

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.



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.



Court Reporter
records testimony at trials or in depositions.



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.



Georgia's Court System © 2026
Cynthia H. Clanton, Director
Administrative Office of the Courts
244 Washington Street, SW, Suite 300 • Atlanta, GA 30334

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.

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.



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

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.



Find out more about your court system inside!!

What Do The Courts Do?

Superior Courts

State-wide Business Court

State Courts

Juvenile Courts

Probate Courts

Magistrate Courts

Municipal Courts

Trial Courts

Different courts are set up to do different things. Georgia's courts hear cases based on the subject matter jurisdiction they are given; this may be broad or limited.

Municipal courts are city courts.

Magistrate courts are sometimes referred to as "small claims courts."

Probate courts are where estates are processed and wills probated.

Juvenile courts hear cases involving delinquency and child welfare (abuse and neglect) cases.

State courts handle misdemeanor criminal, traffic, and civil cases.

The State-wide Business Court hears complex commercial cases.

Superior courts handle felony criminal, family law, and other civil cases.

Some general jurisdiction trial courts hear appeals from limited jurisdiction courts.

Appellate Courts

The **Court of Appeals of Georgia** and the **Supreme Court of Georgia** review appeals of decisions in the state's trial courts.

Why Appeal?

Georgia's courts of review are set up to correct legal errors or errors of law made at the trial level. No trials are held at the appellate level – instead, judges review written records and briefs and hear oral arguments from attorneys.

Supreme Court

Court of Appeals

The Nathan Deal Judicial Building in Atlanta houses courtrooms for both appellate courts and the State-wide Business Court.

Trial Courts

Municipal Courts

- Small Claims (\$15,000 or less)
- Violations of city ordinances
- Issuance of criminal warrants
- Preliminary hearings
- Traffic violations in city limits
- 370 courts

Magistrate Courts

- Small Claims (\$15,000 or less)
- Minor criminal offenses
- County ordinance violations
- Preliminary hearings
- Arrest & search warrants
- Check fraud
- 159 courts, each county has a magistrate court

Probate Courts

- Wills, administration of estates, appointments of guardians, involuntary hospitalizations
- Marriage & weapons carry licensing
- Traffic in some counties
- 159 Courts, each county has a probate court

Juvenile Courts

- Delinquent juveniles under age 18
- Child in need of services, abused, neglected, emancipation proceedings
- Juvenile traffic cases
- 159 courts, each county has a juvenile court.

State Courts

- Misdemeanor violations - traffic & civil actions
- Felony preliminary hearings
- Review limited jurisdiction court decisions
- 73 counties have state courts

State-wide Business Court

Over 17 statutorily-defined subject matters, including those arising under:

- The Limited Liability Company Act
- The Limited Liability Partnership Act
- The Uniform Commercial Code
- The Georgia Business Corporation Code, among others.
- One court

Superior Courts

- Felonies
- Divorce proceedings
- Title to land, equity
- Juveniles who commit serious felonies
- Correct errors from county courts
- 159 courts, each county has a superior court

Appellate Courts

Court of Appeals

Appellate jurisdiction over lower courts in cases in which the Supreme Court has no appellate jurisdiction

15 judges
5 panels of 3 judges

Supreme Court

Reviews cases involving:

- Death Penalty and murder
- Constitutionality of law
- Election contests
- COURT OF LAST RESORT
- Certiorari review of Court of Appeals
- Habeas Corpus
- 9 Justices

Georgia's Court System

Judicial Circuits

For purposes of administration in the Superior and Juvenile courts, the state of Georgia is divided into 51 Judicial Circuits. Each circuit is made up of at least one county. Some circuits are made up of many counties.

About Your Circuit

Use the state map at right to answer these questions:



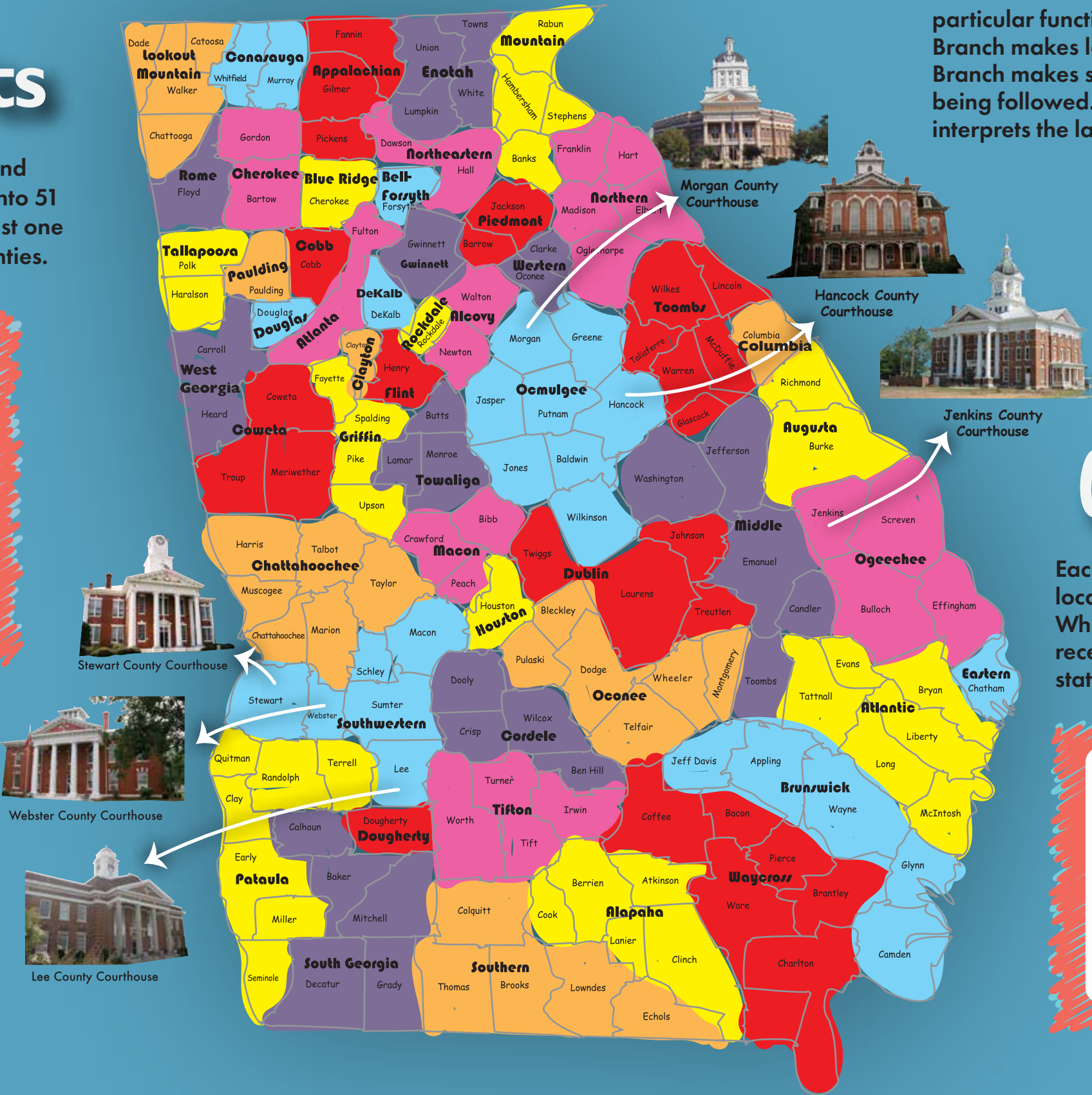
- I live in the _____ Circuit.
- There are _____ counties in my Circuit.
- How many Circuits have only one county? _____
- Which Circuit has the most counties? _____

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.

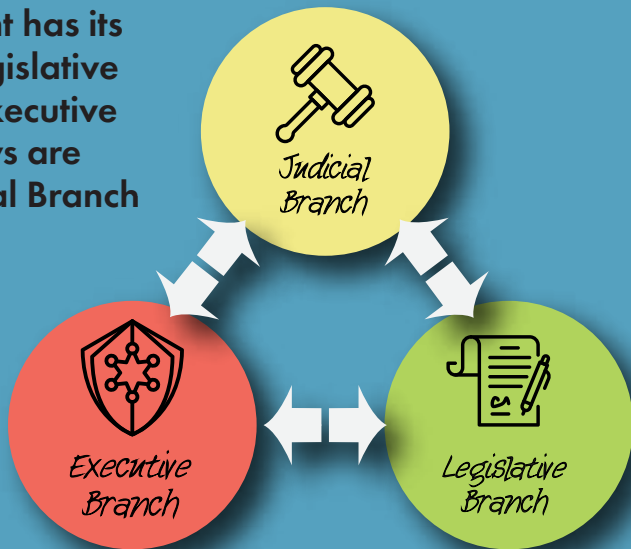
How are Circuits Named?

