to our funding challenges. Look for more information on these initiatives in the coming months.

We also need to tap into the organizations and advocacy groups whose interests overlap with ours. These groups include the local chapters of AARP, The Arc and the National Alliance on Mental Illness, as well as Naugatuck-based Guardian Ad Litem Services, health care facilities, the statewide and local bar associations and legal aid. These groups represent, work with or share interests with some of our court users, and by joining forces with them we hope to promote our cause in a more visible way.

Meanwhile, we’re monitoring several sources, formal and informal, to intimately understand how the budget cuts are affecting court users and our system. We are reviewing the impact of cuts on the kinship and respite funds for guardians and on truancy programs. The impact of fee increases on individual estates, problems with fee payment compliance and comments from court users are also of great interest.

All of you in the courts – staff and judges – are indispensable partners in our effort, too. I ask that you continue to speak with your legislators about our funding as we all work toward capturing not only their attention but also their commitment to returning Connecticut to the overwhelming majority of states that recognize the duty to fund their probate courts.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Planning Committee Tackles Assembly Bylaws Revisions

A lingering question has tainted the organizational structure of the Probate Assembly: Is the assembly a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, as its bylaws have stated, or is it a state entity, due to its creation by state statute?

The assembly’s planning committee, with the bylaws committee, has settled the matter by recommending that the assembly confirm its status as a state entity. The assembly voted on June 24 to amend the bylaws to reflect that status and adopt other revisions to the bylaws proposed by the planning committee.

“Our feeling is much of the assembly won’t notice a difference in how the assembly carries out its business,” says Judge Michael Brandt, chair of the planning committee, which has spent 10 months reviewing the bylaws and discussing proposed amendments. “The changes clarify that the Probate Assembly’s organizational structure is consistent with its status as a state entity.”

The bylaws revisions include the following:

- The assembly and its committees will follow the protocols of the state Freedom of Information Act by providing public notice of meetings and making minutes available. Meeting notices are posted with the Secretary of the State and on ctprobate.gov, and minutes are posted on ctprobate.gov.
- Funding for the Probate Assembly, including money to support the work of the committees, comes through the Probate Court Administration Fund and is subject to the state budget process. The treasurer of the assembly continues to manage the assembly budget, while PCA processes the invoices. The assembly no longer collects dues from its members.
- Other changes to the bylaws include reducing the quorum needed to conduct assembly business from 50 percent of members to 40 percent; ending term limits for committee chairs and members; identifying the quarter, instead of the month, in which quarterly Probate Assembly meetings are held; and amending or removing obsolete bylaws.
- In a related step, judges have formed a nonprofit entity to pay for governmental relations and social activities using dues collected from members. The entity, the Connecticut Probate Judges Association, will operate separately from the Probate Assembly.

“The changes clarify that the Probate Assembly’s organizational structure is consistent with its status as a state entity.”

Judge Michael Brandt

“Many of the changes were needed, no question,” assembly President-Judge Sydney Elkin says. “The changes should not affect the general operation of the assembly, but they probably will make things a little easier for the treasurer and for the assembly as a whole.”

Some judges questioned the need for the new financial mechanisms and the formation of the nonprofit entity, Judge Brandt says. “Yet, given the concerns about the assembly structure that state auditors raised during their recent review of the Probate Courts, many judges agreed that the revisions address the concerns in the most effective way,” he says.

He credits Judge Elkin with reconstituting the planning committee to review the bylaws and formulating a plan for the future of the Probate Assembly.

“At Judge Elkin’s suggestion, the committee members thoroughly reviewed the bylaws and sought legal advice on the status of the assembly as a legal entity and how best to reform or create the separate legal entity,” says Judge Brandt.

