

**Merrill E. Otis** (1884–1944)

## BIOGRAPHY

Merrill E. Otis served as a United States District Judge for the Western District of Missouri from 1925 until his death in 1944. A native of Missouri, Otis received both his undergraduate and legal education from the University of Missouri. Following his graduation from the University of Missouri School of Law, he worked in private practice in St. Joseph from 1911 until 1921.

After a decade of private practice, Otis transitioned to public roles. In 1921, he became First Assistant Attorney General of Missouri. He also chaired the Missouri Public Service Commission from 1923 to 1924 before his appointment as Assistant to the U.S. Solicitor General in 1924. In 1925, he appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Sandford & Brooks Co. v. United States*.

Otis developed a reputation for independence from machine politics and a commitment to anti-corruption. On March 23, 1925, President Calvin Coolidge issued a recess appointment to Otis, allowing him to immediately assume judicial duties. Coolidge formally nominated Otis to the same position on December 8, 1925, and the Senate confirmed him on December 14.

During his tenure as a U.S. District Judge, Otis presided over multiple high-profile trials involving widespread election fraud and corruption in Kansas City. Most notably, he presided over the 1939 income tax evasion trial of political boss Tom Pendergast. Beyond the bench, Otis served as Chairman of the Section of Judicial Administration of the American Bar Association and as Honorary President of and Lecturer on Constitutional Law at the Kansas City School of Law.