

Change is Coming!

Based on an interview of Claude Compton, by Don Coulter in November 2016

Claude Compton grew up in Manassas, attended Osbourn High School, and followed his father, C. Lacey Compton, Sr. and brother, C. Lacey Compton, Jr., into the practice of law in 1969. The law firm was known as Compton, Latimer, Compton & Compton. (Bud Latimer was Lacey Compton, Sr.'s first partner.) Claude recalls there were very few lawyers in the area when he started and records suggest there were fewer than 30. When asked who his mentors were in those early years, (other than his father and brother), he replied, Percy Thornton, Selwyn Smith, and Thomas Underwood, noting they were open to questions and willing to lend a helping hand. As a young attorney, all of the lawyers in town were helpful and took pride in their work and their word. Other attorneys to become associated with the Manassas firm were Richard Potter, Martin Cross, Tim Cope and Greg Porter. Eventually the firm opened a second office in Woodbridge that dissolved and reformed to become Compton & Duling, LC.

Other law firms in the area in the late 1960's were Owens, Thornton, Underwood & Beane; Smith and Davenport; Smith, Hoss and Stephens; and McGolrick, Bowles and Gallagher. These lawyers were practicing during a time of tremendous growth in the community during the 60's and 70's. Claude recalled that his father was involved in the re-zoning of property that would later become Georgetown South. As the land was developed, they would handle up to six settlements a night, one going on in every office, between 5:00 pm and 10:00 pm so people wouldn't have to take time from work. Claud's father also worked on the re-zoning necessary to bring IBM to the area. When those facilities opened in Manassas, "they moved 150- 200 families in here. They all had to buy a house or rent a house or something and we did a lot of their referral work." Claude worked on the re-zoning and development of the Ben Lomond Farm which would later become the Sudley, Westgate and Loch Lomond subdivisions.

When asked how the practice of law has changed during his career, Claude replied, the practice has changed "night and day." Now, everything has to be in writing, where previously, a handshake was binding. Court procedures have become more rigid in response to the increased volume. The real estate practice has changed significantly as well. In the 1960's lawyers did it all, there were no title companies. They would spend hours in the records room and had keys to the courthouse so they could access files after hours. That practice changed during Charlie Gnad's (1973-1990) term as Clerk because he was uncomfortable with the growing number of lawyers who wanted keys.

Claude was kind enough to share a little history about his father, one of the founding members of the PWC Bar Association. C. Lacey Compton, Sr. graduated from George Washington Law School in 1935. He started his practice in Manassas as a "general practitioner. Any[one] that came to the door that needed representation, he was there." In 1938, he was appointed to serve as a Trial Justice in the County Courts, (which were the predecessor to the General and Juvenile & Domestic Relations District Courts), a part-time position he held for over 20 years, until he decided to devote his energies to the full time practice of law. Serving as a Judge prevented Compton Sr., from handling any trial work, so he focused on real state and land use, becoming one of the area's first land use attorneys. He "recognized that change was coming [to PWC] and he was able to get people to trust him that were against some of the changes" ultimately representing many of the farmers, whose land was under development, helping them obtain a fair value for their property.

In his final comments, Claude Compton said, this was "a good place to be and to grow up, raise a family." His family had a tremendous impact on this area's growth, impacting public health, economic development, and quality of life for area residents, demonstrating the positive impact of lawyers in our community.