“The guidance from Attorney Barbara Lindsay resulted in recommendations that the committee
brought to the entire assembly for continued
discussion and ultimate approval,” he added.
The bylaws will be republished as amended
and revised, concluding the immediate work of
the planning committee. Serving on the
committee with Judge Brandt, of the East
Haven-North Haven court, are Litchfield Hills
Judge Diane Blick, Fairfield Judge Daniel
Caruso, Housatonic Judge Martin Landgrebe,
Newington Judge Robert Randich, Milford-
Orange Judge Beverly Streit-Kefalas and
Wallingford Judge Philip Wright, Jr.

COURT HAPPENINGS

CMS Updated to Reflect New Fee Structure Due to Budget Changes

Eleventh-hour revisions
to the state budget, which included
changes in the way the
Probate Courts bill for some
decedents’ estates, required
some nimble action by the
courts’ information
technology department.

As the legislative session
came to a close on June 30, it
was clear that lawmakers
were standing by their
decision to cut general fund
support for the Probate
Courts and make up much of
the money by increasing fees
on large estates of over $2
million. By then, George
Fernandes, manager of
information technology, and
his staff had updated CMS to
incorporate the new fee
structure for some estates
filed on or after July 1, 2015,
the start of the new 2015-
2016 fiscal year.

When the General
Assembly reconvened on
June 30 in a special session to
implement the budget,
however, lawmakers chose an
effective date based on date
of death on or after Jan. 1,
2015, for the fee changes for
large estates.

“It wasn’t our expectation
that the fee change would be
retroactive; we had no
warning,” Probate Court
Administrator Paul J.
Assembly and the Governor
signed the budget bill hours
before the new fiscal year
began on July 1, which
required us to make big
changes in the CMS
program.”

The fee change for
decedents’ estates applies
only to estates in which the
basis for costs, not the gross
taxable estate, is more than
$2 million. Most estates are
not affected by the change,
and billing for estates under
the threshold continues in the
normal course.

While the IT team was
reprogramming CMS for the
second time, courts
suspended billing for large
estates. On July 28, IT staff
deployed the latest CMS
version, 6.6.0.0. It
incorporates the new
effective date of Jan. 1 and
can also generate
supplemental invoices for
affected estates that had
already been billed.

“With the CMS
programming changes now
complete, courts have
resumed billing estates over
$2 million,” George says.
The CMS calculate tool can
help court staff determine the
basis for costs for an estate,
and the IT department is
available to work with courts
that need to send out
supplemental invoices.
CLERKS' CORNER

Message from the President of the
Connecticut Association of Probate Clerks (CAPC)

Dear Fellow Clerks,

I hope everyone has enjoyed the summer and was able to take some vacation time to get away or relax at home. Where does the time go? It seems like we were just at our annual meeting, honoring retirees and announcing our scholarship winner. Now, our October meeting is just around the corner.

Although there is nothing new to report about the state budget or other recent pursuits or interests of clerks, it is never too early to think about next year. As always, if you have any questions, concerns or ideas, please feel free to contact me, CAPC Vice President Evan Brunetti or any other board member. We are always here to listen and help if we can.

Upcoming CAPC meetings are being planned as I write this. The Shelton court will host our Oct. 7 meeting at Vazzy’s Cucina in Shelton. Because this is a closed meeting, we will have the educational portion of the meeting first. Once the speakers have left, the business meeting will take place. Judge Fred Anthony (and a possible co-speaker) will talk about the firearms law and estates that include firearms.

The Simsbury Regional and Madison-Guilford courts have volunteered to co-host our Dec. 8 meeting, which will be at the Pond House in West Hartford’s Elizabeth Park. The educational component is still being discussed, but Ellington Judge James Purnell will be on hand with his keyboard to provide holiday music for our enjoyment, as I mentioned in my previous letter. I understand that the Pond House is quite the place, with a scrumptious menu and views of the park – a perfect setting for a holiday meeting. Open to members and non-members, the meeting is well attended, and its date in early December kicks off the holiday season. Hope to see you all there!

We need volunteers to host meetings next year. We’re also looking for new ideas for the educational component and for guest speakers. As always, I encourage your attendance at our meetings, Probate Assembly meetings and budget committee meetings. Watch your email inbox for news about these events and mark your calendars.

