

Secret Lives Of Lawyers

Roig Lawyers' Francis Sexton Gets Every President's Autograph

By Nathan Hale | July 29, 2016, 6:31 PM ET



Francis Sexton Jr. keeps artifacts from his personal collection, including examples of Confederate money, on the walls of his Miami office. (Credit: Nathan Hale/Law360)

Entering the office of Francis X. Sexton Jr., the first thing you notice — or maybe the second, after the expansive view over downtown Miami — is the wall by his desk covered in framed, weathered documents that look as if they belong in a museum.

As the [Roig Lawyers](#) partner is happy to point out, his office walls show off genuine artifacts: paper money from all 13 original American colonies, Civil War-era newspaper front pages, and envelopes that were issued to Union soldiers — merely a glimpse into a personal collection that includes the signatures of all 44 U.S. presidents and numerous items dating to the Revolutionary and Civil wars.

Not surprisingly, such items pique the curiosity of colleagues and clients, whose questions draw out the occasional impromptu history lesson.

“They like to hear about it, and I like to talk about it,” Sexton said. “And then I remember that I’ve got to go back and bill some time.”

Even conversations with opposing counsel can take a turn toward the past. Sexton once used his [New York Times](#) front page reporting the 1864 burning of Atlanta by Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman to break the ice with an attorney who was from Georgia, gesturing to the paper and saying, “You know, we could do that again.”

Thankfully, the other attorney laughed, he recalled.

Sexton, who focuses on complex commercial litigation and has served as an arbitrator for more than 20 years, said he could never compare the practice of law to what many notable names from history went through, but he admires their courage and strong will — attributes he thinks attorneys, especially litigators, need to develop.

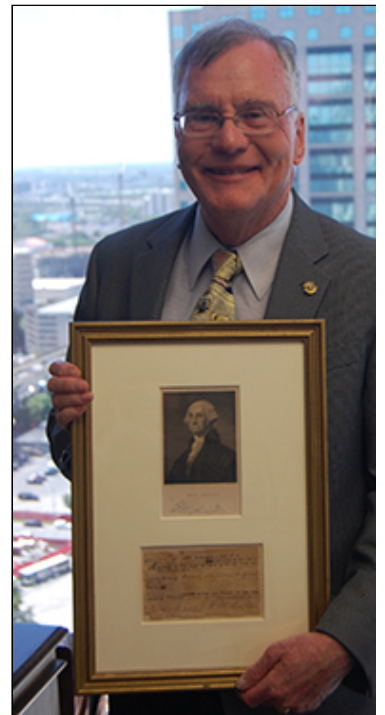
“I find them all inspiring,” he said. “They were people who were confronted with difficult circumstances — Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln for sure, Truman. If there is one thing they all did, they all persevered. So when I read about them, it impacts me. It impacts me in every facet of my life.”

Retired Miami-Dade County Circuit Judge Scott J. Silverman got to know Sexton as a fellow board member with the city’s HistoryMiami museum and through efforts about a decade ago to establish the affiliated 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society, which works to maintain the history of the legal profession in the city. Sexton remains active with both groups, and he is secretary of the historical society, which preserves legal documents and memorabilia and hosts several events a year.

Judge Silverman said Sexton came up with the idea for lunchtime presentations the group holds at law firm offices.

“He’s a man of action,” Judge Silverman said, adding, “Frank has been a real mover in this push to keep the organization moving forward and keep it relevant.”

Sexton traces his interest in U.S. history to his father, a conductor on the New York Central rail



This money draft slip signed by Washington stands out in a collection that includes the signature of every U.S. president.

line, who would tell him about how George Washington's army found itself on the hill behind their home during the Battle of White Plains. He took the family to Gettysburg in 1961 for the centennial of the Civil War when Frank Jr. was 12 — just the right age to get hooked — and also passed on his fascination with historical memorabilia.

“He never really had any money to indulge in it, but we always found it thrilling to hold something that Lincoln or Roosevelt or somebody like that held,” Sexton said.

Sexton's collection, which he estimates at 100 to 120 items, started on another family vacation, to Washington, D.C., when he was about 9. He consumed one of their two days in the nation's capital agonizing over whether to buy a stained Franklin D. Roosevelt autograph or a 19th century sketch of the White House signed by Benjamin Harrison. (The shopkeeper ultimately gave him both for his five dollars and told his father he should get outside to play more.)

His most prized items are a Robert E. Lee autograph, which he has at home in a large frame alongside one from Ulysses S. Grant, and his George Washington signature.

When he bought that one, Sexton knew only that it was some type of bank draft payable to fellow founding father Gouverneur Morris for 26 pounds, 5 shillings. But with the advent of the internet, he discovered a letter in which Washington instructed Morris to withdraw the money from an account in London. Morris was told to then find out from Thomas Jefferson where in Paris he purchased a watch that he gave to James Madison because Washington wanted a similar one for his inauguration.

“That watch is on the mantelpiece at Mount Vernon,” Sexton said. “They know about this [document] and want it.”

Most of the 50 attorneys and staff in Roig's Miami office are aware of Sexton's passion for history, according to partner-in-charge Nelson C. Bellido, who said he thinks the occasional conversations provide more than just a glimpse at a colleague's hobby and release from the intensity of the legal profession.

“The majority of them know, especially when they come into his office that there's more to him than just being a great litigator,” Bellido said, adding, “When they go in, they realize that he is a man of substance.”

*Secret Lives of Lawyers is a series on attorneys' novel pursuits outside the courtroom. In the **last installment**, we spoke with Kirkland & Ellis partner Bill Burgess, who competed in a nine-hour, 200-kilometer speed skating race in Finland this winter.*