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New IP law firm shares historical documents on its Internet site

By Jerry Crimmins
Law Bulletin staff writer

A letter by President Thomas Jefferson, who was in charge of U.S. patents in the 1790s, has been posted this week on the Web site of a new Chicago law firm devoted to intellectual property law.

The letter was purchased in an auction last month by William J. Hallihan, who started Hallihan IP Partners LLC here on April 1.

Jefferson wrote the letter on Jan. 15, 1809, in his last months as president, to his cousin, Richard Randolph.

"I have duly received your letter of the 10th mentioning the invention of a bridle having the advantage of not going into the horse's mouth," Jefferson wrote.

"You know, of course," Jefferson continued, "you can have a patent for the use of it on the terms mentioned in the patent law."

"What attracted me to the letter," Hallihan said, "was the fact that it is concerning patents.... Even Thomas Jefferson told his cousin you should protect your intellectual property."

Jefferson was appointed secretary of state in 1790 by President Washington, and in that role, among many other jobs,

Jefferson was in charge of the United States' first patent office.

Hallihan said he "stumbled across the letter" in an online auction in July run by an auction house that specializes in signed memorabilia, RR Auction.

The auction house provided a certificate of authenticity, "and I also had it verified separately," Hallihan said.

Asked how much he paid for it, he said, "It was a lot of money.... I suspected another patent attorney must have been bidding on the thing."

Starting Sunday, Hallihan had the letter posted publicly along with documents signed by famous inventors on the firm's Web site at www.hallihan.com.

Hallihan said the documents are from his collection. Among other documents displayed currently are a handwritten note by Thomas Edison and a note signed by Lee De Forest, who invented the three-element vacuum tube used in radio and television and who brought sound to movies.

The Web site says the firm "has obtained a number of historical documents and items relating to famous inventors, Supreme Court justices, the founding fathers, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, presi-

dents, patents and assorted other things.... We will be slowly adding items from the collection and encourage you to come back to see what has been added."

The originals are stored off site, but, "We encourage our clients and colleagues to make appointments to see any of the originals in which they have an interest," the Web site says.

"I have always liked old things," Hallihan said in an interview.

He said he has an "old Victrola" more than 80 years old, which plays records that are a quarter-inch thick.

Posting the letters on the firm's Web site was a way to share them and promote the law firm, Hallihan said.

Hallihan IP Partners is located, coincidentally, at 117 N. Jefferson St.

The firm has three patent lawyers who represent clients in intellectual property matters, including patent law, trademarks, copyrights, trade secrets, entertainment and Internet issues. The firm also has three patent agents who prosecute patents before the U.S. Patent Office.

The lawyers, in addition to Hallihan, are Dr. Gregory S. Umberson M.D. and Jose J. Aparicio.