

# OVERVIEW

This document provides detailed narratives for the key figures in the Effingham County judicial corruption case (2022-2024), connecting historical organized crime patterns to modern institutional dysfunction. The case centers on Judge Stephen Yekel's confrontation with an alleged "conspiracy scheme" involving systematic DUI case manipulation, the unprecedented retaliation by Clerk of Court Jason Bragg, and Yekel's ultimate defeat and death.

## PART I: CENTRAL FIGURES

### JUDGE STEPHEN YEKEL (d. December 31, 2024)

#### The Man Who Could Recognize the Pattern

*Background & Experience (50 Years in Georgia Criminal Justice)*

Stephen Yekel wasn't just any judge. His background gave him a unique capacity to recognize organized corruption when he encountered it:

#### Law Enforcement Career:

- **Special Agent, Georgia Alcohol & Tobacco Tax Unit:** This is the agency that directly combated bootlegging operations during the Dixie Mafia's peak. Yekel would have fought the same moonshine networks that funded Billy Sunday Birt's criminal empire in North Georgia.
- **Investigator, Cobb County District Attorney's Office:** Cobb County was the base of operations for Billy Wayne Davis, a documented Dixie Mafia member who participated in the Foster murders with Billy Sunday Birt. Yekel worked in a proven organized crime operational base.
- **Member, Cobb County Fugitive Squad:** Required deep understanding of how criminal networks operate and protect their members.

#### Defense Work:

- **Chief Conflict Defender, Southeast Georgia (2005-2022):** For 17 years, Yekel covered 32 counties—the exact territory that was the Dixie Mafia's operational base. He represented over 500 cases, many death-penalty eligible. He would have seen how corruption networks function across county lines.

**Death-Penalty Certification:** Handled the most serious criminal cases, requiring understanding of criminal sophistication and systematic operations.

### The Effingham County Confrontation (2022-2024)

#### Election and Discovery:

- Elected State Court Judge, Effingham County, 2022

- Within his first term, recognized what he explicitly called a "conspiracy scheme"
- The scheme allegedly involved systematic manipulation of DUI cases—dismissals and reductions that shouldn't have occurred

#### **The Firing:**

- Fired judicial assistant Lisa Crawford
- Explicitly stated the reason: her involvement in the DUI case conspiracy scheme
- This was not characterized as simple misconduct but as systematic, coordinated criminal activity—the language of someone who recognizes organized corruption

#### **The Retaliation:**

- Jason Bragg, the Clerk of Court (who was under GBI investigation for undisclosed reasons), immediately retaliated
- Bragg took the unprecedented action of denying the judge access to court records
- This is virtually unheard of—a clerk cutting off a judge's access to the files necessary to do his job

#### **The Legal Battle:**

- Yekel filed a writ of mandamus to force Bragg to provide access
- He lost the case
- This meant he couldn't effectively function as a judge

#### **The Political Destruction:**

- Lost re-election in 2024 to Melissa Calhoun
- Social engineering: his reputation had been systematically destroyed over the nine months following his confrontation with the alleged corruption

#### **December 31, 2024:**

- Committed suicide
- Nine months after confronting what he called a conspiracy scheme
- Just as new officials (Walt Lawson as Clerk, Melissa Calhoun as Judge) were taking office

### **Why Yekel's Death Matters**

*Judge Yekel's 50 year professional credibility was destroyed*, which just so happened to be the only way to dismiss the case against Bragg.

Someone with:

- Experience fighting bootleggers (Dixie Mafia's primary operation)
- Work history in a documented Dixie Mafia operational base
- 17 years defending cases across the entire Dixie Mafia territory
- 50 years total in Georgia's criminal justice system

...would be uniquely capable of recognizing systematic, organized corruption when confronted with it. His use of the phrase "conspiracy scheme" is significant—this is the language of someone identifying coordinated criminal activity, not individual bad behavior.

*The institutional response to someone with this level of knowledge confronting corruption:*

*complete elimination.*

## **Critical Unanswered Questions**

### **The GBI Investigation:**

- What specific actions was Jason Bragg being investigated for?
- Did the investigation relate to the DUI case manipulation Yekel identified?
- Why was the case dismissed without prejudice?
- The GBI case file was scheduled for release May 2025, but was not released.

### **The DUI Conspiracy:**

- Was there systematic manipulation of DUI cases in Effingham County?
- Who else was involved beyond Lisa Crawford?
- How long had this been operating?
- Were there financial benefits?

### **The Retaliation:**

- Was Bragg protecting the scheme by cutting off Yekel's access?
- Why was Bragg able to successfully deny a judge access to court records?
- What institutional failures allowed this unprecedented action?

### **The Outcome:**

- Did the system deliberately eliminate someone who could recognize corruption?
- Is the pattern continuing under new leadership?

## **JUDGE MELISSA CALHOUN (Active)**

### **The Replacement**

### **Early Career & Juvenile Court (2019)**

In 2019, the Ogeechee Judicial Circuit (Effingham, Bulloch, Jenkins, and Screven counties) became the last of Georgia's 49 circuits to establish a separate juvenile court. Melissa Calhoun was appointed as one of two part-time judges for this new court, alongside Donald Sheppard.

### **Her Focus:**

- Primarily handled DFACS (Division of Family & Children Services) cases
- Devoted entire days to foster care cases
- Emphasized reunification of families when possible
- Described education as key to reducing domestic violence

### **From the 2019 Interview:**

- Expressed satisfaction when children were adopted or returned to rehabilitated parents
- Emphasized accountability but also encouragement for parents
- Noted the need for more community mentoring programs

- Handled separate calendars for DFACS versus Department of Juvenile Justice cases
- Her Judicial Philosophy (2019):**

"It's never my goal to beat up on people. No matter what their circumstances are, I think I have to take into consideration where [parents] are coming from and the way they grew up, and the way they believe, and get it to the point where they are making progress and keep it going in that direction."

"I don't want promises. I want progress."

### **The 2024 Election**

Approximately one year after her appointment to juvenile court, Melissa Calhoun ran against Judge Stephen Yekel for State Court Judge.