Sincerely,

Patricia Saviano
Transitions

A career winds down: Ann Brennan retires Oct. 1 after 10 years as a PCA computer training specialist. Ann, who provided instruction and support to the courts in the use of Laserfiche, is proud of her work creating a digital archive of court documents. She also spearheaded the records preservation project, which made probate records since 1921 available from a computer desktop at the touch of a button.

Another highlight was coordinating probate documents for the Office of the Chief State’s Attorney as it investigated a funeral director who misrepresented assets of decedents at several Probate Courts. “Due to the diligence of judges and courts, the chief state’s attorney’s office was successful in prosecuting and convicting the individual,” Ann says.

She will miss her co-workers at PCA. “We’ve got a very tight-knit group,” she says, adding that she’ll remember the “tremendous amount of support, not only from this office but from the courts and judges” she received after being hit by a car in April 2014.

Her retirement plans call for getting back to her genealogy project and visiting friends and family, including two children in Northern Virginia and sisters in California and Massachusetts.

Promotions and New Hires

- Assistant Clerk Christina Bianchi arrived at the Milford-Orange court on Aug. 17, after working part time as a paralegal and full time as a receptionist in a doctor’s office. She is also a student at Quinnipiac University and expects to graduate in 2017 with a degree in legal studies.

- Matthew Haine is the new chief clerk in Stamford. Previously, he was a family relations counselor with the Superior Court Family Division for three years, where he says he did “a fair amount of probate work,” including with seniors and individuals with mental illness. From 1995 to 2012, Attorney Haine practiced law privately in his native Stamford. He earned his bachelor’s degree in economics from the University of Vermont and his law degree from Washington University in St. Louis. He succeeds Roselyn Ramist, who retired June 1 but is helping with the transition.

- At the Region #19 court, Reine Pelletier has been promoted from assistant clerk to clerk, and Andre Ciccarelli has been promoted from court assistant to assistant clerk. The court welcomed Assistant Clerk Yolanda Candeias on July 20 and Court Assistant Sara Fahey on July 6.

- Staffing changes at the Bridgeport court have followed the retirement of Chief Clerk Jeannette Sargent on April 1 after nearly 21 years with the Probate Courts. Melissa Vaz, former deputy chief clerk, has succeeded Jeannette as chief clerk. Christine Bjorkman is deputy chief clerk, and Karolyn Ryan has left her assistant clerk position at the Region #19 court to become court staff attorney in Bridgeport.

FASTFACT

Did you know...

CMS now allows only charge administrators to void unposted invoices.
After 50 Years, Chief Clerk Sondra Waterman Steps Down

Encouraged by a teacher, Sondra Waterman applied for a job at the Hartford Probate Court while in high school. She started in the records room. As she gained experience and took on more responsibility, she found herself tossing around legal terms “a little too fast and flip,” she says.

Until an exchange with a court user who was struggling to understand a procedure opened her eyes.

“One man told me, ‘You know, miss, I’ve never done this before,’” Sondra recalls. It dawned on her: Nothing would be gained by using words he didn’t understand. She took his gentle admonishment to heart.

As she prepared to retire on Aug. 1 after 50 years of service, the last 18 as chief clerk, Sondra offered some advice to those who succeed her: “Listen to the people you’re helping. Try to zero in on their needs. Really be like an investigator when you talk to them. It is so important to get the full story before jumping up to get a form to fill out. Every experience is a little bit different than the one that came before it. There is no cookie-cutter approach, so take your time and use all your knowledge and apply it to whatever the situation is.”

That deceptively simple approach has played a huge role in her success, and it’s partly why the public, judges and her staff heap accolades on her.

“That’s the backbone of this court,” Monica says. “She’s the glue that holds us together.”

Hartford Judge Robert Killian, Jr., who retired in April, agrees. “Sondra Waterman is the reason why this place has worked for the last 30 years. There are no words to describe her value to the system, to the court or to the judge who served with her for 30 years.”

