



Courthouse Experience Fun Facts

The Gavel

The gavel is a small ceremonial mallet that judges strike against a wooden block to indicate the opening of court proceedings or “call to order” as well as closing proceedings or “adjournment.” It is seen as a symbol of the authority of the presiding judge.



How does someone become a judge in Oregon?

All Oregon judges must be a member of the Oregon Bar Association. This means that all judges must attend law school and pass the Oregon Bar Examination. The bar exam is a test to determine whether a candidate is qualified to practice law in a given jurisdiction. In order to serve on the Supreme Court, the judges must also be a United States Citizen and an Oregon resident for three years prior to the beginning of their term. Appeals judges must be an elector of the county of their residence. Circuit court judges must be a resident of the state and a resident of the judicial district in which they serve.

Multnomah County’s First Circuit Court Judge

Charles Bellinger became the first circuit court judge in Multnomah County in 1878. Bellinger later became Oregon’s second federal judge in 1893.

Multnomah County’s First Woman Circuit Court Judge

Jean Lewis became the first woman to serve on the circuit court in 1961. She was the first woman to hold office as a circuit court judge in Oregon. Judge Lewis’ tenure on the circuit court lasted 17 years.

Multnomah County’s First African-American Circuit Court Judge

Mercedes Diez became the first African-American judge to serve on the Multnomah County Circuit Court in 1973. She was a graduate of the Northwestern School of Law in Portland. She served as a judge until 1992.

Why do judges wear black robes?

Upon the founding of the United States, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson disagreed on the attire judges should wear. Adams wanted judges to wear red robes and wigs as English judges did. Jefferson wanted judges to simply wear suits. A compromise between these two points of view was reached in which Adams and Jefferson agreed that judges in the United States would wear black robes without the wigs.

Why are judges addressed as “your honor?”

The origin of why judges are addressed as “your honor” is a remnant of the colonial period in the United States when the developing court system was still heavily influenced by traditions in England. English judges in the high courts are referred to as “Your Lordship” or “Your Ladyship” and the lower court judges are referred to as “Your Honor.”

Why are courtrooms open to the public?

The reason why trials are open to the public is addressed in the United States Constitution. The Sixth Amendment in the Bill of Rights states that, “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial.” It is implied in the language of this amendment that the public has an interest in seeing that justice has been served and that the trial process should be subject to public scrutiny to minimize malfeasance on the part of the justice system.

What does the bailiff do?

The duty of the bailiff is to provide security for those in attendance in the courtroom. They escort defendants who are in custody and they assist the judge and the clerk in the administration of court functions. In Multnomah County, bailiffs serve in the Corrections Division of the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Department.

Multnomah County Justice Center

The Justice Center performs the exclusive function of criminal arraignments. In addition to its four courtrooms, it also contains the second largest county jail facility in the state of Oregon with the capacity for nearly 700 inmates.

Multnomah County Courthouse

After four years of construction the new Multnomah County Courthouse was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The state-of-the-art courthouse includes a wide variety of new patron-centered designs created specifically with the visitor in mind. An example of this design is the Information Desk on the Lobby Floor (staffed through fundraising by the Multnomah Bar Foundation). Administered by the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC), new artwork is adorned both inside and outside the courthouse, featuring many local artists' work.



Pioneer Courthouse

The Pioneer Courthouse in Portland is the second oldest federal building in the Pacific Northwest. The courthouse was constructed in a series of stages beginning in 1869, and was finally completed in 1903. The Pioneer Courthouse is one of 4 locations where the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit hears oral arguments, and it houses the chambers of the Portland-based judges who sit on the Ninth Circuit. The Pioneer Courthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and it was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1977.

Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse

The Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse was completed in 1997 and is used by the United States District Court for the District of Oregon. The courthouse is named in Honor of Mark O. Hatfield, a United States Senator for Oregon from 1967 to 1997. The building is recognized for its energy efficiency. Compare the design of the Mark O. Hatfield Courthouse with the other courthouses in Portland.