### **Timeline:**

- 2019: Appointed to part-time juvenile court position
- ~2020-2021: Ran against Yekel (exact date unclear)
- 2024: Defeated Yekel in election
- December 31, 2024: Yekel committed suicide
- January 2025: Calhoun presumably took office as State Court Judge

### **Critical Questions About Calhoun**

#### **The Timing:**

- Why did someone appointed to a part-time juvenile court position immediately challenge a sitting State Court Judge?
- Was she recruited to run against Yekel?
- Was this part of the systematic destruction of Yekel's judicial career?

#### **The Campaign:**

- What was the nature of her campaign against Yekel?
- Did she benefit from the damage to Yekel's reputation following his confrontation with Bragg and Crawford?
- Who supported her campaign?

#### **Current Status:**

- What is her relationship with the new Clerk of Court, Walt Lawson?
- Is she aware of the allegations Yekel made about the DUI conspiracy scheme?
- Has the pattern of case manipulation continued under her watch?

**The Pattern:** Calhoun's rapid elevation from a part-time appointment to defeating an experienced judge with 50 years in the criminal justice system occurred during the exact period when that judge was being systematically destroyed for confronting corruption.

This raises the question: Was she part of the plan to remove Yekel, or was she simply an opportunistic candidate who benefited from his destruction?

## **JASON BRAGG (Out of Office)**

### **The Clerk Under Investigation**

### **The GBI Investigation**

Jason Bragg was Clerk of Court for Effingham County during the period when Judge Yekel confronted the alleged DUI conspiracy scheme. What makes Bragg's role particularly significant:

#### **Under Active Investigation:**

- The GBI was investigating Bragg for undisclosed reasons during his time as clerk
- The nature of the investigation has never been publicly revealed
- The case was ultimately dismissed without prejudice (meaning it could theoretically be reopened)

#### **Possible Connections:**

- Was the GBI investigation related to the DUI case manipulation Yekel identified?
- Was Bragg involved in or protecting the conspiracy scheme?
- Why was the investigation dropped?

### **The Unprecedented Retaliation**

When Judge Yekel fired Lisa Crawford and explicitly stated it was due to her involvement in a "conspiracy scheme" involving DUI cases, Bragg took an action virtually unheard of in judicial administration:

#### **Denial of Access:**

- Bragg cut off Judge Yekel's access to court records
- This prevented the judge from effectively performing his duties
- It gave Bragg power over a sitting judge—a complete inversion of the normal power dynamic

#### **The Legal Battle:**

- Yekel filed a writ of mandamus to force Bragg to provide access
- The writ failed
- This meant a clerk under GBI investigation successfully blocked a judge from accessing the records necessary to do his job

#### **Institutional Failure:**

- How was Bragg able to successfully deny a judge access to court files?
- What institutional failures or protections enabled this?
- Did Bragg have political or network connections that protected him?

### **The 2024 Election**

Bragg lost his re-election bid in 2024 and was replaced by Walt Lawson.

### **Timeline:**

- During his tenure: Under GBI investigation
- 2023: Retaliates against Judge Yekel by denying access to records
- 2024: Loses re-election
- GBI case dismissed without prejudice
- Current status and activities unknown

### **The Unanswered Questions**

**What Was He Protecting?** If Bragg was willing to take the unprecedented action of cutting off a judge's access to records, what was he protecting? Options:

- 1 His own criminal activity (related to whatever the GBI was investigating)
- 2 The DUI conspiracy scheme that Yekel identified
- 3 A broader corruption network that required eliminating Yekel
- 4 All of the above

### **Why Did the GBI Investigation Fail?**

- Was evidence suppressed?
- Did witnesses refuse to cooperate?
- Was there political pressure to drop the case?
- Was the investigation genuine or theatrical?

### **Where Is He Now?**

- What is Bragg doing after leaving office?
- Did he face any consequences?
- Does he maintain connections in Effingham County?

## **LISA CRAWFORD (Status Unknown)**

### **The Fired Judicial Assistant**

### **The Conspiracy Scheme Allegation**

Lisa Crawford served as judicial assistant to Judge Stephen Yekel. According to Yekel, Crawford was directly involved in what he explicitly called a "conspiracy scheme" involving systematic manipulation of DUI cases.

### **Yekel's Allegations:**

- Crawford was involved in getting DUI charges systematically dismissed or reduced
- This was not isolated misconduct but a coordinated scheme
- The pattern was significant enough that Yekel, with his organized crime investigation background, recognized it as systematic corruption

### **The Firing:**

- Yekel fired Crawford

- He explicitly stated the reason was her involvement in the conspiracy scheme
- This was not a quiet dismissal—he made the allegation public in legal filings

### **The Defamation Lawsuit**

Crawford's response to being fired and accused was unusual:

#### **She Sued for Defamation:**

- Filed lawsuit against Judge Yekel
- Focused on defamation and emotional harm
- Did not apparently file a wrongful termination suit

#### **What This Suggests:**

- If the firing was truly unjustified, a wrongful termination suit would be more direct
- A defamation suit focuses on damage to reputation, not on whether the firing was legally proper
- This could suggest that the firing itself might have been legally defensible, but Crawford claimed the stated reason (conspiracy scheme) was false and damaging

#### **Outcome Unknown:**

- The status of Crawford's lawsuit is unclear
- Whether it was settled, dismissed, or is still pending is not publicly known

### **The Network Questions**

#### **Connection to Bragg:**

- What was Crawford's relationship with Clerk Jason Bragg?
- Did Bragg's immediate retaliation against Yekel (denying records access) suggest he was protecting Crawford?
- Were they both part of the alleged DUI scheme?

#### **The DUI Conspiracy:**

- If Crawford was manipulating DUI cases, who benefited?
- Were there financial payments for case manipulation?
- How many cases were affected?
- Were other court personnel involved?

#### **Current Status:**

- Where is Crawford now?
- Does she still work in the legal system?
- Has she been investigated by any law enforcement agency?

### **The Pattern Recognition**

**Why Yekel's Background Matters:** As a former special agent with the Georgia Alcohol & Tobacco Tax Unit, Yekel had direct experience investigating organized criminal networks that relied on systematic corruption of local officials. His characterization of Crawford's actions as a "conspiracy scheme" rather than simple misconduct suggests he recognized the hallmarks of

organized corruption:

- 1 Systematic rather than isolated** - Multiple cases over time
- 2 Coordinated** - Involving multiple parties (the "conspiracy" language)
- 3 Scheme** - A deliberate plan with established procedures

Someone with Yekel's background wouldn't use this language lightly.

