

Introduction: The Federal Courts and Minnesota

On May 11, 1858, Congress admitted the State of Minnesota to the Union. The same act which transformed the Minnesota Territory into a state also established the United States District Court for the District of Minnesota.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURTS— CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS

The United States District Court for the District of Minnesota is part of the federal system of courts provided for in Article III of the Constitution of the United States. (Proposed by Convention on September 17, 1787, and effective on March 4, 1789.) Section 1 of Article III declares:

The judicial power of the United States shall be vested in one Supreme Court, and in such inferior courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish.

U.S. Constitution, Art. III, 1.

The Constitution itself did not create any federal courts besides the Supreme Court, but it did allow the Congress to establish lower federal courts. The first Congress did precisely that in the Judiciary Act of 1789. The act created 13 district trial courts in the then existing 11 states. Two states had two districts, while the remaining nine had one district each. The act started a tradition that remains in effect today: no federal judicial district crosses state boundaries.

At present, 94 federal district courts exist, 89 in the fifty states, one each in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Guam, and Northern Mariana Islands. Every state has at least one federal district court, and some states have as many as four. In states with more than one district, each district covers a designated geographical area.

JURISDICTION OF THE FEDERAL COURTS

Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, which means they handle only certain types of cases. Article III of the U.S. Constitution sets forth the kinds of cases federal courts can hear, but Congress determines whether the federal courts will handle cases to the full extent of this Constitutional authority. Congress did not give the federal district courts jurisdiction over cases to the full extent of their constitutional authority until 1875. Since that time, the jurisdiction of the federal district courts has remained essentially the same.

The federal district courts hear both criminal and noncriminal cases. Criminal cases which concern only state laws are resolved in the state courts. The criminal cases federal courts handle involve violations of federal laws, such as kidnapping, mail fraud, racketeering, bank robbery, sale of prohibited drugs, and conspiracy. Under federal law, these cases must basically be tried within 70 days from the time the defendant was first charged with the crime.

Federal courts also handle civil or non-criminal cases which are disputes between individuals, corporations, governmental agencies, or other entities. The civil matters heard by federal courts include cases involving the United States Constitution, cases in which the United States government is a party, cases involving foreign diplomats, and cases involving violations of federal laws passed by the United States Congress. Some of the more frequent federal laws invoked in civil cases are laws preventing discrimination in employment on the basis of race, religion, sex, or age; civil rights laws; securities laws such as those regulating corporate take-overs and the sale of stock; anti-trust laws; and laws protecting intellectual property such as patents, trademarks, and copyrights.

The Court's caseload has always varied with the times, reflecting societal issues and events. For example, during Prohibition, many cases concerned enforcement of the liquor laws. Similarly, during the Vietnam War, the Court heard controversial cases involving draft protestors. That same time period brought increased awareness of civil rights, along with a corresponding increase in the number of cases relating to equal protection and discrimination.

The federal judges do not choose which suits they would like to hear, nor may a party ask for a particular judge. Rather, cases are randomly assigned to the judges by the Clerk of Court. When a party files a case, it is classified according to the types of issues it involves. Cases are then randomly assigned by category, ensuring that all judges hear all types of cases.

The federal courts also handle civil cases which involve disputes between citizens of different states where more than \$50,000 is at stake. These cases come under the court's "diversity jurisdiction." The framers of the Constitution created diversity jurisdiction because of their concern that residents suing parties from other states in the residents' own state court might have an unfair advantage. The framers intended that federal judges would be independent of local pressures or attitudes.

This independence is not only important for diversity cases, but also for enforcing federal rights when public opinion may be against such enforcement. For example, federal judges have enforced anti-discrimination laws when racial tensions have run high in local communities.

The ability of a federal judge to be independent comes from Articles II and III of the Constitution. Unlike the judges of many state

courts, federal judges are not elected by the voters of a state or district. Rather, Article II provides that the President shall appoint federal judges "with the advice and consent of the Senate." Although the Constitution does not provide any more specificity to the appointing process, a number of procedures have developed. The Department of Justice and White House staff help the President consider potential nominees who may be proposed by Senators or others. The Federal Bureau of Investigation investigates the background of each nominee for the federal bench, and the American Bar Association evaluates the nominee's qualifications. In addition, the Senate Judiciary Committee conducts a hearing and votes on each judicial nomination and makes a report to the full Senate. A majority vote of the Senate must confirm the President's selection before he or she becomes a federal judge.

Other provisions to promote an independent federal judiciary are found in Article III. Once appointed and confirmed, a federal judge cannot be removed from office unless impeached for a crime or other high offense. Federal judges thus have their jobs for life; this is referred to as life tenure. The Constitution also provides that Congress cannot lower the salary of federal judges once they are in office. These provisions were intended to permit federal judges to make decisions without fear of reprisal from a reduction in salary or removal from office.

Assisting the life-tenured federal judges are two other types of federal judicial officers: magistrates and bankruptcy judges. Their work is discussed on pages 35–41. Congress created these positions pursuant to its legislative powers in Article I so they do not have all the characteristics of a judicial post created under Article III.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF MINNESOTA

Since its inception in 1858, the United States District Court for the District of Minnesota has served the entire state. The district originally had only one federal judge, but it now has seven full-time district court judges and two judges on senior status. (When a judge takes senior status, the judge is no longer required to take a full caseload. Age and years of service determine when senior status may be taken.) Additionally, the district currently has four full-time and two part-time United States magistrates, and four bankruptcy judges.

All of the district court judges are located in either the United States Courthouse in Minneapolis (110 South Fourth Street) or the Warren E. Burger Courthouse in St. Paul (316 North Robert Street). The judges handle cases in those courthouses, as well as in the federal courthouse in Duluth, and occasionally elsewhere in the state.



Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse, 110 South 4th Street, Minneapolis



Warren E. Burger Federal Building & Courthouse, 316 North Robert Street, St. Paul



Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse, 515 West First, Duluth



Landmark Center (Old Federal Courts Building), 75 West Fifth Street, St. Paul



Old Minneapolis Post Office & Federal Building, demolished in 1961, stood at Marquette Avenue and Third Street (Photo courtesy of Minn. Historical Society)