

# LAWDRAGON

## From Deep Roots to Litigation Powerhouse: Skadden's Decades-Long Rise in Houston



*Noelle Reed, Abby Davis and Michelle Scheffler spearhead the litigation practice at Skadden's Houston office.*

*By James Langford*

In a city like Houston, which has kept a small-town character despite boasting the largest population in a state where size grants bragging rights, relationships matter.

Even Texas's transformation into a financial industry hub, drawing companies from corporate strongholds like New York and Delaware and fueling the development of three stock exchanges, hasn't changed that: The state's securities industry has been dubbed "Y'all Street," in a nod to (and a play on) Manhattan's Wall Street.

It's an environment that makes [Skadden's](#) more than 30 years in Houston the kind of asset even Texas money can't buy, something the megafirms now arriving in Space City (population 2.3M and climbing) are unable to replicate.

“It’s important to be able to say to clients, ‘We know this market, we know this region, we know the oil patch, we know the businesses that you’re in,’” says [Noelle Reed](#), the head of both Skadden’s Houston office and its growing litigation practice. The office’s expansion is a key reason for its recent move to a state-of-the-art headquarters at Texas Tower, a 47-story building in downtown Houston that opened in 2021.

“In the last three years, we have nearly tripled the number of attorneys in the Houston office,” Reed explains. Today, in addition to associates, the Houston office has three litigation partners: Reed, [Michelle Scheffler](#), who joined in 2024, and [Abby Davis](#), who leads hiring for the office.

## TIME TO MOVE

“We’re still a little undersized for our market and for the size of the office, so I’d expect, in the next couple of years, to see the litigation practice continue to grow,” Reed adds. “We’re always looking for great people, and we will always take the opportunity to interview people whom we think are going to strengthen our litigation base.”

Connections with prospects have occurred organically, more often than not, as they did with Davis, who was based in the firm’s New York office and worked closely with Reed and the Houston litigation team on a few cases, including one headed to a jury trial.

She jibed so well with them that one night over dinner, more than two years ago, Reed broached the topic of relocation.

“You’d never think of moving to Houston, would you?” she asked Davis, who had recently made partner in New York. “My reply was, ‘Let’s talk about it and what that might look like,’” Davis says. “And the rest is history.”

The daughter of a trial lawyer, Davis grew up outside Boston and spent her summers as an undergraduate working with her father, which solidified her plans to go to law school. After earning her Juris Doctor from the University of Kentucky, she focused on New York law firms and was particularly intrigued by the training and mentorship opportunities at Skadden, which was founded in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and built an early reputation handling proxy fights and hostile takeovers.

“I’ve worked with people who are absolutely at the top of their game and who are always willing to look out for opportunities for more junior people,” Davis says. “Being able to get pushed out of my comfort zone, take that deposition, do that argument, was critical to my ability to grow as a lawyer.”

Davis has spent her entire career at Skadden, and the breadth of her experiences has equipped her for a role on a team whose members are often described as the Swiss Army knives of lawyers, possessing the tools to handle any case.

The Houston litigation practice is broad, the partners say, and frequently involves “parachuting in” on cases that the parties and other law firms were unable to resolve through negotiation.

## UP IN THE AIR

“Only 11 percent of cases actually go to trial,” Scheffler says, “and that includes personal injury cases, which means a very, very small number of true commercial cases are actually tried. Often, clients don’t think they’re going to get there and then have an ‘aha’ moment where they realize, ‘We’re actually doing this,’ and they want somebody experienced in the courtroom who’s done it before. Our group provides that. We put on Superman’s cape and get ready in three weeks, or however long it is that we have.”

Reed’s favorite memory of parachuting in dates to the early 2000s, when she and litigation partners from other Skadden offices were rushed to California to defend a newspaper in a class-action suit filed by paper carriers – five days before trial.

“About 10 partners from around the firm and all of our associates from Houston at the time packed our bags and relocated to Los Angeles and dug in, 24/7, for months,” says Reed, who had five-month-old triplets at the time. “I flew out at 5 a.m. every Monday morning for months and months and flew home on Thursday nights; court was dark on Fridays.”

“That sounds terrible, but for a trial lawyer, it’s the greatest thing in the world,” she explains. “It really is. We all looked at each other the day before trial after running ourselves ragged trying to master the material, interview all the witnesses and make sure that we were prepared and said, ‘If we win this case, we are the greatest trial lawyers in America, and if we lose this case, we might still be the second greatest.’”

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Not every lawyer would react to the challenging demands of such a situation with Reed’s enthusiasm. The ones who do are the attorneys Davis looks for as a hiring partner.

