History of the Court System

The basic powers and framework of the court system in Wisconsin were established by Article VII of the Wisconsin Constitution when Wisconsin became a state in 1848. At that time, judicial power was vested in a supreme court, circuit courts, courts of probate, and justices of the peace. Subject to certain limitations, the legislature was granted power to establish inferior courts and municipal courts and determine their jurisdiction.

The constitution originally divided the state into five judicial circuit districts. The five judges who presided over those circuit courts were to meet at least once a year at Madison as a “Supreme Court” until the legislature established a separate court. The Wisconsin Supreme Court was instituted in 1853 with 3 members chosen in statewide elections – one was elected as chief justice and the other 2 as associate justices. In 1877, a constitutional amendment increased the number of associate justices to 4. An 1889 amendment prescribed the current practice under which all court members are elected as justices. The chief justice is selected by a majority of the justices. Since 1903, the constitution has required a court of 7 members.

Over the years, the legislature created a large number of courts with varying types of jurisdiction. As a result of numerous special laws, there was no uniformity among the counties. Different types of courts in a single county had overlapping jurisdiction, and procedure in the various courts was not the same. A number of special courts sprang up in heavily urbanized areas, such as Milwaukee County, where the judicial burden was the greatest. In addition, many municipalities established police justice courts for enforcement of local ordinances, and there were some 1,800 justices of the peace.

The 1959 Legislature enacted Chapter 315, effective January 1, 1962, which provided for the initial reorganization of the court system. The most significant feature of the reorganization was the abolition of special statutory courts (municipal, district, superior, civil, and small claims). In addition, a uniform system of jurisdiction and procedure was established for all county courts.

The 1959 law also created the machinery for smoother administration of the court system. One problem under the old system was the imbalance of caseloads from one jurisdiction to another. In some cases, the workload was not evenly distributed among the judges within the same jurisdiction. To correct this, the chief justice of the supreme court was authorized to assign circuit and county judges to serve temporarily as needed in either type of court. The 1961 Legislature took another step to assist the chief justice in these assignments by creating the post of Administrative Director of Courts. This position has since been redefined by the supreme court and renamed the Director of State Courts. In recent years, the director has been given added administrative duties and increased staff to perform them.
The last step in the 1959 reorganization effort was the April 1966 ratification of two constitutional amendments that abolished the justices of the peace and permitted municipal courts. At this point the Wisconsin system of courts consisted of the supreme court, circuit courts, county courts, and municipal courts.

In April 1977, the court of appeals was authorized when the voters ratified an amendment to Article VII, Section 2, of the Wisconsin Constitution, which outlined the current structure of the state courts:

> The judicial power of this state shall be vested in a unified court system consisting of one supreme court, a court of appeals, a circuit court, such trial courts of general uniform state wide jurisdiction as the legislature may create by law, and a municipal court if authorized by the legislature under section 14.

In June 1978, the legislature implemented the constitutional amendment by enacting Chapter 449, Laws of 1977, which added the court of appeals to the system and eliminated county courts. Following a 1977-78 reorganization of the Wisconsin court system, the circuit court became the “single level” trial court for the state.

**Responsibility**

The circuit court is the trial court of general jurisdiction in Wisconsin. It has original jurisdiction in both civil and criminal matters unless exclusive jurisdiction is given to another court. It also reviews state agency decisions and hears appeals from municipal courts. Jury trials are conducted only in circuit courts.

The constitution requires that a circuit be bounded by county lines. As a result, each circuit consists of a single county, except for 3 two-county circuits (Buffalo-Pepin, Florence-Forest, and Menominee-Shawano). Where judicial caseloads are heavy, a circuit may have several branches, each with an elected judge.

**Organization**

Circuit judges, who serve 6-year terms, are elected on a nonpartisan basis in the county in which they serve in the April election and take office the following August 1. The governor may fill circuit court vacancies by appointment, and the appointees serve until a successor is elected. The state pays the salaries of circuit judges and court reporters. It also covers some of the expenses for interpreters, guardians ad litem, judicial assistants, court-appointed witnesses, and jury per diems. Counties bear the remaining expenses for operating the circuit courts.
Winnegabo Courts

• Branch 1:
  - Judge Thomas J. Gritton 8/1/2000 to present
  - Judge William E. Crane 1966 to 2000
  - Judge Arnold J. Cain 1964 to 1966
  - Judge Helmuth F. Arps 1947 to 1963
  - Judge Henry P. Hughes 1937 to 1947
  - Judge Fred Beglinger 1922 to 1937
  - Judge Wilbur E. Hurlbut 1922 to 1922
  - Judge George W. Burnell 1884 to 1921
  - Judge D.J. Pulling 1872 to 1884
  - Judge G.W. Washburn 1864 to 1872
  - Judge Edwin Wheeler 1861 to 1864
  - Judge S.R. Cotton 1856 to 1861
  - Judge James R. Doolittle 1851 to 1856
  - Judge Alexander W. Stowe 1848 to 1851
  - Judge A.G. Miller 1/12/1848 to 1848

• Branch 2:
  - Judge Scott C. Woldt 1/26/2004 to present
  - Judge Robert A. Haase 1982 to 2004
  - Judge Edmund P. Arpin 1970 to 1982

• Branch 3:
  - Judge Barbara H. Key 8/01/1998 to present
  - Judge Thomas S. Williams 1972 to 1998

• Branch 4:
  - Judge Karen Seifert 8/01/2006 to present
  - Judge Robert A. Hawley 1982 to 2006
• Branch 5:
  o Judge John A. Jorgensen 8/01/2010 to present
  o Judge William H. Carver 1973 to 2010

• Branch 6:
  o Daniel J. Bissett 8/01/2011 to present
  o Judge Robert A. Hawley 2010 to 2011
  o Judge Bruce K. Schmidt 1991 to 2010

County Judges

Judge W.W. Jackson 1849
Judge Jedidiah Brown 1849 to 1852 (resigned)
Judge Dudley C. Blodgett 1852 to 1854
Judge A.P. Hodges 1857 to 1861 (resigned)
Judge G.W. Washburn 1861 to 1864
Judge Joseph B. Hamilton 1865 to 1870
Judge George Gary 1870 to 1882
Judge Joseph B. Hamilton 1882 to 1886
Judge C.D. McDonald 1890’s
Judge Silas Bullard 1910 to 1910
Judge Fred Beglinger 1912 to 1922
Judge D. E. McDonald 1922 to 1955
Judge Herbert J. Mueller 1955 to 1972
Judge James V. Sitter 1962 to 1973
Judge James G. Sarres 1962 to 1982

8/15/2017 Judge Scott C. Woldt with help from Law Clerk John Becker
(Judge Woldt retains reference materials, See A History of Winnebago County 352 14 G612H)