Judge Killian continues, “She’s always calm, always fair. She knows the duties of her position – not only what she’s supposed to do but why she’s supposed to do it. It’s easy to memorize a checklist of things to do, but she understands the fundamentals of why she’s doing it. That’s why she’s a valuable addition to the judges’ committees she has served with.”
Sondra has served on the procedures review, rules of procedure and weighted workload committees, and she helped write the first clerk’s manual – all career highlights, she says. She also is proud of her appearances as a guest lecturer in probate matters as part of a University of Hartford course.

“Sondra’s record of service is truly exceptional,” Probate Court Administrator Paul Knierim says. “In addition to helping thousands of Hartford families at the court, she’s had a big role in improving the system. Through her committee work, she has given lots of good advice to all of us at PCA. She was also generous in assisting clerks and judges in other courts. We all look up to her and owe her a huge thank you.”

Sondra’s greatest satisfaction comes from helping the many court users who have no legal representation. “I like that I’m able to help them and put away their fears,” she says. “Some people feel like they’re coming into enemy territory. You don’t want them to have a bad experience during a bad time in their lives. They thank me for making them smile, or they call back to thank me. I like that I’ve changed their whole idea of the system.”

Sondra has seen many changes in her half century at the court, including court consolidation in 2011 and the transformation of court staff positions into viable careers. The proportion of court matters has changed, too. Wills and decedents’ estates once accounted for perhaps 80 percent of the Hartford court’s workload, but “now the pie has gone completely the other way,” Sondra says. “Conservatorships have risen more than anything I’ve ever seen, along with children’s matters.”

She will leave the challenges those trends present to her successor, after staying on part time to help with the transition to a new judge.

“Sondra has given her career to probate,” Monica says. “We can’t demand that she give us more, although we won’t complain if she does. It’s a new phase in her life, and we wish her all the luck in the world and all the best.”

COURT FAMILY NEWS

Recognition: Meriden Judge Brian Mahon has been recognized for professional excellence by the Connecticut Law Tribune. The newspaper’s inaugural set of excellence awards honors attorneys with at least 30 years of experience who have made “substantial contributions during their careers.” Judge Mahon was recognized for his roles as “former Connecticut Bar Association president and longtime probate judge in Meriden.” The 21 honorees are to be featured in a September issue of the Law Tribune and recognized at an event in October.
Peace, love and groovy dogs:
Humans aren't the only creatures to press their cases before Branford-North Branford Judge Frank Forgione. At Branford's annual Woofstock festival on Aug. 9, Judge Forgione applied his jurisprudence skills to dogs and their attire as he helped choose a winner in a highlight of the festival: the hippie dog costume contest. “We have a very active animal shelter and they’re always asking me to judge the crazy things they do,” Judge Forgione (right, center) says. The winner, a Chihuahua named Sienna, “had me at hello,” he adds. The event raised money for the Dan Cosgrove Animal Shelter. Photos: Sally E. Bahner, left, Mary Johnson, right, Branford Eagle.

Wedding bells: Andrea Zara Obert, daughter of Jane Obert at probate administration, and Daniel Hahn were married on July 3 at Aria in Prospect. “Throughout the planning process, I was so happy to have been able to share my excitement with my probate friends and co-workers,” Jane says. “Everything about the day was perfect. Watching my beautiful daughter walk down the aisle to her groom was so emotional. The ceremony was joyful and poignant at the same time, and those who participated made it that much more meaningful. Andi and Dan make the perfect couple. I am so happy for them, but I’m glad it’s over!” Photo: Carrie Draghi Photography

