



State Bar of Georgia

Lawyers Serving the Public and the Justice System

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State Bar of Georgia Retires Debt on Bar Center Headquarters Building

Atlanta – The State Bar of Georgia has retired the debt on its Bar Center headquarters building in downtown Atlanta five years ahead of schedule. The Bar’s Board of Governors celebrated the achievement during its summer meeting with a note-burning ceremony on Aug. 13.

“This is a historical milestone and a tribute to the Georgia lawyers whose vision and hard work made it possible,” State Bar President S. Lester Tate III said. “We had the funds to retire this debt, thanks to some very good stewardship over the years, placing us in superior financial condition. Taking this action will significantly strengthen the Bar’s financial flexibility in future years.”

The Bar Center is located at 104 Marietta St. in the former Federal Reserve Bank building. The 335,000-square foot facility not only houses the offices for Bar staff, it is considered a “professional gathering place” for Georgia lawyers, with meeting space accommodations ranging from one-on-one sessions with clients to large auditorium conferences with several hundred in attendance.

More than 70 percent of the continuing legal education seminars in Georgia are held at the Bar Center. Members are also able to take advantage of a lawyers’ lounge for reading or making telephone calls, as well as free onsite parking for meetings or other events in the downtown area.

Growing in popularity are the “Journey through Justice” law-related education programs housed at the Bar Center for school students and the general public. A full-size courtroom gives school classes a place to conduct mock trials and experience a hands-on illustration of the justice system. The Museum of Law exhibits trials and other events from the legal history of Georgia

and the nation. A replica display of former President Woodrow Wilson's downtown Atlanta law office, circa 1882, is also on site for visitors.

“Capitol buildings represent government, and courthouses represent the justice system,” said Past President Frank C. Jones, who chaired the steering committee to secure a site for the Bar Center in the 1990s. “This center represents the Bar and the legal profession. There is nothing comparable to it in the nation.”

The Bar's quest to find a permanent home that was both suitable and affordable actually began in the 1970s, but that effort failed. In 1995 and 1996, while renting 25,000 square feet of space in the Hurt Building near Five Points, Bar leaders tried again and looked at about 40 possible sites, but with the same results.

Fortunately, in 1997, the Federal Reserve building was put on the market. It turned out to be the perfect answer to a long search.

“Our only concern at the time was that this building was too big for us. But we were aware that our neighboring Bars in the other Southeastern states – all of whom owned their own buildings – had been outgrowing their facilities,” Tate said. “That convinced us to make the deal, even though we had no idea what to do with all that extra space.” Today, it is leased to a number of legal entities.

Today, the Bar Center is not only a functional headquarters office for the 42,000-member State Bar of Georgia, it stands as a realization of the ideal expressed by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy on the day it was officially dedicated in 2005: “The building itself is elegant and traditional, its structure very stable like the law ought to be, the inside simply remarkable for its elegance and its openness and its honesty – all of which are characteristics of what the legal profession is and what the practice ought to be. ... When people pass by this building, they will be able to say, there's the headquarters of a great, noble profession. There's the headquarters of a group of men and women who are dedicated to preserving freedom.”

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The State Bar of Georgia, with offices in Atlanta, Savannah and Tifton, was established in 1964 by Georgia's Supreme Court as the successor to the voluntary Georgia Bar Association, founded in 1884. All lawyers licensed to practice in Georgia belong to the State Bar. Its more than 42,000 members work together to strengthen the constitutional promise of justice for all, promote principles of duty and public service among Georgia's lawyers, and administer a strict code of legal ethics.