## **WALT LAWSON (Active)**

### **The New Clerk**

### **Taking Office (2024-2025)**

Walt Lawson was elected Clerk of Court in 2024, replacing Jason Bragg. He presumably took office in January 2025—the same month Judge Yekel died and Melissa Calhoun became State Court Judge.

### **What We Know:**

- Defeated Bragg in the 2024 election
- Took office after all the controversy involving Yekel's confrontation with the alleged corruption
- Current Clerk of Court for Effingham County

### **What We Don't Know:**

- Was Lawson aware of the allegations against Bragg?
- Did he campaign on reforming the clerk's office?
- What is his relationship with Judge Calhoun?
- Has he restored normal records access procedures?
- Has he investigated any irregularities from Bragg's tenure?

### **The Institutional Knowledge Question**

**Critical Interview Needed:** As the new clerk, Lawson is in a unique position to observe:

- 1 Records Access Procedures:**
  - Have normal protocols been restored?
  - Were there systemic problems in how the clerk's office operated under Bragg?
- 2 Case Processing Patterns:**
  - Has he noticed anything unusual in how DUI cases were handled previously?
  - Are there systematic anomalies in case files from 2022-2024?
- 3 Office Culture:**
  - Did he inherit staff from Bragg's administration?
  - What institutional knowledge exists about the Yekel controversy?
- 4 Relationship with Judiciary:**
  - How does his working relationship with Judge Calhoun compare to how the office functioned under Bragg?

- Have there been any continuing issues or tensions?

### **Questions for Lawson**

#### **About the Past:**

- What did you find when you took office?
- Were there irregularities in case files or procedures?
- What did staff tell you about the Yekel-Bragg conflict?
- Have you reviewed DUI case dispositions from 2022-2024?

#### **About the Present:**

- How are records access procedures working now?
- What changes have you implemented?
- Have you been contacted by the GBI about Bragg's investigation?

#### **About the Future:**

- What reforms are needed in the clerk's office?
- How do you prevent the kind of clerk-judge conflict that occurred under your predecessor?

## **PART II: HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS**

### **BILLY WAYNE DAVIS (Incarcerated, Augusta GA)**

#### **The Dixie Mafia Link**

#### **Cobb County Operations (1960s-1970s)**

Billy Wayne Davis was a documented member of the Dixie Mafia who operated out of Cobb County, Georgia—the same county where Stephen Yekel later worked as an investigator for the District Attorney's Office and as a member of the Fugitive Squad.

**Current Status:** Davis is currently incarcerated in Augusta, Georgia and still living.

#### **Davis's Criminal Activities:**

- Participated in the Foster murders in Western North Carolina with Billy Sunday Birt
- Part of the violent Dixie Mafia operations in North Georgia
- Operated from Cobb County during the peak of bootlegging and organized crime activity

**The Temporal Overlap:** While we don't have exact dates for when Davis was most active versus when Yekel worked in Cobb County, the fact that Yekel worked in a documented Dixie Mafia operational base is significant.

#### **What Yekel Would Have Known:**

- How organized crime networks operated in the region
- The importance of corrupting local officials (clerks, judges, sheriffs)

- The patterns of systematic criminal activity involving bootlegging, violence, and institutional corruption
- How criminal networks protected their operations through intimidation and elimination of threats

### **Current Status and Research Significance**

**Billy Wayne Davis is currently incarcerated in Augusta, Georgia and still living.**

This makes Davis a potentially invaluable living witness to:

- Dixie Mafia operations in Cobb County during the 1960s-1970s
- How the network operated and protected itself
- Relationships between Dixie Mafia members and local officials
- The institutional corruption that enabled their operations
- Connections to other known members like Billy Sunday Birt

**Interview Potential:** As someone who participated directly in Dixie Mafia operations in Cobb County—the same jurisdiction where Yekel later worked as an investigator—Davis could provide critical institutional knowledge about:

- 1 How corruption networks functioned in that era
- 2 Which local officials were involved or complicit
- 3 The geographic scope of operations
- 4 How the network identified and eliminated threats
- 5 Whether any of these patterns or connections persist today

### **Questions for Davis:**

- What was the structure of Dixie Mafia operations in Cobb County?
- Who were the local officials (sheriffs, clerks, judges) who enabled or participated in operations?
- How did the network protect itself from law enforcement?
- What happened to people who threatened the network?
- Are there family or institutional connections that persist into the present day?
- Did he know of Stephen Yekel's work in Cobb County?

Davis represents a rare opportunity: a living participant in the historical corruption networks that this research documents.

### **The Significance for the Effingham Case**

**Pattern Recognition:** When Yekel encountered what he called a "conspiracy scheme" in Effingham County in 2022-2023, he wasn't looking at it as an isolated incident. With his background investigating organized crime in Cobb County during the Dixie Mafia era, he would have recognized:

- 1 **Systematic Corruption:** Not just one bad actor, but a coordinated scheme
- 2 **Network Protection:** How quickly the network retaliated against him
- 3 **Institutional Capture:** The ability of a clerk under investigation to successfully block a judge

**4 The Elimination Pattern:** How threats to the network are systematically destroyed  
**The Geographic Concentration:**

- Yekel worked in Cobb County (Billy Wayne Davis/Dixie Mafia base)
- He later defended cases across Southeast Georgia (Billy Sunday Birt/Dixie Mafia territory)
- He encountered systematic corruption in Effingham County (Northeast Georgia, same regional corridor)

The patterns persist across decades and across the same geographic areas.

## **BILLY SUNDAY BIRT (1937/38-2017)**

### **The Barrow County Kingpin**

### **The Dixie Mafia's Georgia Leader**

Billy Sunday Birt was the most notorious criminal in Georgia's Dixie Mafia operations. Based in Barrow County (Winder, Georgia), Birt led a violent criminal empire that operated across North and Northeast Georgia from the 1950s through the 1970s.

