



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

Portion of divorce record unsealed

Copeland case details are sought by TP

Friday, July 21, 2006

**By Bruce Hamilton
St. Tammany Bureau**

State Judge Reginald Badeaux has unsealed portions of restaurateur Al Copeland's divorce record, but he ordered all the documents dealing with the details of the agreement between Copeland and his fourth wife, Jennifer Devall Copeland, to remain private.

The unsealing of part of the record is the latest chapter in a battle between The Times-Picayune and the Copelands over the couple's effort to keep their divorce proceedings secret.

The Louisiana Supreme Court ruled June 2 that judicial cases should be conducted in public and ordered Badeaux to unseal the records or explain the privacy interest that might require that parts of the file be withheld.

In doing so, the court overturned pro-secrecy rulings by Badeaux and 1st Circuit Court of Appeal judges Burrell Carter, Robert Downing and Jimmy Gaidry.

But Badeaux chose to keep most of the record secret, saying that the three children of the Copeland marriage need to be protected from "embarrassment, ridicule and derision of their peers and from the unwanted scrutiny of unscrupulous strangers."

In doing so, he rejected the suggestion by Times-Picayune attorney Lori Mince that the proper course for protecting privacy interests is to delete sensitive portions of the documents, rather than sealing them altogether.

Of the 32 documents unsealed, 27 deal with the newspaper's intervention in the case and the couple's attorneys' opposition to the unsealing.

Robert Lowe, attorney for Copeland, and Mary Devereux, attorney for Jennifer Devall Copeland, have argued there is nothing in the couple's divorce proceedings that is of interest to the public.

Jennifer Devall Copeland filed for divorce Feb. 17, and it was granted in April.

Copeland's divorce from his third wife, Luan Hunter, became a central focus of the federal government's wide-ranging Operation Wrinkled Robe investigation into Jefferson Parish Courthouse corruption. Judge Ronald Bodenheimer pleaded guilty to conspiring to fix the divorce case in Copeland's favor. Copeland has not been charged with a crime in that investigation and has denied knowledge of the conspiracy.