

The Judicial Act of September 24, 1789 (1 Stat. 73) which established the Supreme Court of the United States, also divided the country into thirteen judicial districts, each with a district court and a district judge. These districts were grouped into circuits. A circuit court, made up of the district judge and two justices of the Supreme Court, was to convene twice a year in each district. While the powers of the district courts and circuit courts changed throughout the years, the district courts generally had original jurisdiction in admiralty and bankruptcy cases, in suits for penalties and seizures under federal laws, and jurisdiction in non-capital criminal proceedings and in law suits exceeding \$100 in value in which the United States was the plaintiff. Besides hearing appeals from the district courts, circuit courts exercised original jurisdiction in law and equity cases involving suits exceeding \$500 in value in which the United States was the plaintiff, an alien was a party or citizens of two states were involved.

When a territorial government was established for Louisiana in 1804, Congress also created one federal judicial district in the territory with one district court (2 Stat. 285). This U. S. District Court, which began holding sessions in 1806, was located in New Orleans. The court was given both district and circuit court jurisdiction, and appeals from the court's decisions went directly to the U. S. Supreme Court. The district court's exercise of circuit powers ended in 1837 when Louisiana was included in the Ninth Circuit (5 Stat. 176). In 1842, Louisiana was transferred to the Fifth Circuit (5 Stat. 507) where it remained until 1862 when Louisiana was included in the Sixth Circuit with Texas, Arkansas, Kentucky and Tennessee (12 Stat. 576). Louisiana returned to the Fifth Circuit in 1866 (14 Stat. 209).

On three occasions from 1823-1881, the state of Louisiana was divided into two judicial districts. The Eastern and Western Districts, which were originally established by an Act of Congress in 1823 (3 Stat. 775), were combined into one district in 1845 (5 Stat. 722). The increasingly heavy caseload of the court in New Orleans made a second division of the state into Eastern and Western Districts necessary in 1849 (9 Stat. 401).

The division between the two districts remained in effect after Louisiana seceded from the United States in January, 1861. By 1862, the city of New Orleans had been recaptured by the Union troops, and in October, 1862, a Provisional Court was established with district and circuit court jurisdiction in New Orleans. In 1863, the U. S. District and Circuit Courts in Louisiana began functioning as a single judicial district.

The present Eastern and Western Districts were created in 1881 (21 Stat. 507). In 1888, the Eastern District was divided into two divisions with court terms to be held in Baton Rouge and New Orleans (25 Stat. 438).

The majority of the records created by the U. S. District Court in the Eastern District of Louisiana relate to maritime matters, including admiralty proceedings filed in the district court during the period of 1844-1849 and 1861-1875 relate to land claims in Louisiana. No separate files appear to have been maintained for original and appellate jurisdiction records of the circuit court.

This preliminary inventory describes the records of the United States District Court and Circuit Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana.

These records are part of Record Group 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, and amount to approximately 2248 cubic feet.

The following record groups in the National Archives contain records relating to those described in this inventory: Record Group 276, Records of the U. S. Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit; and Record Group 267, Records of the Supreme Court of the United States.