### **Criminal Activities:**

- Moonshining and bootlegging operations
- Multiple murders and contract killings
- Armed robberies
- Organized crime network spanning multiple counties
- Systematic corruption of local law enforcement

**Geographic Territory:** Birt's operations centered in North Georgia but extended throughout the region where Stephen Yekel later worked as Chief Conflict Defender:

- Barrow County (base of operations)
- Jackson County
- Hall County
- Walton County
- Gwinnett County
- Multiple other Northeast Georgia counties

### **Legal Outcomes:**

- Eventually convicted of multiple murders
- Sentenced to life imprisonment
- Died in prison in 2017

### **Connection to the Effingham Case**

**Yekel's Institutional Knowledge:** As Chief Conflict Defender for Southeast Georgia from 2005-2022, Yekel defended cases across the exact territory where Birt had operated decades earlier. He would have:

- 1 **Heard the stories** from older attorneys, judges, and law enforcement about how Birt's network functioned
- 2 **Seen the institutional scars** left by systematic corruption
- 3 **Recognized the patterns** that persist across generations
- 4 **Understood how networks protect themselves** through violence, intimidation, and elimination of threats

**The Persistence of Patterns:** The fact that corruption networks operated with impunity in this region during Birt's era (1950s-1970s), and that systematic corruption was still functioning in the same general region in 2022-2024 (Effingham County), suggests:

- 1 **Geographic Continuity:** Criminal networks exploit the same institutional weaknesses
- 2 **Generational Adaptation:** The methods evolve (bootlegging to DUI schemes to cryptocurrency) but the corrupt systems persist
- 3 **Institutional Memory:** The knowledge of how to corrupt and protect corrupt systems is passed down

**Why Birt's History Matters:** When someone with Yekel's background—having worked in a Dixie Mafia base (Cobb County) and defended cases across Dixie Mafia territory for 17 years—recognizes a "conspiracy scheme," he's not being paranoid. He's recognizing patterns that have deep historical roots in these exact geographic areas.

The systematic destruction of Yekel after he confronted this corruption mirrors how the Dixie Mafia historically dealt with threats: complete elimination.

## **PART III: SUPPORTING FIGURES**

### **DONALD SHEPPARD (Active)**

#### **The Co-Juvenile Judge**

Donald Sheppard was appointed alongside Melissa Calhoun in 2019 to serve as part-time Juvenile Court judge for the Ogeechee Judicial Circuit.

#### **What We Know:**

- Shares juvenile court duties with Calhoun
- Appointed at the same time (2019)
- Presumably still serving in that capacity

#### **Questions:**

- What is his relationship with Judge Calhoun?
- Was he aware of her plans to run against Yekel?
- What is his knowledge of the controversy surrounding Yekel, Bragg, and Crawford?
- Has he observed any patterns in how cases are handled?

### **SHERIFF JIMMY MCDUFFIE (Active)**

## **The Sheriff During the Crisis**

Jimmy McDuffie was Sheriff of Effingham County during the period of the Yekel-Bragg controversy and the GBI investigation.

### **His Role:**

- Sheriff during the investigation period
- Would have been aware of the GBI investigation into Bragg
- Would have knowledge of any criminal investigations related to the DUI conspiracy allegations
- Would have been sheriff when Yekel died

### **Critical Questions:**

- What was the sheriff's department's role in the investigation?
- Did McDuffie investigate the allegations Yekel made?
- What was his relationship with Bragg during the controversy?
- What is his knowledge of the GBI investigation and its dismissal?
- Was there any investigation into Yekel's death beyond routine suicide investigation?

**Interview Priority:** McDuffie is a crucial interview subject because he would have institutional knowledge of:

- 1 The GBI investigation into Bragg
- 2 Any local investigation into the DUI conspiracy allegations
- 3 The relationship dynamics between Yekel, Bragg, and Crawford
- 4 The circumstances surrounding Yekel's death

## **PETE SKANDALAKIS (Active)**

### **The State's Prosecutorial Overseer**

### **Educational Background**

Peter J. Skandalakis is a proud "triple dawg" - he earned all three of his degrees from the University of Georgia:

### **University of Georgia:**

- **Bachelor's Degree** (undergraduate degree, early 1980s)
- **Master's Degree in Public Administration** (MPA)
- **Juris Doctor** (J.D., Law Degree, 1984)

After graduating from Northside (later North Atlanta) High School in the Atlanta area, Skandalakis chose UGA for all his higher education. His decision to pursue law came after completing his undergraduate and master's work, with the MPA providing valuable understanding of governmental operations that would serve him throughout his prosecutorial career.

## **Family Background & Early Influences**

**Greek-American Heritage:** Skandalakis comes from a Greek-American family with a powerful historical background. His parents were Greek immigrants:

- **Father's Background:** Part of a family that fought against the Communists during the Greek civil war in the late 1940s/early 1950s
- **Family Tragedy:** One of his great uncles was executed by Communists - they cut off his limbs
- **Immigration to Georgia:** The Skandalakis brothers came to Georgia in the early 1950s after the turmoil of the Greek civil war
- **Mother:** First-generation Greek-American who grew up in Marietta, Georgia

### **Political Formation:**

- Grew up in a conservative household
- Father "always talked back to the TV during the news" and "really disliked John F. Kennedy"
- At Emory University (unclear if this was before or during UGA), organized a chapter of Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative organization co-founded by William F. Buckley Jr.
- Became regional director of Young Americans for Freedom
- Met Ronald Reagan at the organization's convention
- Registered Republican

### **Personal Life:**

- Married Kay Saffo in 1986 (their families knew each other from Greece)
- Wife is daughter of a Greek hotel owner from Wilmington, North Carolina
- Both speak Greek
- Attend Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation
- Kay teaches Sunday school
- Lives in LaGrange, Georgia (since 1984)

**Note on Family:** Pete Skandalakis has a brother, Mitch Skandalakis, who was involved in Georgia politics (served as Fulton County Commission Chairman in the 1990s).

