



SCRIPPS HOWARD

*"Give light  
and the people  
will find  
their own way"*

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# The Cincinnati Post

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# Access to the courthouse

In medieval times, a fresh Internet posting reminds us, clerics controlled access to the information of that age.

Clerics were among the few people who could read and write back then. Hence, they became the ones who kept the records. If a king or the local noble issued a proclamation, the clerics got the word out — and held on to the official version of it.

Eventually the job title changed from cleric to clerk, but in most of the Western world the position itself endured.

Ohio's first Constitution, adopted in 1802 and approved by Congress a year later, authorized each county to appoint a clerk of courts. Indeed, William Henry Harrison held that office here in Hamilton County when, in 1840, he was elected president.

Over time the means employed to maintain records have become more sophisticated. But to this day, in most county courthouses, the basis of the legal record-keeping system are words written on paper. And in most counties, to see any of these records you must visit the Courthouse and convince the cleric to allow you to peruse them.

In a decade that has seen the Internet move into the mainstream, and the flow of digitized information grow from a stream to a tidal wave, such practices seem downright archaic.

They may not be around long. With a push or two from one of President Harrison's successors, Hamilton County Clerk of Courts Jim Cissell, the courthouse doors are being opened to anyone with Internet access.

Last week Cissell became one of the first county clerks in

Ohio to offer reasonably full Internet access to computer records maintained by his office.

Some of the information cited above comes courtesy of the home page at the Hamilton County clerk's web site, [www.courtclerk.org](http://www.courtclerk.org).

From there, citizens, for free, can navigate to Common Pleas and Municipal Court civil and criminal records and court schedules. The site also maintains information about car and boat titles and the like.

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## Providing Internet access to court records enhances democratic process.

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The system is still in its infancy, and it has some decided limitations (actual copies of most documents are not available, for example.)

But putting court indexes, schedules and other information online represents a big advance. And it doesn't take much imagination to envision the day when ordinary citizens, from their own homes, can monitor all the filings in any and all cases.

(That may or may not be good news. To get a taste of just how brave the new online world has already become, type your own name at one of the prompts in the criminal index.)

From our perspective, however, the benefits of online public records are enormous.

An open, accessible legal system is fundamental to this democracy. We applaud Cissell for his leadership in pursuit of that goal.