Regional tops: Readers of New Haven Living magazine singled out the law practice of West Haven Judge Mark DeGennaro as one of the best in the area. Judge DeGennaro tied for third place (second runner-up) in the annual reader poll. Faxon Law Group of New Haven topped the poll, and Lynch, Traub, Keefe & Errante of New Haven was the first runner-up, according to the magazine’s August issue.
Compensation study. The first order of business after the budget committee adopted the recommendations of the compensation consultant last year was to adjust the pay ranges of court staff positions. The next step is now underway: determining how the new ranges for each position will translate into pay adjustments for individual employees. PCA will prepare a worksheet for each employee showing how the amount is calculated. The worksheets will go out in late September. For questions, contact Alyce Cariseo, acariseo@ctprobate.gov, or Andrea King,aking@ctprobate.gov. The budget committee will also accept comments at its Oct. 28 meeting (see page 11). The committee voted to phase in the compensation increases over two fiscal years, with one half of the increases coming this fall and the other half in fall 2016. This year’s increases are delayed slightly due to delays in finalizing the state budget. Meanwhile, court staff received merit increases in their July 23 paychecks, and COLA pay increases will be reflected in January paychecks.

Lien for probate fees in decedents’ estates. A new law, P.A. 15-5 (June special session), creates a lien for unpaid probate fees on any real property located in the state that is included in the basis for fees in decedents’ estates. The lien, effective July 1, 2015, applies to statutory probate fees, including interest, in the settlement of the estate from the date the fees are due until the date paid. This lien is in addition to the lien for Connecticut estate taxes. The law details how and when the courts must release the liens. For guidance on the new procedures for releasing liens and the accompanying forms, please check your email inbox for instructions from PCA Attorney Bonnie Bennet. For questions, contact Attorney Bennet or any member of the law department.

Legislative summary. Watch your email inboxes for the legislative summary describing the new laws from the 2015 legislative session that affect the Probate Courts. Vincent Russo, manager of communications and intergovernmental relations, plans to send the summary in early September. The series of court staff training sessions that will begin in October and the judges institute on Oct. 28 will focus on some of the new provisions (see page 11).

Court visits. As usual, it’s been a summer on the go for the law and financial departments as attorneys and accountants pay their respective visits to the courts. The statute requires each department to review the courts on a biennial basis. Last year, the law department began combining visits with a staff workshop staff conferring 1 hour of continuing legal credit. “The clerks seem to really appreciate the discussion and the opportunity to earn the credits without having to travel. It’s like having their personal roundtable,” says PCA Attorney Bonnie Bennet. The court visits and financial reviews started in July and are expected to conclude well before the statutory deadline of Dec. 31.

Online resources. Agendas of all Probate Assembly meetings, including committee meetings, are posted online at ctprobate.gov. Each committee has its own Web page, and meeting minutes are also posted there.
The office of the Probate Court Administrator extends its condolences to the following families:

**June C. Fialkoff**
June Fialkoff, former chief clerk of the Hartford Probate Court, died Aug. 15 at age 83. After raising her four children with her husband Jules, June returned to the workforce as a bookkeeper at the Hartford Court and worked her way up to chief clerk. She retired after more than 20 years at the court. She lived in West Hartford and Deerfield Beach, Florida.

**Hon. Romeo G. Petroni**
Judge Romeo Petroni, who served at the former Ridgefield court for 14 years and later became a Superior Court judge, died Aug. 3. He was 89. A long-time resident of Ridgefield, he graduated from Syracuse University in 1950 and Fordham Law School in 1953. He became Ridgefield’s town attorney in 1957 and
was a state representative and a state senator before being elected probate judge in 1974. He made unsuccessful bids for governor and Congress. In May 1990, Judge Petroni was appointed to the Superior Court bench and served until January 1999, when he became a judge trial referee. Most recently, he lived in Madison with his wife Catherine.

Constance F. “Connie” Anstett
Connie Anstett, the wife of the late Judge Robert Anstett of the former Westport court, died July 23 in Westport. After her marriage to Judge Anstett in 1948, she became active in the town’s Republican Party and local government. Connie ran her husband’s campaigns for probate judge – he served from 1971 to 1987 – and was active in other campaigns at the local, state and national levels. Both Anstetts received the John Davis Lodge Award for Outstanding Public Service in 1995.