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.



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.

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.



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.

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 1,600 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 (shown below) come from a variety of professional backgrounds and personal 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.

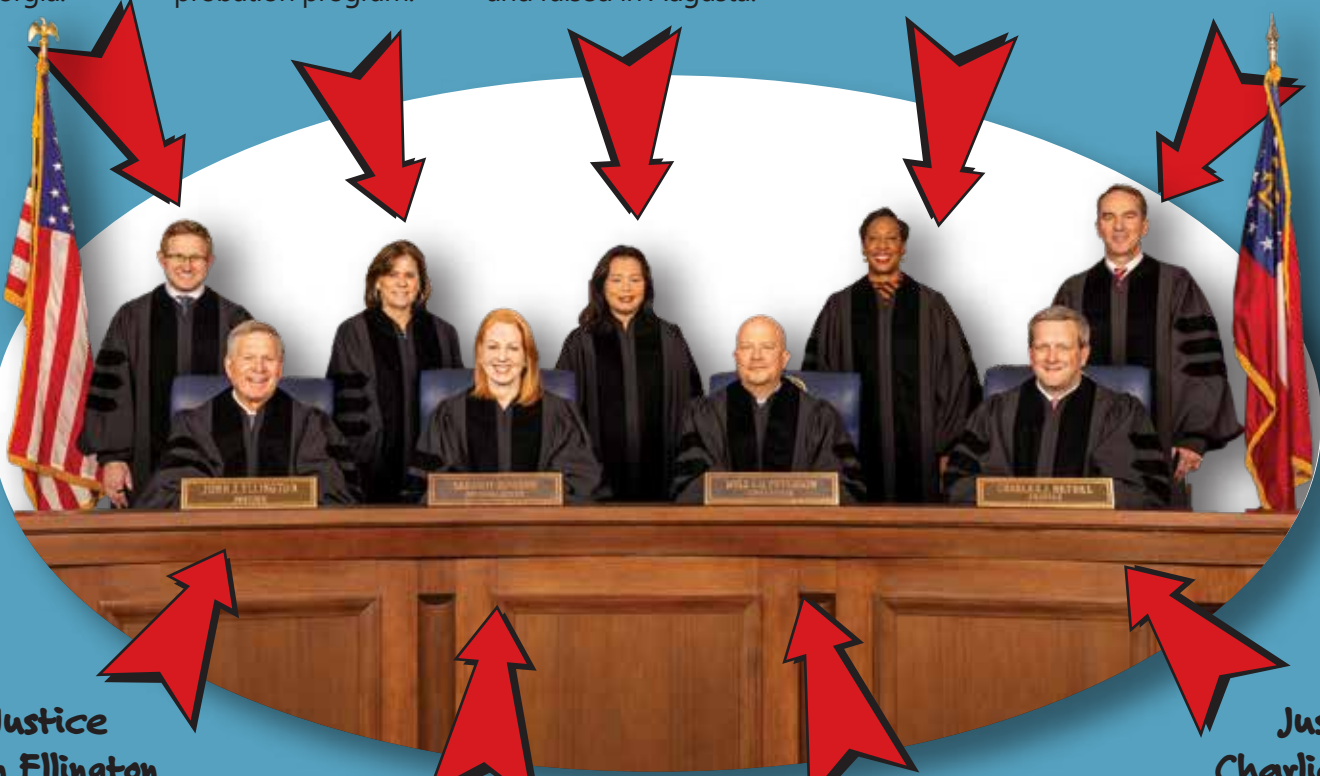
Justice Andrew Pinson
Earned two degrees from UGA, which is known as being a “Double Dawg.” Served as Solicitor General of Georgia.

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

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

Justice Ben Land
A private practice attorney for nearly 26 years before serving on the Superior Court and later on the Georgia Court of Appeals.



Justice John Ellington
Made the cover of Bulldog Illustrated in 2018. Farms timber and hay, and grows roses. An avid turkey hunter.

Presiding Justice Sarah Warren
Worked in the White House. Argued a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Served as Solicitor General of Georgia.

Chief Justice Nels S.D. Peterson
Earned J.D. from Harvard Law. Served as GA’s first Solicitor General.

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

Who Are Your Judges?



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

What Do Judges Do?

Newly appointed gubernatorial appointees are sworn-in by the Governor.



The judge’s role in a **TRIAL COURT** is to rule on legal issues and determine the 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.