

## The John Minor Wisdom United States Court of Appeals Building

---

New Orleans is the headquarters for the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals that hears cases throughout Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The three story granite structure at 600 Camp Street was designed by James Gamble Rogers of the New York firm of Hale and Rogers. The firm also designed the Shelby County Courthouse in Memphis, which is similar in design to the Camp Street facility. Both buildings illustrate classic Italian Renaissance styling.

The building was completed in 1915 after four years and two million dollars in human and financial resources. The structure was originally planned as a post office, weather station, and courthouse for both the Federal District Court and Court of Appeals. As the building grew older, the need for renovations became urgent. The post office moved out in 1961, and the court followed in 1963, moving to temporary quarters in the Wildlife and Fisheries Building in the French Quarter.

The renovation of the building was fraught with delays. After Hurricane Betsy devastated McDonough No. 35 High School in 1965, the courthouse served as a substitute schoolhouse for five years. Meanwhile, the Court of Appeals grew from nine to fifteen judges as the caseload quadrupled over the ensuing nine years. In 1973, after the \$3.5 million dollar renovation was completed, only the Court of Appeals moved back into building. The District Court moved into new federal buildings next to the Court of Appeals.

The building currently houses the clerk's office, three resident judges' chambers, many visiting judges' chambers, the headquarters library, and the circuit executive's office. In recent years, an automation division and appellate conference attorney's office were added to the organization. In 1990 the Office of the Staff Counsel, which includes more than forty staff attorneys, moved to leased office space at 400 Lafayette, an historic building bordered by the Magazine Street side of the John Minor Wisdom U. S. Court of Appeals Building.

The courthouse is classical architecture making great use of marble. The exterior includes several balconies that are lined with blocks of marble. The inscriptions above the exterior columns of the building are the names of former Chief Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court and their dates of service. In the original construction, local building materials were preferred: Louisiana and Mississippi pine, Tennessee marble, and Louisiana gum. The renovation in the sixties made major changes in the great hall and rotunda on the first floor. Where post office windows and mail boxes once stood are now magnificent arched windows that line the great hall. Plaster cast ceilings display richly detailed medallions and other designs. The thirty foot ceilings were brightened with a fresh coat of bronze. The ornate metal gates once used as security blockades now hang above the stairwells on the first floor.

The main features of the building are the courtrooms on the second floor. The most impressive is the middle one, called the "En Banc" courtroom. It is the largest courtroom with a massive bench and seating for all the judges used during cases of great importance. The walls are polished Louisiana gum paneling. The En Banc courtroom was refurbished again in 1996, which provided royal blue carpeting and court seals designed specifically to cornice proud new draperies. The East and West courtrooms are smaller but equally distinguished by the craftsmanship displayed in the rich wood decor.

In the mid 1990's a mezzanine floor was redesigned as office space between the first and second floors on the Capdeville Street side of the building. Following this work came a new ceiling and sprinkler system for the library space. During both of these projects, a previously functional "catwalk" was revealed. This tunnel-like hallway surrounds what is now the main library space. The catwalk contained small windows from which supervisors could oversee postal workers without being visible. The floor of the catwalk was thick slate, presumably to eliminate the sound of supervisor's footsteps.

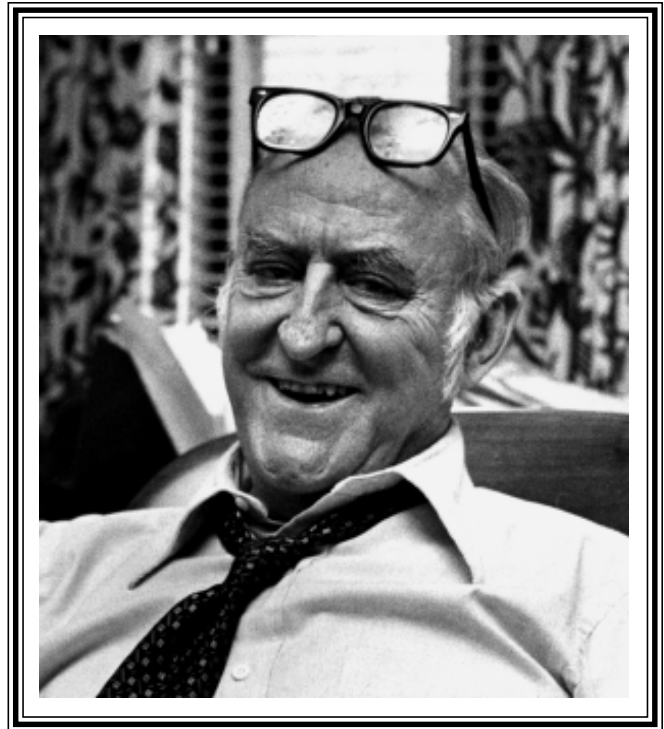
The courthouse has provided stunning visuals for numerous feature films and television shows. The great hall became presidential for Turner Network's production of "Kingfish," starring John Goodman as flamboyant Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long. The exterior of the building was displayed throughout Oliver Stone's movie "JFK." Ironically, the front steps of the courthouse are just a few feet from the former 544 Camp Street, the return address that Lee Harvey Oswald used on his political literature. In reality, that address belonged to Oswald's colleague, Guy Banister. Oswald and his wife actually lived on Magazine Street, which borders the rear of the building.