Joseph L. “Joe” Antinerella
Joe Antinerella, the husband of Newington Assistant Clerk Louri Antinerella, died July 1 at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford. He was 67 and lived in Wethersfield. A graduate of the Hartford school system, he worked as a certified plumber and later became a state marshal, retiring in 2011.

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On the Docket

Sept. 22: Probate Assembly meeting and seminar for judges and clerks, 9 a.m.-2 p.m., Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), ITBD Conference Center, Stanley Room, New Britain. Seminar topics will focus on children’s matters. Please register with Sue Dornfried, sdornfried@ctprobate.gov, or fax registrations to 860-231-1055.

Oct. 12: Columbus Day. The Office of the Probate Court Administrator will be closed.

October, several dates, court staff training. Watch your email inboxes for notice of this series of six training sessions to be held in various regions rather than in one central location. The sessions will focus on new legislation.

Oct. 28: Judges Institute, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., CCSU/ITBD Conference Center, Goodyear Room, New Britain. Topics will include of new legislation.

Probate Assembly committee meetings (held at the Office of the Probate Court Administrator, 186 Newington Rd., West Hartford):
- Executive committee, Sept. 9, 9:45 a.m.
- Ethics committee, Sept. 16, 1 p.m.
- Procedures review committee, Sept. 28, 9 a.m.
- Conservator guidelines committee, Oct. 2, 11 a.m.
- Executive committee, Oct. 14, 9:45 a.m.
- Procedures review committee, Oct. 26, 9 a.m.
- Budget committee, Oct. 28, 5 p.m.

Visit the Calendar of Events on the intranet for the latest meeting dates and times. Visit ctprobate.gov for agendas and minutes.

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FASTFACT

Did you know…

Banks process checks based on the value written on the check’s legal line. Please confirm that the legal line and the numeric value match before processing.
Former Probate Court Administrator James Lawlor has received the Waterbury Regional Chamber’s 2015 Malcolm Baldrige Community Award for his commitment to the city in the areas of economic development and growth. Judge Lawlor was a judge for more than 22 years for the Waterbury, Middlebury and Wolcott communities before serving as Probate Court Administrator from 2002-2008. As the chairman of Waterbury Housing Authority, he is credited with redesigning its organizational structure and saving the city millions of dollars, among other accomplishments. Judge Lawlor will be recognized at a dinner at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville on Oct. 7.

One retired judge has declared his candidacy for a town council post in the November elections, while another has ended his run for a city office. Former Plainfield-Killingly Regional Judge David Griffiths is an at-large candidate for the Killingly Town Council; former Hartford Judge Robert Killian, Jr., withdrew his name for mayor of Hartford in July.

May 21 is now known in Stamford as “Judge Gerald M. Fox Jr. Day,” following a declaration by Mayor David Martin. Judge Fox, who retired last year after serving for more than 23 years, was the honoree at an annual golf outing that raises funds for SilverSource, a local senior services organization. The event brought in more than $65,000 for a program to provide medical-related transportation for older adults. Judge Fox is one of the longest serving board members of SilverSource, according to the Stamford Daily Voice. Caption: With Judge Fox (right) are SilverSource’s executive director Kathleen Bordelon and board chairman Dr. Donald Case (center) and Stamford Mayor David Martin (second from left).

Who is in the News?

The views of Probate Court Administrator Paul Knierim about zero-funding the Probate Courts for the current biennium were widely disseminated this summer. Judge Knierim’s opinion piece ran in July in The Hartford Courant, The Bulletin in Norwich, the Republican-American in Waterbury and the Connecticut Law Tribune. In addition, a columnist for the Meriden Record-Journal weighed in on the probate cuts, and the Courant published an editorial. An Associated Press news story appeared in newspapers from Connecticut to California. In August, Fox Business and Fox News aired segments on the fee increases, the latter broadcast featuring the Fairfield court.
The Chappaqua Daily Voice featured Westport Probate Judge Lisa Wexler in her role as a radio talk show host. The newspaper reassured its readers in the July 7 story that despite a venue change from White Plains, New York, to Greenwich, Connecticut, “The Lisa Wexler Show” would continue in the same format with the same mantra: “If you're thinking about it, Lisa is talking about it.”