“Having that kind of can-do, proactive attitude, that willingness to do what’s necessary to give the best client service is the hallmark of a Skadden lawyer,” she explains. “It’s critical, but it’s hard to tease out during the interview process, so what I’ve tried to do over the years is figure out the best questions to identify those people who will do anything for the team and really just want to dig in.”

## GRIT AND GRID

Another factor that's key to success is grit.

"In litigation, one of the great things is that you can win," Davis says. "One of the hard things is that you can lose. When you go into that argument and you are 100 percent certain – because you have to be, by the time you get to the podium – that you are right and you are going to win and you don't, it's a blow. Being able to dust yourself off, get back up and do the best for the client and win at that next turn without getting deterred is a critical ability to have as a litigator."

While the Houston litigators maintain a heavy commercial caseload, they also take on matters outside that realm, including bankruptcies and a significant amount of securities cases.

Whatever the field, there are no run-of-the-mill trials.

"We handle more than your typical simple breach-of-contract cases," says Scheffler, who dreamed as a child of working as an actress or a geologist, eventually combining the two interests by becoming a trial lawyer with an energy focus. "We excel at handling true bet-the-company cases, where the company is on the operating room table, bleeding out, and they call us. When you're a trial lawyer, not only is that really, really exciting, but it's also really challenging, and it's what sets us apart as a practice group and as a firm."

As Houston is the heart of the U.S. energy industry, changes in prices of commodities such as oil and gas as well as regulatory shifts are regular influencers in the types of cases clients bring, says Scheffler, who has 20 years of experience in the field.

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The demand for energy continues to grow, with data centers and AI helping drive the market. As a result of rapid growth and high demand there comes an increase in litigation over energy infrastructure.

"There's increased demand for energy across the country and obviously here in Texas as well, so you're going to see disputes related to that," Scheffler explains.

In securities litigation, meanwhile, courts are still processing cases from the Covid-19 pandemic along with suits related to environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices and claims involving cryptocurrencies as well as artificial intelligence. As use of commercial AI has increased, so have lawsuits related to the accuracy of corporate disclosures about the technology, Reed says.

Though Reed, Scheffler and Davis each have areas of particular interest and expertise, they're also generalists, able to try a variety of cases and adept in mastering new subjects. The team's caseload is split almost evenly between plaintiff and defense matters.

“Having the experience of doing both is really valuable,” Reed says. “The hardest thing for people who do mostly defense work when they get on the plaintiffs’ side is to push a case forward. There’s a joke on the defense side that when nothing’s happening, nothing *bad* is happening. Plaintiffs are often freer to move and move quickly.”

## WHAT’S THE WHY?

A former federal prosecutor, Reed enjoys the opportunity to play offense that comes with plaintiffs’ litigation. And she’s also aware of the edge that comes from practicing on both sides of the V.

As a defense lawyer, she says, cross-training helps gauge the plaintiff’s next move more accurately.

“All three of us approach our cases with trial in mind,” she says. “There’s a different way to prepare a case when you’re thinking about how it will ultimately look, not just in summary judgment papers but live in front of a jury or a judge when you try it.”

That requires a willingness to explore new techniques and strategies, contrary to the stereotype of Big Law attorneys as staid practitioners reluctant to depart from traditional methods.

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Successful litigators are “able to anticipate the questions that are going to be lingering in a judge’s mind or a jury’s mind,” Davis adds. “It’s not just, ‘What do the documents say?’ and ‘What are the facts?’ but also ‘What’s the why? What’s the motivation behind it? Why did things happen the way that they happened?’ and filling in those blanks. Or, even better, laying out the groundwork so that the jury or the judge can piece that together themselves, which is sometimes more convincing to the juror than just telling them the story. If they get to put that final piece in place, then they found it out for themselves.”

Scheffler often compares litigation practice to a giant game of chess. “Every single day involves strategizing how to best position your client for the most successful outcome at trial or the most successful settlement that you can achieve that’s aligned with their business goals,” she says.

Reed agrees.

“Years ago, somebody asked me, ‘Is every case winnable?’ she recalls. “And my answer was, ‘Yes, if you define a win correctly.’ And that’s really a core part of what we do with our clients. You can’t just say, ‘There’s a complaint filed, and we have to go to trial and win the case.’ You really have to understand your client’s business, what that case means for them and all the nuance around it. Is this going to involve your CEO sitting in depositions? Is this going to involve your management team being distracted? Is this going to involve your core technology and put it at risk? What is litigating this case going to do to customer relationships, to vendor relationships? Are they going to get dragged into the litigation?”

“As much as I love trials and a trial is sometimes the right answer for clients, it’s not always the right answer,” Reed adds. “The really critical part of what we all do is work with our clients to define at the outset, ‘What does a win look like for you?’ and then find the fastest, most cost-effective path to that win.”



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