



225th Anniversary
1789-2014



John Munro Woolsey

Born:

January 3, 1877
Aiken, SC

Received Commission:

April 29, 1929

Died:

May 4, 1945
New York, NY

John M. Woolsey was the child of two northerners who moved to Aiken, GA. His maternal grandfather, however, was a judge of the Ohio Supreme Court, and his maternal uncle was a lawyer in New York. While still a small child, Judge Woolsey's parents separated, and he moved with his mother to Englewood, N.J., where her brother lived. His early education was at a private school in Englewood, and he then attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Ma. From there he went to Yale, from which he graduated in 1898. Judge Woolsey received his law degree from Columbia Law School in 1901, where he was one of the founders of the Columbia Law Review. In the same year he was admitted to the bar of New York.

From 1901 to 1929 when he joined the District Court, Judge Woolsey maintained a private practice in New York with his uncle's firm. He became known as an expert in admiralty law. As a judge, he presided over several very well-known cases. In 1931, he ruled that Dr. Marie Stopes' book *Contraception* about birth control was not obscene or immoral. A more famous obscenity case was in 1933, when Judge Woolsey ruled that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was not only not obscene but had great literary value. Random House, the publisher, reprinted Judge Woolsey's decision in all future editions making it, perhaps, the most widely-read District Court decision in American history.

Unfortunately, in 1934 Judge Woolsey suffered a heart attack and subsequently maintained a schedule that accommodated his medical requirements until he assumed senior status in 1943.

Sources:

Biographical Directory of Federal Judges, available at <http://www.fjc.gov/>.

"John M. Woolsey, Retired Jurist, 68", *New York Times*, May 5, 1945, pg. 15.

"Judge John M. Woolsey", *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3/4, *Joyce and the Law* (Spring - Summer, 2000), pp. 367-370.