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## Spilman Thomas & Battle marks 150 years

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By Linda Harris, Legal Reporter [CONNECT](#)

It would be easy enough to get swept up in the intricacies of Spilman Thomas & Battle's 150-year history, but Managing Partner Michael Basile says that would be a mistake.

Basile says the real story is what the firm is doing to position itself for the next 150 years.

"We are not in any way resting on our laurels," Basile said. "We're trying to configure the firm for what's next, and we're certainly excited about the future."

Spilman Thomas & Battle's origins go back long before the firm was founded in 1864. Its founder, Benjamin Harrison Smith, spent five years in the Virginia State Senate, helping to craft much-needed land law legislation before resigning in 1838, one year into his third term in office.

Outspoken in his views on slavery, in later years Smith made no secret of his unionist leanings. He was called to serve as delegate to the 1850-51 West Virginia Constitutional convention and West Virginia's first Constitutional Convention in 1863. He was appointed U.S. attorney for the Western District of Virginia by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. Several American presidents also tapped the firm's expertise in land laws.

In Spilman Thomas & Battle's "History of Service: The First 150," author Elizabeth J. Wilson writes that the firm's history "is told by the lives of the individuals — a masterful orator and a pioneering contract draftsman; a Distinguished Flying Cross medal award winner and a frail World War I soldier honored for bravery; a presidential campaign aide and a federal tax expert; a West Virginia Senate president and gubernatorial aides; Confederate soldiers and Union loyalists; a horse farmer and a bank president; distinguished federal appeals court judges and a renowned circuit judge; a pioneer broadcast executive and a political historian. Each demonstrated great character and exceptional achievement; they also created a culture ..."

Basile points out few firms in the Mountain State have achieved sesquicentennial status, "but that said, we tend to look forward here at Spilman. Although we had a series of celebratory events in 2014, our focus is 'What's next?' It's part-and-parcel of the client service campaign we unfurled throughout the year."

The firm anticipates continued expansion, he said, "but not necessarily in a brick-and-mortar format."

"Given the rapid evolution of technology, it's quite feasible to tether a lawyer to one of the firm's offices by wiring their home with technology that allows them to participate as a practitioner without being housed in the office," he said. "We call that 'Spilman in a box.' It allows folks to be very productive in a home office."

Spilman Thomas & Battle currently has a staff of 270, about 135 of them lawyers, with seven offices in four states — Charleston, Morgantown and Wheeling, West Virginia; Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Roanoke, Virginia; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

"We haven't taken a traditional 'expansion for expansion's sake' approach," he said. "We hire great people, we ensure during the hiring process that we're looking at consummate professionals. We 'measure twice and cut once' with regard to significant hires ... growing through mergers and acquisitions, that hasn't been the approach we take. In the end, it's about the lawyers on the team so we're very, very careful (hiring)."

While much has changed as the firm evolved over the past 150 years, Basile said they remain focused on serving the business community.

"No doubt businesses of different sizes have different issues, but the unifying force is the business environment and creating solutions that make sense, that allow folks to more productively manage their business," he said.

He said in the 1800s, as now, the firm's members were deeply involved in their community.

"Our founding member assisted Lincoln with property rights issues involved with cleaving West Virginia away from Virginia," Basile said. "He didn't appreciate the way West Virginians were repatriated after the Civil War, so he became a Democrat and ran against the first governor."

The founding members, in fact, specialized in property rights, and in that regard he said Spilman Thomas & Battle has come full circle with the re-emergence of oil and gas and other energy-centric business segments.

"In that day the mineral of significance was salt," Basile said. "Eventually salt gave way to oil and gas, oil and gas gave way to coal ... but it's spiraled back, and we've been at the forefront, helping craft legislation supporting oil and gas development."

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