

## On the Trail of the Elusive Judge Slick



Judge Thomas Slick,  
*Indianapolis News*, 7 Feb 1925

When the United States Courthouse & Post Office first opened in Indianapolis back in 1905, the second floor of the building housed two courtrooms. The courtroom on the west side of the building was occupied by the District Court, while a second courtroom on the east side of the building was used by the Circuit Court (the predecessor to today's Court of Appeals). For years, it has been assumed that after the Circuit Court was abolished and replaced by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, the east courtroom sat vacant before being put to service as a District courtroom when Judge Thomas Slick was appointed to the District of Indiana bench in 1925. When Judge Slick was reassigned to the newly created Northern District of Indiana in 1928, the courtroom again sat empty until the appointment of Cale Holder in 1954. Recently, the court has discovered several sources that draw Judge Slick's use of the courtroom into question.

On January 16, 1925, Congress passed the Hickey Bill, authorizing an additional judgeship for the District of Indiana and splitting the state into seven divisional locations: Indianapolis, Terre Haute, New Albany, Evansville, Fort Wayne, Hammond, and South Bend. Just four days earlier, the Senate had confirmed a new district judge to fill the seat vacated by the elevation of Judge Albert B. Anderson to the Court of Appeals. The newcomer, Robert C. Baltzell, hailed from the southern Indiana town of Princeton. It was assumed, therefore, that Indiana Senator James Watson would choose an attorney from northern Indiana for the new judgeship.

The nomination of Thomas Slick by President Calvin Coolidge was announced on February 6, 1925. He was confirmed by the Senate and received his commission on February 17, 1925. Born July 5, 1869, in South Bend, Indiana, Thomas Slick initially worked as a teacher before turning his aspirations to the law. He eventually enrolled at the University of Michigan School of Law, earning an L.L.B. in 1893. Slick returned to South Bend, where he established a successful private practice. He also served terms as St. Joseph County

Prosecutor and City Attorney for South Bend.

Judge Slick was sworn in as a district judge at the South Bend postmaster's office. While South Bend had been announced as a new divisional location for the court, it did not, at that time, have an office or courtroom for a judge. After conferring with Judge Baltzell on how to split their duties, it was decided that each judge would be responsible for the workload in a set of divisions. Judge Baltzell would take Indianapolis, Terre Haute, New Albany, and Evansville, while Judge Slick would handle business in Hammond, Fort Wayne, and South Bend. Newspapers in northern Indiana were quick to report that Judge Slick would be a "strictly Northern Indiana Judge."

While Judge Slick continued to reside in South Bend and handle cases filed in his divisions, officially, his status as a district judge for the District of Indiana gave him concurrent jurisdiction over all matters with Judge Baltzell. Occasionally, as the caseload would require, Judge Slick was called upon to preside over matters in Indianapolis. On April 3, 1925, he presided over his first case (*Durkee-Atwood Co. vs. Thomas Auto Top Co.*, a patent infringement case) in Indianapolis. In January 1926, Judge Slick spent a month in Indianapolis hearing cases while Judge Baltzell sat on the federal bench in New York.

But, was the old Circuit courtroom cleaned up and made ready for Judge Slick's infrequent use, or did Judge Slick preside in the District courtroom on the rare instances when he heard cases in Indianapolis? It seems unlikely, but not impossible, that any great expense would have been undertaken to prepare the Circuit courtroom for Judge Slick's sporadic use, given that his visits often coincided with Judge Baltzell's absence from Indianapolis.

Recently, the court uncovered a transcript of the induction ceremony of the Hon. Cale Holder in 1954. In it, Judge Steckler noted that, to his knowledge, Judge Slick had not presided in the old Circuit courtroom, making Judge Holder the first district judge to preside there. Subsequent research appears to support this theory. Future research may prove conclusive, but for now, the mystery over the courtroom's past remains.

Judge Slick's tenure as a district judge for the District of Indiana was short. On April 21, 1928, he was reassigned to the newly created Northern District of Indiana. He retired in 1943 and died in 1959.

## *Spotlight: Fall 2019 Court History Symposium*

This year's Court History Symposium focused on the appointment stories of past and present judges of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Indiana, with a nod to some significant projects undertaken by the Historical Society in the past year. The three-hour CLE began with a short presentation by court historian Doria Lynch on the court's recent mural alteration project. Ms. Lynch discussed the decision to remove the name of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney from a series of murals in the Sarah Evans Barker Courtroom. Judge Taney authored the notorious Dred Scott opinion in the years prior to the Civil War, stating that African Americans were not eligible for United States citizenship. Ms. Lynch discussed the decision to remove Taney's name and replace it with the name Marshall, as well as the lengthy process involved. Mural restoration expert Mary Yeager, who completed the alteration, was on hand for the unveiling.

Next was a presentation on the William E. Steckler chambers papers project. In 2019, the Court Historical Society funded the papers processing project, which was undertaken by Alysha Zemanek of the Indiana Historical Society (IHS). Ms. Zemanek discussed the process of cataloging a judge's personal papers and offered a sneak peek of the collection, which is now available to researchers at the Indiana Historical Society. Mary Giorgio, the court's Public Outreach Coordinator, followed with a look at some interesting records from the collection that enhance the story of the court's institutional history.

In the second hour, Doria Lynch and Mary Giorgio teamed up to present "Paths to the Bench: Southern District of Indiana Appointments from William E. Steckler to Gene E. Brooks." The presentation offered new research and insights into the appointment processes of five past district judges, focusing on the stories of their personal and political connections that ultimately secured their nominations to the bench.

The final hour featured an audience favorite - a judicial round table discussion featuring four past and present district judges regaling the audience with insightful and amusing stories of their own appointment processes. The Hon. Jane E. Magnus-Stinson, the Hon. Sarah Evans Barker, the Hon. James Patrick Hanlon, and the Hon. David F. Hamilton served as panelists. The round table discussion was moderated by Inge Van der Cruysse, J.D., a member of the faculty at the Indiana University Maurer School of Law. As the spouse of Judge Hamilton, Ms. Van der Cruysse's insights and stories added another interesting perspective to the story.

Stay tuned for news on this year's symposium theme, to be announced later this spring!



From left to right: the Hon. James Patrick Hanlon, the Hon. Jane E. Magnus-Stinson, the Hon. Sarah Evans Barker, and the Hon. David F. Hamilton reminisce on their appointment processes.

## *Plans Underway for New Courthouse Museum & Learning Center*



Photo Credit: David Sundberg

The Court Historical Society of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Indiana has recently entered into a contract with Taylor Studios to create a concept design for a new Courthouse Museum & Learning Center. A small room on the first floor of the Birch Bayh Federal Building & United States Courthouse will be re-purposed for the new space.

The new exhibit space will feature history of the court and courthouse, as well as exhibits related to the purpose and function of the judiciary. The room will be open to the public during normal operating hours, as well as to the Court and bar.

Concept designs will be unveiled early this summer, with fundraising for the cost of exhibit fabrication and installation to follow.

### *2020 Events:*

Fall 2020 - Court History Symposium

Details will be announced this spring!

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