The most popular exterior design feature of the courthouse is "The Ladies." On the four corners of the courthouse roof are marble balustrades holding copper and bronze statutes representing History, Agriculture, Commerce, and Industry. "The Ladies" were refurbished by the General Services Administration in 1990, providing a new coat of bronze. Each statute supports an open globe which zodiac signs surround. Although the statues exhibit Italian Renaissance styling, the palm and banana fronds at the bases provide a southern signature. The sculptor was Daniel Chester French, one of America's most renowned artists of the 19th century. French's first commissioned work was the statue "The Minute Man" in Concord, Massachusetts. His most famous work is the seated Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

**O**n May 25, 1994, President William Jefferson Clinton signed into law a bill proposed by U. S. Representative William Jefferson to honor the building's most famous tenant: John Minor Wisdom. Judge Wisdom was only nine years old in 1915 when the structure was completed and named the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse. In 1952 he was the Republican Committeeman who cast "thirteen hard earned votes for Dwight D. Eisenhower" at the nominating convention in Chicago. In 1957, he was appointed to the federal bench by President Eisenhower. He later became known as the father of landmark civil rights decisions, including those of school desegregation and voter registration. Judge Wisdom received the nation's highest honor in 1993: The Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Although Judge Wisdom took senior status in 1977, he continued to handle an active caseload. His presence is felt throughout the building with the addition of two pieces of art. In 1994, Judge Wisdom donated a bronze sculpture of himself created in 1952 by Lindsay Daen. The work is displayed inside the front entrance of the building. In 1996, the judge donated a magnificent oil painting of himself created by local artist N. Reynolds. The painting is located immediately inside the library but is also visible from the great hall.

At 3:30 p.m. on June 20th, 1994, a ceremony in the great hall proclaimed the John Minor Wisdom U.S. Court of Appeals Building. As big, brass letters spelled his name on the exterior of the building, Judge John Minor Wisdom stood in the rotunda while dignitaries from around the world packed the great hall to honor him. U.S. District Judge Martin L.C. Feldman, who was Judge Wisdom's first law clerk, spoke:



***“It is fitting that the building that stands as such an important symbol of law and justice in this part of the United States be dedicated to one of the most brilliant and leading jurists of the 20th century.”***

Judge Wisdom passed away on Saturday, May 15, 1999, just two days away from his ninety-fourth birthday. Newspapers across the nation hailed Judge Wisdom as a pioneer for civil rights and a giant among legal scholars. Jack Bass, the author of *Unlikely Heroes*, a book about the four Southern judges who shaped the civil rights laws of the 1950's and 1960's, wrote an eloquent obituary that appeared in the May 17th *New York Times*. Bass said Judge Wisdom was one of a “handful of remarkable men who prevailed by meeting the demands of the times with an innovative and creative judicial response that restructured an unjust social order and helped shape the nation in a second reconstruction and left a permanent imprint on American history.”

A memorial service was held in the John Minor Wisdom United States Courthouse on May 27th. The service was attended by over four hundred dignitaries, including his survivors, wife Bonnie Mathews Wisdom, and two daughters, Kathleen Mathews Wisdom and Penelope Stewart Wisdom Tose. A son, John Minor Jr., died in 1985.

Chief Judge Carolyn Dineen King began the memorial: “Judge Wisdom's long and distinguished tenure on the bench of the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit honored us all and has made the Fifth Circuit a great court in the nation's history.”

---

---

---

---

*Updated October, 1998 by Michael R. Smith, Deputy Circuit Librarian*

*“The John Minor Wisdom United States Court of Appeals Building” is derived from the following sources:*

*“The Home of the United States Court of Appeals For the Fifth Circuit” by Leslie A. Steele. Florida Bar Journal, Vol. 47, No. 7, July 1973. (Leslie A. Steele is the daughter of former Fifth Circuit Judge Robert A. Ainsworth, Jr.)*

*A History of the Fifth Circuit 1891-1981, by Harvey Couch. Published under the Auspices of the Bicentennial Committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States, 1984.*

*“New Orleans” by Lisa Stansky. ABA Journal, April 1998, p. 65.*

*New Orleans Times-Picayune, June 20, 1994, p. A6; May 4, 1994, p. A8.*

*Cover Sketch by Sean Childs, 1981*

*Photograph of Judge John Minor Wisdom by Patt Petterson, Times-Picayune, also appeared in Unlikely Heroes by Jack Bass, New York : Simon and Schuster, 1981*

---

---

A publication of the U. S. Court of Appeals Fifth Circuit Library System  
600 Camp Street, Room 106, New Orleans, Louisiana 70130 (504) 589-6510

---

---

rev. 7/15/1999

h:/pthfndrs/jmwblgd.p65  
www.circ5.dcn, library  
www.ca5.uscourts.gov, library