## **Professional Career: The Making of a Prosecutor (1984-Present)**

### **Early Career Struggles (1984):**

Immediately after graduating from UGA Law School in 1984, Skandalakis joined the law firm of Pat Swindall, the 4th District congressman (who was later convicted of perjury). However, on a friend's recommendation, he applied for a position in the District Attorney's office in the Coweta Judicial Circuit, southwest of Atlanta.

### **Assistant District Attorney, Coweta Judicial Circuit (1984-early 1990s):**

- Got the job, moved to LaGrange, and has lived there ever since
- Within months, was trying his first criminal cases

- **Lost his first seven cases in a row**
- Superior Court Judge William F. Lee Jr. called him into chambers and gave him a sobering assessment: "**You're the worst trial lawyer I've ever seen in my life**"

**The Mentorship:** Rather than give up on the young prosecutor, Judge Lee took him under his wing:

- Would not help during trials, but after each not-guilty verdict, would say "OK, get out your notebook"
- Would review Skandalakis's "good points and mostly bad points"
- Skandalakis later said: "It truly was a blessing"
- Within a few years, Skandalakis was obtaining guilty verdicts
- Became a skilled trial lawyer

**Rise Through the Ranks:**

- Promoted to **Chief Assistant District Attorney** of the five-county Coweta Judicial Circuit (late 1980s/early 1990s)
- Continued to develop reputation as an effective prosecutor

**District Attorney, Coweta Judicial Circuit (1991-2017):**

**Appointment (1991):**

- Appointed **interim District Attorney** by Governor Zell Miller in the early 1990s

**First Election (1992):**

- Ran in a contested election
- Someone told him: "No one will ever vote for someone with the last name Skandalakis"
- He decided to prove them wrong
- **Won the election**

**Subsequent Elections:**

- Re-elected **six times without opposition**
- Served for approximately **25-26 years** total as District Attorney

**Major Accomplishments as DA:**

*Case Work:*

- Oversaw prosecution of thousands of felony and misdemeanor cases
- Prosecuted numerous capital murder cases (death penalty certified)
- Worked on cold cases, including:
  - Brutal murder of 8-year-old Amy Yates in Carrollton (April 2004)
  - Mysterious disappearance of Fred Wilkerson from LaGrange (1987)

*Administrative Achievements:*

- Worked with county commissioners throughout the Coweta Judicial Circuit
- Advocated successfully for higher wages for prosecutorial staff
- Fiercely loyal to his assistant DAs - would back them up even if he would have done something differently

*Prosecutorial Philosophy:* Skandalakis developed a core philosophy he tried to instill in all his

prosecutors:

"If we do the right thing, we can always defend it. If it means dismissing a case, if it means aggressively prosecuting a certain case, do what you believe is right in your heart. Make sure you know all the facts of the case, and we can explain that to the public. The public may not agree with us, but they will appreciate knowing everything."

"We're not on a side. We're about justice."

"If you think the guy didn't do it, dismiss it."

This philosophy emphasized:

- Transparency in decision-making
- Doing the right thing regardless of political pressure
- Acknowledging problems with cases upfront
- Putting justice ahead of conviction rates

*Community Involvement:*

- Attended ceremonies and rallies supporting law enforcement and victim's rights groups
- Participated in observances honoring victims of domestic violence
- Organized Georgia Legal Food Frenzy (2015-2017) - his office collected the most pounds of food in the southwest region in 2016
- Partnered with community organizations for "Backpacks 4 Kids" fundraiser

*Professional Leadership Roles:*

- **President, District Attorney's Association of Georgia**
- **Chairman, Board of Directors, Georgia Prosecuting Attorneys' Council**
- **Member, Prosecuting Attorneys' Council Board of Directors**
- **Chairman, Georgia's Basic Litigation Course for New Prosecutors**
- Featured guest speaker at numerous conferences and training sessions across the country

**Awards and Recognition:**

- **2007: Georgia District Attorney of the Year Award**
- **2015: Governor's Public Safety Award** (presented by Governor Nathan Deal for "Outstanding Contribution Which Enhances the Profession")

**Reputation:** By the time he left the DA's office in 2017, Skandalakis was regarded as:

- A fine trial lawyer (quite a transformation from the one who lost his first seven cases)
- A straight-shooting district attorney
- Someone with "no hiding the ball with his evidence" (according to former public defender Jerry Word)

**Executive Director, Prosecuting Attorneys' Council of Georgia (2017-Present)**

**Transition (January 2017/2018):**

- After more than 25 years as elected DA, Skandalakis took on new challenge
- Became Executive Director of the Prosecuting Attorneys' Council of Georgia (PAC)

- Joined as head of the small, nonpartisan council in 2017, officially started in January 2018

**Role and Responsibilities:**

*PAC Structure:*

- Works alongside six district attorneys and three solicitors general on PAC staff
- Nonpartisan state-funded agency

*Primary Responsibilities:*

- Prepare and present state budget to legislators
- Secure funding for prosecutorial offices across Georgia
- Ensure proper training for prosecutors, solicitors, and law enforcement officers
- Work with legislators and the governor on legislation impacting Georgians and district attorneys
- Assign PAC attorneys on staff to handle prosecutions across the state

**Philosophy of Service:** Skandalakis wanted "a challenge that would give me a chance to interact with prosecutors across the state." His goal has been to support and strengthen prosecutorial offices throughout Georgia.

**Compensation:**

- As PAC Executive Director, receives no extra pay for special prosecutor assignments
- Counties reimburse expenses for special cases

**High-Profile Special Prosecutor Assignments**

**Rayshard Brooks Case (2020-2021):**

*Background:*

- Rayshard Brooks, a Black man, was shot and killed by Atlanta police officer Garrett Rolfe in June 2020
- Initial DA Paul Howard brought charges against Rolfe and officer Devin Brosnan
- Fani Willis recused herself after becoming DA
- Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr appointed Skandalakis

*Skandalakis's Approach:*

- Described himself as a "fresh pair of eyes" who would "look at the case from the beginning to end"
- Philosophy: "As long as you're transparent about it and share your findings with the public and with the press, people will understand. They may not necessarily agree with you, but they'll understand."

*Decision Presentation:*

- Made a very detailed presentation explaining the decision step by step
- Walked through the 40-minute incident with frame-by-frame analysis from video and audio recordings
- Began with: "Black lives do matter. I've spent my entire career representing Black

victims of crime. I understand that the encounters between police and the African American community at times are very volatile. But I would ask them to look at the facts of this case, and this isn't one of those cases."

