

Justice and Legal Change on the Shores of Lake Erie:
A History of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio

The federal district courts play a prominent role in our nation's legal system by serving as the national trial courts. While numerous histories regarding the U.S. Supreme Court have been written, only a handful of books have attempted to chronicle the histories of any of the 94 federal district courts where most of the country's significant cases first arose. The publication of Justice and Legal Change on the Shores of Lake Erie: A History of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio covers the origins, politically charged cases, and tough decisions of the district court in northern Ohio.

The federal courts have had a presence in Ohio since its statehood in 1803. However, the Northern District was not established until 1855 when the Lake Erie maritime interests triumphantly lobbied that the then Ohio District Court be divided into Northern and Southern districts. The individual selected to become the first judge of the newly established district was Hiram V. Willson, one of Cleveland's leading attorneys, but perhaps more importantly, the individual who was sent to Washington to get the bill to establish the Court passed. The Court has grown considerably since then. In 1855, one judge was able to carry out the workload of the Court. Now 11 active district judges, four senior district judges, seven magistrate judges, and one retired-recalled magistrate judge are on board. Over the years the Court's jurisdiction over legal matters has expanded dramatically.

Justice and Legal Change on the Shores of Lake Erie focuses on the key political, economic and social debates that have come before the Northern District of Ohio. Individual chapters recall the background and recount the legal issues in a diverse set of cases including the Oberlin Fugitive Slave Rescue case, the World War I trial of Social Democratic party founder and presidential candidate Eugene Debs, the Cleveland and Parma school desegregation litigation, the Kent State shooting case, the trials of John Demjanjuk, the fight for gender equality, labor law cases, the origins of zoning and environmental law, capital death penalty litigation, religion in the public sector and the never ending battle to preserve the public trust by derailing public corruption.

The book is more than a mere history or legal recitation. It addresses the personal issues, triumphs and tribulations of many individuals involved in these matters. The hard decisions and isolation, perhaps somewhat self-imposed, of Chief Judge Frank Battisti, who presided over the Cleveland school desegregation case are dealt with in detail. The tactical decisions made by Eugene Debs to uphold his beliefs ended up sending him to prison. The perseverance of a young attorney, Jane Picker, who argued her first case before the U.S. Supreme Court, is both inspirational and sadly amusing for what it said about the views on gender and the practice of law at that time. The plight of a conscientious objector whose beliefs made him unwilling to register for the draft, but who would have willingly served his country in another capacity, and the prosecuting attorney who would have rather dropped the case, reveal some of the harsher edges of the implementation and practice of law.

The history of the Northern District of Ohio is written in a manner that can be enjoyed by casual readers, students, historians and legal scholars alike.

The book is published by the Ohio University Press and was edited by Paul Finkelman and

Roberta Sue Alexander with a foreword by Chief Judge Solomon Oliver, Jr. Contributing authors include: Roberta Sue Alexander, Martin H. Belsky, Melvyn Dubofsky, Paul Finkelman, Alison K. Guernsey, Thomas R. Hensley, Keith H. Hirokawa, Nancy E. Marion, Judge Dan Aaron Polster, Renee C. Redman, Elizabeth Reilly, Richard B. Saphire, Tracy A. Thomas and Melvin I. Urofsky. Funding for the project was provided through the Northern District of Ohio Attorney Admissions Fund.

Justice and Legal Change on the Shores of Lake Erie is available in hardbound and electronic versions from online book sellers and at book stores.