

## INTRODUCTION

There are a number of different proceedings which may be filed in the Probate Court following the death of a Georgia resident or a non-resident owning property in the State of Georgia. Proceedings are filed in the Probate Court of the county of the deceased's residence in Georgia or in the county where property of a non-resident is located.

This pamphlet briefly describes the usual, initial proceedings. For each proceeding described, there is a standard form, which the Court will provide to any petitioner.

It is suggested that you discuss the matters of concern with an attorney who practices probate or estate law. The attorney can assist you in determining which proceeding is the most appropriate for your particular situation. Very often, there are other matters (e.g., tax returns, preparation of deeds, title transfer, etc.) which may also make it appropriate or necessary to seek the services of an attorney.

If you proceed without an attorney, it will be your responsibility to determine or select the proceeding appropriate to your situation. The staff of the Probate Court may not make the determination or selection for you, since to do so may constitute the unauthorized practice of law, a misdemeanor under Georgia law. Neither the Court nor the County can accept responsibility for incorrect decisions made by the staff, and they have been directed to refrain from giving that kind of advice.

The Probate Judge is required by law to remain impartial to all parties. The Judge must treat every case as though it may become contested. Therefore, the Judge also may not advise you on which proceeding is most appropriate to your case. The Judge is prohibited from discussing the facts or evidence in any contested case with a party unless all parties are present. You should not ask to discuss your case privately with the Judge, and you should

understand if the Judge stops any discussion which appears to require the presence of others.

## PROCEDURES AVAILABLE FOR DECEDENTS' ESTATES

### WHEN THERE IS A WILL

**SOLEMN FORM PROBATE.** This procedure requires notice to all heirs-at-law and becomes binding upon all parties immediately upon appointment of the executor. "Heirs-at-law" are the persons who would inherit the estate if there were no lawful Will; heirs at law may or may not be beneficiaries under the Will. The notice requires anyone having a legal cause to object to or contest the alleged Will to file the objection or contest before a certain deadline. The original Will must be attached to the Petition, and proof of the execution of the Will must be provided by either Interrogatories or Proof of Witness. All heirs must be duly served or must acknowledge service. The Court will appoint a guardian ad litem for each minor or incapacitated heir.

**COMMON FORM PROBATE.** This procedure may be done without notice to heirs but does not become binding for four years after the appointment of the executor. The requirements of providing the original Will and proof of proper execution are the same as with the Solemn Form Probate. Heirs and others may file an objection or contest at any time up to four years after common form probate.

**PROBATE OF WILL IN SOLEMN FORM/LETTERS OF ADMINISTRATION WITH WILL ANNEXED.** If there is a Will but the named Executor(s) is (are) either unable or unwilling to serve, an Administrator CTA (with will annexed) must be appointed. If a named Executor is still living, the Executor must sign a declination, or there must be testimony that the Executor is unable to

serve. A majority of the beneficiaries may select the Administrator CTA. The Court will appoint a guardian ad litem for each minor or incapacitated heir.

**WILL FILED NOT FOR PROBATE.** If there is no property to pass under the Will, probate is not necessary. However, the Will of the deceased must be filed with the Probate Court. Real estate, unlike joint bank accounts, may not automatically pass to a surviving co-owner. If the only property in the estate is an automobile, title may be transferable through the Tag Office without probate being necessary.

### WHEN THERE IS NO WILL

**PERMANENT ADMINISTRATION.** This procedure requires notice to all heirs. A surviving spouse or sole heir is entitled to serve as Administrator; otherwise, the administrator must be selected by a majority of the heirs. Administrators must post bond and file inventories and returns, unless ALL heirs at law consent to a waiver of those requirements. If ALL heirs consent, the Administrator may be given additional powers and authority. Natural guardians of minor heirs and legal guardians of incapacitated adult heirs may consent to waive requirements unless the guardian is the petitioner.

**TEMPORARY ADMINISTRATOR.** Notice to all heirs at law is not required, but a majority of the heirs at law must select the Temporary Administrator, unless the petitioner is the surviving spouse or sole heir at law. Powers are limited to collecting and preserving the assets of the deceased. No expenditures or disbursements may be made without a special court order. Temporary Administrators must post bond and file inventories and returns. When selection is required, natural guardians of minor heirs and legal guardians of incapacitated adult heirs may consent to selection unless the guardian is the petitioner.

NO ADMINISTRATION NECESSARY. If all debts of the deceased have been paid (or if all creditors consent) and there is no other need for formal administration, and the heirs have all agreed on how the estate will be divided, this proceeding may be filed. All heirs must be over the age of 18 and not under any legal disability and must sign an agreement disposing of the estate. All creditors, if any, must consent to the entry of the Order Declaring No Administration Necessary.

### WHETHER OR NOT THERE IS A WILL

TWELVE MONTHS' SUPPORT. This proceeding may be filed only by a surviving spouse or for minor children of the decedent. The petition asks that specified property be awarded to the spouse and/or children. Notice must be given to all "interested persons". Property awarded as year's support is free of all unsecured debts of the estate and takes precedence over any disposition by Will.

PETITION TO ENTER SAFE DEPOSIT BOX. This proceeding is usually used when the Will is thought to be in a safe deposit box. It permits the bank to open and examine the contents of the box in the presence of the petitioner. If a Will is found, the bank must deliver it directly to the Probate Court. Insurance policies may be delivered directly to the named beneficiaries. The petitioner may receive only burial instructions and any deed to a burial plot. Other property must remain in the box until an Executor or Administrator is appointed.

## GLOSSARY

**Administrator:** the person who administers a decedent's estate when there is no will.

**Administrator with Will Annexed:** the person who administers a decedent's estate when there is a Will, but the Will either fails to name an executor, or the named executor cannot or will not serve.

**Decedent:** the deceased person.

**Executor:** the person who administers a decedent's estate when there is a Will.

**Heirs at Law:** those persons who would inherit the estate if there were no Will.

**Intestate:** without a will.

**Letters Testamentary/Letters of Administration:** The official document issued by the Probate Court evidencing the authority of an executor or an administrator.

**Probate:** the court procedure by which a Will is proved to be the valid last will of a decedent; also used generically to refer to the legal process of administering a decedent's estate.

**Probate Court:** the court having jurisdiction over proceedings to administer the estate of a decedent; also has other jurisdiction.

**Testator:** a person who has made a Will.

**Will:** a document, signed with the formalities required by law, by which a person makes disposition of his property, to take effect after his death.

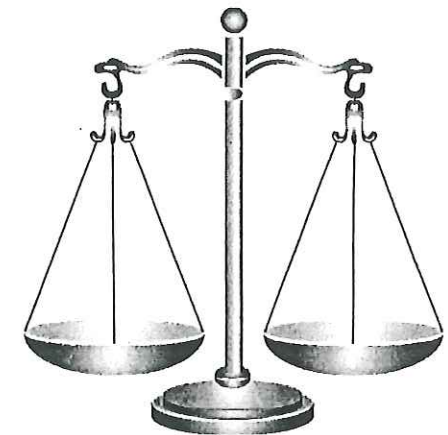
(Adapted from a Brochure Created by  
Judge William Self, Bibb Co. Probate Court)

# GEORGIA PROBATE PROCEEDINGS

*"What to Do When  
Your Loved One Dies"*

*Presented as a Public Service  
by the*

**Sumter County  
Probate Court**



***Stephanie Bennett, Judge***

You may visit the Georgia Probate website  
for additional information:  
[www.gaprobate.gov](http://www.gaprobate.gov)