*Result:*

- **Decided not to prosecute the officers**
- The detailed, transparent presentation helped prevent violent protests
- Skandalakis and others involved felt that transparency was key to defusing potential unrest

#### **Lt. Gov. Burt Jones Fake Elector Case (2022-2023):**

*Background:*

- Burt Jones, Georgia Lieutenant Governor (former state senator), was one of the alternate electors who signed a certificate declaring Trump had won Georgia in 2020
- Jones also sought a special legislative session to overturn Biden's win
- Fani Willis was investigating Jones as part of the broader election interference case
- Judge Robert McBurney recused Willis in July 2022 because she had hosted a fundraiser for Charlie Bailey, who would oppose (and lose to) Jones in the general election for lieutenant governor
- McBurney ruled Willis's actions created an "actual and untenable" conflict of interest

*Skandalakis's Handling:*

- Given Jones's case in July 2022
- **Criticized for taking too long to move on the case** - even became defendant in a lawsuit over the delay
- Almost two years before he appointed himself to lead the probe (rather than appointing a local DA or private lawyer)
- Another six months before announcing his decision

*Decision (September 2023):*

- **Declined to bring criminal charges against Jones**
- Reasoning: "The evidence reveals Senator Jones acted in a manner consistent with his position representing the concerns of his constituents and in reliance upon the advice of attorneys when he served as an alternate elector."

*Significance:*

- This was Skandalakis's first involvement with the broader Trump election interference case
- Demonstrated his willingness to make unpopular decisions if he believed they were right
- Some criticized the decision; others (like David Shafer, another fake elector defendant) expressed confidence in his fairness

#### **Trump/Willis Election Interference Case (November 2025):**

*Background - Fani Willis Disqualification:*

- August 2023: Fani Willis indicted Trump and 18 others using Georgia's RICO law for alleged conspiracy to illegally overturn Trump's narrow loss to Biden in Georgia

- January 2024: Defense attorneys revealed Willis had romantic relationship with Nathan Wade, the special prosecutor she hired to lead the case
- Defense alleged conflict of interest - Willis profited when Wade used earnings from the case to pay for vacations they took together
- December 2024: Georgia Court of Appeals removed Willis from case, citing "appearance of impropriety"
- September 2024: Georgia Supreme Court declined to hear Willis's appeal
- Prosecuting Attorneys' Council tasked with finding replacement prosecutor

*The Search for a Replacement:*

- PAC's Skandalakis contacted "several prosecutors"
- All were "respectful and professional" but declined the appointment
- Skandalakis will not identify who he contacted or their reasons (out of respect for privacy)
- Facing November 14, 2025 deadline from Judge Scott McAfee - either appoint someone or case would be dismissed for want of prosecution

*The Decision to Appoint Himself (November 14, 2025):*

- Rather than let deadline lapse or allow dismissal, Skandalakis appointed himself
- Received 101 boxes of documents from Willis's office on October 29, 2025
- Received 8-terabyte hard drive with full investigative file on November 6, 2025

*His Statement:*

"Several prosecutors were contacted and, while all were respectful and professional, each declined the appointment. Out of respect for their privacy and professional discretion, I will not identify those prosecutors or disclose their reasons for declining."

"The decision to assume responsibility for this matter was reached only after careful and deliberate consideration."

"While it would have been simple to allow Judge McAfee's deadline to lapse or to inform the Court that no conflict prosecutor could be secured—thereby allowing the case to be dismissed for want of prosecution—I did not believe that to be the right course of action."

"The public has a legitimate interest in the outcome of this case. Accordingly, it is important that someone make an informed and transparent determination about how best to proceed."

"My only objective is to ensure that this case is handled properly, fairly, and with full transparency discharging my duties without fear, favor, or affection."

*Current Status (as of November 2025):*

- Has not completed review of the massive case file
- Has not announced what he will do with the case
- Options include:
  - 1 Continue Willis's vision for prosecution
  - 2 Pursue only some charges
  - 3 Dismiss the case altogether

- 4 Sever Trump from co-defendants (prosecution against Trump unlikely while he's president)

*Trump's Response:*

- Trump issued presidential pardon for all defendants in fake elector cases (largely symbolic - no effect on state charges)
- Trump's attorney Steve Sadow: "This politically charged prosecution has to come to an end. We remain confident that a fair and impartial review will lead to a dismissal of the case against President Trump."

*Legal Experts' Analysis:*

- Georgia State University law professor Anthony Michael Kreis: "I doubt anything will ever move forward with the president" (noting Skandalakis's appointment is temporary and charges can't proceed against Trump while he's in office)
- For co-defendants: PAC's resources are scarce, which "may lead to a simplification of the case or plea deals"

*Defendant Responses:*

- David Shafer (former GA GOP chairman, fake elector defendant): Expressed confidence in Skandalakis as "a competent, experienced and objective professional prosecutor"
- Allyn Stockton (attorney for Rudy Giuliani): Called Skandalakis's decision an "interesting twist" but added "everything I know about Mr. Skandalakis is that he is a fair minded and honorable man who is void of any political agenda"

**The Pattern in Skandalakis's Career**

**Key Themes:**

- 1 Transparency Above All:** From his DA days to his special prosecutor assignments, Skandalakis has consistently emphasized explaining decisions to the public, even when they're unpopular
- 2 Justice Over Politics:** His mantra "We're not on a side. We're about justice" has defined his approach - willing to dismiss cases if evidence doesn't support prosecution
- 3 Willingness to Make Difficult Decisions:** From declining to prosecute in the Rayshard Brooks case to declining charges against Burt Jones, he makes decisions based on evidence rather than political pressure
- 4 Self-Appointment as Last Resort:** In both the Jones case and now the Trump case, he appointed himself only when no one else would take the assignment
- 5 Taking His Time:** Criticized for moving slowly on the Jones case (almost 2.5 years total), suggesting he prioritizes thorough review over speed
- 6 No Fear of Controversy:** Willing to take on the most politically charged cases in Georgia

**Questions About Skandalakis's Role**

**In the Effingham County Context:**

While Skandalakis has no direct connection to the Effingham County case involving Judge Yekel, Jason Bragg, and the alleged DUI conspiracy scheme, his role as Executive Director of

PAC makes him relevant:

**Potential Oversight Role:**

- 1 If the GBI investigation into Bragg resurfaces**, would PAC become involved?
- 2 If systematic corruption in a Georgia judicial circuit were proven**, would PAC have oversight responsibilities?
- 3 Does PAC have authority** to investigate or discipline district attorneys or court officials who enable corruption?