HISTORICAL NOTE

This feature highlights the rich history of Connecticut’s Probate Courts and the people who have helped make the courts. We welcome your contributions about an aspect of the probate system that tickles your historical fancy. Items may run up to 600 words. Please fax submissions to the SignPost at 860-231-1055 or send them to cfitzpatrick@ctprobate.gov or SignPost, Office of the Probate Court Administrator, 186 Newington Rd., West Hartford, CT 06110.

In the following column, published July 12 in the New Britain Herald, correspondent Erv Dworkin ties the present to the past through the Civil War experience of Valentine Chamberlain, the Berlin district’s probate judge from 1878-1884. The column is reprinted with permission.

TALES FROM THE TOOLBOX: Respected in war and peace
By Erv Dworkin, correspondent | Posted: Sunday, July 12, 2015 9:04 pm

The window has just closed on the four-year sesquicentennial of the Civil War and yet another barrage of gunfire has reopened wounds in the place where it all began.

When word was received in New Britain on Sunday, April 14, 1861, that Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor had been fired upon by Confederate forces, a war meeting was convened that evening at the First Church. Valentine B. Chamberlain, a lawyer and publisher of the short-lived New Britain News, on the day after his 28th birthday, roused the animated assembly with colorful oratory and saber rattling, culminating with his presentation of a wreathed portrait of Maj. Robert Anderson, Union commander at the forfeited fort.

Chamberlain walked the walk as well as he talked it, enlisting in the Seventh Regiment, Connecticut Volunteers, a second lieutenant attached to Company A. Folding his newspaper and packing his gunny sack, little could he imagine that his marching orders would deliver him to the very doorstep of that seminal confrontation.

On July 11, 1863, Chamberlain, then a captain, took part in an assault on Fort Wagner — like nearby Sumter, one of several strategic fortifications defending the vital port city of Charleston, a key to both defense and conquest of the South. Commanding the right flank during the valiant charge, he was one of a handful of men to reach and surmount the fort’s parapet, whereupon he was captured. In a gesture of military chivalry, he proferred his sword to an officer of equal rank, Capt. Chichester. By their actions, Brig. Gen. George C. Strong credited the Seventh with having “covered itself with glory” despite the failure of the attack.

A week later, a second attempt, famed for the lead role played by the Massachusetts 54th, one of the first black combat regiments, also failed, as depicted in the movie “Glory.” The timing of Chamberlain’s capture may have been fortuitous, coming as it did before the 54th’s entry into the fray, as the Confederacy had decreed that any white
officer leading black troops would be executed if captured for "inciting service insurrection." Chamberlain executed a daring escape, but was recaptured and remained a prisoner until the war’s latter days.

Returning to New Britain, Chamberlain continued his distinguished service representing Berlin and New Britain in the state legislature and as long-tenured city court and probate judge, earning a reputation as a fair and compassionate jurist. In 1884 he was elected Connecticut state treasurer and in 1887 became chairman of Mechanics National Bank. He sat on the board of education and that of several of the city’s leading companies, and was one of the first presidents of the Stanley Post G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic).

In 1900, the Confederate Capt. Chichester, in a deathbed charge to his wife, said, “I want you to return this sword to the gallant soldier who surrendered it to me at Fort Wagner.” Unfortunately, Chamberlain had predeceased him on June 25, 1893, and is buried at Fairview Cemetery.

And now, 154 years after the “stars and stripes” came down over Fort Sumter, South Carolina, first in secession, first in aggression, is at last retiring “the stars and bars.”

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**What Is Your News?**

Please share news and photos by emailing submissions to Colleen Fitzpatrick at cfitzpatrick@ctprobate.gov, faxing them to 860-231-1055 or sending them to SignPost, Office of the Probate Court Administrator, 186 Newington Rd., West Hartford, CT 06110. The deadline for the November-December issue is Oct. 10.