

Blatt, renowned judge, dies at 94

Federal judge credited with saving Hilton Head Island from bankruptcy

State's longest-serving federal judge was longtime island property owner

BY DAVID LAUDERDALE
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Sol Blatt Jr., the federal judge credited with pulling Hilton Head Island from the jaws of

bankruptcy, died Wednesday night at his home in Charleston. Blatt, 94, served on the federal bench longer than any other judge in South Carolina's history. "Hilton Head Island would

not be as it is today if it were not for him, and most citizens don't understand that," former Hilton Head mayor Tom Peeples said when the Cross Island Parkway was named for Blatt in 2000. Blatt, for decades a part-time Hilton Head resident who built one of the first homes in Palmetto Dunes, was cited for



Blatt

helping pull the island out of one of its worst economic slumps, overseeing the \$100 million bankruptcy of the island's largest employer in the late 1980s.

The Hilton Head Holdings Corp. bankruptcy, which Blatt oversaw, involved the development and resort operations in the communities of Sea Pines, Port Royal Plantation, Indigo Run, Shipyard Plantation and Wexford Plantation and affected more than 2,000 creditors, many of them local businesses.

During the bankruptcy, which threatened to splinter the island's major developments, Blatt said, "I'm not going to supervise the demise of Hilton Head Island when I can stop it."

He chose island hospitality industry leader John C. Curry as trustee, who worked closely with Blatt's longtime friend,

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attorney and former Gov. John C. West of Hilton Head, in maneuvering complex and uncharted waters with saving Hilton Head in mind.

It was unusual in that the case could easily have been handled in New York, and by a judge with experience in bankruptcy. Blatt's involvement raised eyebrows from some creditors, but he never denied his judicial activism, saying he was interested in doing what was good for Hilton Head as a whole.

"That bankruptcy facilitated such sweeping changes in the shape of the local political economy, rather than presiding over the transfer or dismemberment of Hilton Head Holdings, was a testament to the island's political clout and business competence," Michael N. Danielson wrote in "Profits and Politics in Paradise: The Development of Hilton Head Island."

"Certainly Hilton Head did not forget the importance of its friend in court; At the end of 1987, 200 islanders honored Judge Blatt at a dinner sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, Community Association and town government as Hilton Head celebrated Sol Blatt Day."

Blatt was born in Barnwell County in 1921 and was the son of powerful state Rep. Solomon Blatt, who served in the state's

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House of Representatives for 53 years, 33 of them as its speaker.

Sol Blatt Jr. was appointed a federal judge in 1971 and took senior status in 1990. In 2006, he became the longest-serving federal judge in state history.

Blatt and his late wife, Carolyn, are survived by three children.

The Post and Courier in Charleston reported that visitation will be Saturday from 4 to 6 p.m. at the U.S. District Courthouse in Charleston, 85 Broad St. A graveside service will be performed at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Church of the Holy Apostles, 9357 Patterson St., in Barnwell, his hometown. There will be a celebration of Blatt's life from 6 to 8 p.m. on Sunday at 701 Sweetbriar Road in Columbia.