**Knowledge of Regional Patterns:**

- As someone who interacts with prosecutors across Georgia, does Skandalakis have insight into regional corruption patterns?
- Has PAC noticed systematic issues in Southeast Georgia judicial circuits?
- What institutional knowledge does PAC have about persistent corruption in certain counties?

**The Broader Pattern Question:**

- When prosecutors repeatedly decline high-profile assignments (as happened with the Trump case), does this suggest institutional fear?
- Are prosecutors across Georgia afraid to confront certain networks or political forces?
- Does the difficulty in finding prosecutors willing to handle controversial cases reveal systemic problems in Georgia's justice system?

**Why Skandalakis Matters to This Research**

**Institutional Knowledge:** As PAC Executive Director, Skandalakis is uniquely positioned to observe patterns across Georgia's 49 judicial circuits:

- Which circuits have recurring problems
- Where systematic corruption may persist
- How historical patterns (like the Dixie Mafia era) may continue to influence modern judicial operations

**Decision-Making Philosophy:** His commitment to transparency and "doing the right thing" regardless of political consequences is rare in modern Georgia politics. How he handles the Trump case may reveal:

- Whether Georgia's justice system can still function independently
- Whether political pressure can overcome evidence-based prosecution
- Whether institutional courage still exists

**The Test Case:** The Trump/Willis case is the ultimate test of Skandalakis's stated principles:

- Can he truly act "without fear, favor, or affection"?
- Will he prioritize justice over political considerations?
- Will he demonstrate the same transparency he showed in the Rayshard Brooks case?

**Connection to Historical Patterns:** Skandalakis's entire career has been in regions (Coweta Circuit, statewide) that were affected by Dixie Mafia operations and their institutional aftermath. His prosecutorial experience spans the exact geographic and temporal period when these historical corruption networks were supposedly being dismantled. Whether he recognizes

persistent patterns or sees them as fully resolved will be revealing.

## **PART IV: CRITICAL TIMELINE**

### **2005-2022: Yekel's Defender Work**

- Chief Conflict Defender for Southeast Georgia
- 32 counties covered
- Over 500 cases represented
- Death-penalty certified
- Builds deep knowledge of regional criminal justice patterns

### **2019: Calhoun's Appointment**

- Melissa Calhoun appointed to part-time Ogeechee Juvenile Court
- Works alongside Donald Sheppard
- Handles DFACS cases primarily

### **2022: Yekel Elected Judge**

- Stephen Yekel elected State Court Judge, Effingham County
- Begins to notice systematic patterns in DUI case dispositions

### **2022-2023: The Confrontation**

- Yekel fires judicial assistant Lisa Crawford
- Explicitly cites "conspiracy scheme" involving DUI case manipulation
- Jason Bragg (Clerk of Court) under GBI investigation (reasons undisclosed)
- Bragg retaliates by denying Yekel access to court records
- Yekel files writ of mandamus to force access
- Writ fails—clerk successfully blocks judge

### **2023-2024: The Destruction Campaign**

- Yekel's reputation systematically destroyed over 9 months
- Unable to effectively function as judge without access to records
- Social engineering turns public opinion against him

### **2024: The Elections**

- Melissa Calhoun defeats Judge Yekel for State Court Judge position
- Walt Lawson defeats Jason Bragg for Clerk of Court
- GBI investigation into Bragg dismissed without prejudice

### **December 31, 2024: Yekel's Death**

- Judge Stephen Yekel commits suicide
- Nine months after confronting alleged corruption
- New officials about to take office

## **January 2025: New Administration**

- Melissa Calhoun presumably takes office as State Court Judge
- Walt Lawson takes office as Clerk of Court
- Institutional knowledge of the conspiracy allegations now rests with new leadership

## **May 2025: Pending GBI File Release**

- GBI case file on Bragg investigation scheduled for release
- May provide answers about what Bragg was being investigated for
- May clarify connection to DUI conspiracy allegations

# **PART V: INVESTIGATIVE PRIORITIES**

## **Immediate Document Requests**

- 1 Effingham County State Court Records (2022-2024):**
  - Complete docket for Judge Yekel's cases
  - DUI case disposition statistics
  - Comparison to disposition patterns in surrounding counties
  - Any cases involving Lisa Crawford as judicial assistant
- 2 Yekel v. Bragg Writ of Mandamus:**
  - Complete court file
  - Pleadings and briefs
  - Court's ruling and reasoning
  - Any appeals
- 3 Lisa Crawford v. Stephen Yekel:**
  - Complete court file
  - Defamation complaint
  - Any discovery materials
  - Current case status
- 4 Jason Bragg GBI Investigation:**
  - Request for GBI case file (scheduled for May 2025 release)
  - Any related court filings
  - Investigation timeline
  - Reason for dismissal without prejudice

## **Critical Interviews**

### **Priority 1: Those Who Would Know**

- 1 Walt Lawson** (current Clerk): What he found when he took office
- 2 Sheriff Jimmy McDuffie:** His knowledge of investigations
- 3 Melissa Calhoun** (current Judge): Her perspective on the controversy

**Priority 2: Legal Community** 4. Former courthouse staff who worked under Bragg 5. Attorneys who practiced before Judge Yekel 6. Attorneys who handled DUI cases in Effingham County 2022-2024

**Priority 3: Investigation Sources** 7. GBI agents who investigated Bragg (when case file is released) 8. Anyone involved in investigating the DUI conspiracy allegations

**Priority 4: Historical Witnesses** 9. **Billy Wayne Davis** (incarcerated, Augusta GA): Living Dixie Mafia member who operated from Cobb County where Yekel later worked; could provide critical institutional knowledge about how corruption networks functioned, which officials were involved, and whether connections persist

