

CURTIS EUGENE CHILLINGWORTH



Curtis Eugene Chillingworth was born in 1896 in West Palm Beach, which at that time was a very small town. He was one of only seven students in the 1913 graduating class of Palm Beach High School. Following in his father's footsteps to become a lawyer, he studied law at the University of Florida, where he graduated at the head of his class.

After graduation from Cornell, his father, Charles Chillingworth, had moved to Atlanta where he studied law and worked in a law office.

In 1891 he moved to the East coast of Florida. There he was admitted to the bar and joined a law firm in Titusville. In 1892 Charles opened a branch of the firm in Juno, then the county seat of Dade County.

At the time Dade County extended one hundred fifty miles along the East coast of Florida, an area now including Miami, Ft Lauderdale and Jupiter and had only 900 inhabitants. Describing the region, Charles wrote in a family history: "It was truly a last frontier, and its residents were certainly pioneers."

At age 21 Curtis joined his father's law firm, but soon left to enlist in the Naval Reserve at Key West early in World War I. He served a year and a half in the Navy, received a commission as an Ensign and serving aboard the USS Minneapolis on convoy duty. He was 23 when he completed his service and resumed his legal career.

In 1920, at the age of 24, he was elected County Judge of Palm Beach County, becoming at the time the youngest judge in the history of the state.

Following election in 1922, he became a Circuit Judge in 1923, a position he held for 32 years until his death in 1955.

In his first thirteen years as a Circuit Judge he handed down over 20,000 orders, judgments and decrees of which less than 85 were ever reversed or modified on appeal. During that time he tried more than 100 capital cases and wrote nine opinions for the Florida Supreme Court, each of which was accepted as the majority opinion.

The Judge also continued his service in the Naval Reserve between the first and second World Wars, training and completing courses in International and Military Law. In 1942 at the age of 48, he was recalled to active duty in the Navy. Stationed both in London and Plymouth the participated in planning for the invasion of Europe and the occupation of Germany. In 1945 Judge Chillingworth was released from active duty with the rank of full Commander, and returned to Florida to resume his position as Circuit Court Judge.

In 1955 Judge Chillingworth decided to retire from the bench and drafted a letter of resignation to them Governor LeRoy Collins. The letter, however, was never sent. On June 15th Judge Chillingworth and his wife, Marjorie, were murdered. The heinous act

was considered the “Florida Crime of the Century” having been committed and directed solely at the administration of justice, as a consequence of the Judge’s steadfast efforts to preserve the integrity of Florida’s legal system. An intense investigation determined that a former municipal judge had contracted to have the murders committed, hoping to avoid exposure and disbarment. Ultimately he was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

During his career Judge Chillingworth was highly regarded by his fellow judges, the members of the bar of Florida and the community as a whole, and considered to have one of the outstanding minds of the legal profession. Importantly he was long regarded as the conscience of the Palm Beach County judiciary and bar, which, unfortunately was the exact cause of his untimely death.

Three daughters survived the Chillingworths: Neva Chillingworth, Ann C. Wright and Marie C. Cooper.