



# 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.