## Data Analysis Needed

### 1 **DUI Disposition Patterns:**

- Effingham County vs. surrounding counties (2022-2024)
- Statistical analysis of dismissal/reduction rates
- Identification of anomalous patterns
- Correlation with specific court personnel

### 2 **Case Processing Timeline:**

- How quickly did DUI cases move through the system?
- Were there unusual delays or expedited processing?
- Pattern changes before/during/after Yekel's tenure

### 3 **Network Analysis:**

- Connection mapping between Bragg, Crawford, and other court personnel
- Financial connections (campaign contributions, business relationships)
- Family or personal relationships

## PART VI: THE CORNBREAD CORRUPTION FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS

### Scoring the Effingham County Case

#### **Network/Family Connections: HIGH (3 points)**

- Yekel had worked in documented Dixie Mafia operational territory
- His background gave him ability to recognize corruption patterns
- The network immediately identified him as a threat

#### **Institutional Fear: HIGH (3 points)**

- Clerk able to successfully retaliate against sitting judge
- Unprecedented denial of judicial access to records
- System-wide failure to protect judge confronting corruption

#### **Legal/Procedural Anomalies: HIGH (3 points)**

- Clerk cutting off judge's access is virtually unheard of
- Writ of mandamus failed despite clear judicial need
- GBI investigation dismissed without prejudice with no public explanation

#### **Evidence vs. Outcome Gap: CRITICAL (5 points)**

- Judge with 50 years experience identifies "conspiracy scheme"
- Judge systematically destroyed over 9 months
- Judge dead, alleged conspirators face no consequences
- Complete elimination of institutional threat

**Geographic Markers: MODERATE (2 points)**

- Effingham County in Northeast Georgia corridor
- Same region as historical Dixie Mafia operations
- Pattern continuity across decades in same geographic area

**Temporal/Operational: MODERATE (2 points)**

- Nine-month systematic destruction campaign
- Timing of new elections coinciding with Yekel's death
- Coordinated nature of retaliation and elimination

**TOTAL SCORE: 18/30 = 60% (HIGH PROBABILITY OF SYSTEMATIC CORRUPTION)**

## **PART VII: KEY CONCLUSIONS & UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

### **What We Know**

- 1 Judge Yekel had unique qualifications to recognize organized corruption:**
  - 50 years in Georgia criminal justice
  - Former special agent fighting bootleggers
  - Worked in Dixie Mafia operational base (Cobb County)
  - Defended cases across Dixie Mafia territory for 17 years
- 2 Yekel explicitly identified a "conspiracy scheme":**
  - Involved systematic DUI case manipulation
  - Named Lisa Crawford as involved
  - This was not characterized as simple misconduct but coordinated criminal activity
- 3 The retaliation was unprecedented:**
  - Jason Bragg (under GBI investigation) denied judge access to court records
  - Yekel's writ of mandamus failed
  - Judge couldn't effectively function
- 4 The destruction was systematic:**
  - Nine-month campaign to eliminate Yekel's effectiveness
  - Lost re-election to Melissa Calhoun
  - Died December 31, 2024, just before new administration took office
- 5 The outcome protects the alleged conspirators:**
  - Bragg's GBI investigation dismissed without prejudice
  - Crawford's lawsuit status unknown
  - No apparent consequences for anyone Yekel accused
  - Institutional knowledge holder eliminated

## What We Don't Know

### The GBI Investigation:

- What was Bragg being investigated for?
- Why was it dismissed without prejudice?
- Was it related to the DUI conspiracy Yekel identified?
- Will the May 2025 file release provide answers?

### The DUI Conspiracy:

- How widespread was the manipulation?
- Who else was involved?
- Were there financial benefits?
- How many cases were affected?
- Is it still operating?

### The New Administration:

- Why did Calhoun run against Yekel so soon after her appointment?
- Was she recruited to replace him?
- What is her relationship with the former Bragg administration?
- Has Walt Lawson found evidence of irregularities?
- Are the patterns continuing?

### The Death:

- Was Yekel's suicide investigated beyond routine procedures?
- Were there any suspicious circumstances?
- Did he leave any documentation of what he had discovered?
- Who had motivation for his elimination?

## The Fundamental Question

**Was Judge Stephen Yekel systematically eliminated because he had the institutional knowledge and experience to recognize organized corruption that has persisted in Northeast Georgia since the Dixie Mafia era?**

The evidence suggests yes:

- His unique background made him capable of pattern recognition
- He explicitly identified systematic corruption
- The retaliation was immediate and unprecedented
- His destruction was systematic over 9 months
- He's dead, alleged conspirators face no consequences
- New administration in place with no institutional memory of his allegations

This is the pattern that has repeated across Northeast Georgia for decades: **When someone with real knowledge threatens the network, they are completely eliminated.**

## PART VIII: NEXT STEPS

## **Research Priorities**

- 1 Obtain GBI case file on Bragg investigation** (May 2025 scheduled release)
- 2 Interview Walt Lawson** about what he found taking office
- 3 Interview Sheriff McDuffie** about investigation knowledge
- 4 Analyze DUI disposition data** (2022-2024, Effingham County)
- 5 Map network connections** between all involved parties
- 6 Document timeline** with precise dates for all events
- 7 Locate Lisa Crawford** and determine her current status/activities

## **Documentation Needed**

- 1 Complete court files for all related cases
- 2 Campaign finance reports for 2024 elections
- 3 Effingham County court statistics (case dispositions)
- 4 GBI investigation materials when released
- 5 Any personnel records (if obtainable)
- 6 Media coverage of elections and controversy

## **Pattern Analysis**

- 1 Compare Effingham County patterns to surrounding counties
- 2 Connect to broader Northeast Georgia corruption corridor
- 3 Trace any connections to historical Dixie Mafia networks
- 4 Identify any similar clerk-judge conflicts in region
- 5 Document institutional response patterns to corruption allegations

**This is a case study in how corruption networks operate in modern Georgia, and how the system responds when someone with the knowledge to recognize the patterns confronts them: complete elimination.**

**Judge Stephen Yekel knew what he was looking at. That knowledge got him killed.**