

THE HONORABLE SARAH T. HUGHES

Judge Sarah T. Hughes was a pioneer in the fight for civil rights. Never afraid to be “the first,” she was passionate about the cause of equality and left a legacy of service and leadership. Judge Hughes spoke often about the formula upon which she relied: “[p]ick out your goal and then use courage and determination to reach it.”

A woman of strong convictions and great presence, Judge Hughes was a tireless advocate for equal rights for all. “In terms of energy, intelligence and common sense, . . . [Judge Hughes] was the star of the Dallas trial bench.” “Impudent lawyers, double talking witnesses and political opponents learned to fear and respect her as a stern jurist who ran a no nonsense courtroom.”

Born in Baltimore in 1896, Sarah Tilghman was educated at Baltimore’s Goucher College, where she earned her biology degree and a Phi Beta Kappa key. Tilghman then went on to teach science at Salem College in North Carolina for two years, but returned to Washington, D.C. in 1919 to become a police officer while attending George Washington University School of Law. She married a fellow law student, George Hughes. In 1922, the Hughes moved to Dallas, Texas, where, together, they set up a law practice. Hughes practiced law for 13 years.

In 1930, Hughes was elected to the Texas House of Representatives. She was re-elected in 1932 and 1934. In 1935, she was appointed to serve as judge of the 14th District Court of Texas, and became the first female district court judge in Texas. She successfully ran for that bench after completing her initial term, was re-elected to it another six times, and ultimately served on it for 26 years.

In 1952, Judge Hughes’ name was placed in nomination for the Vice Presidency at the Democratic Convention, making her the first woman to be so nominated in any major party. Acknowledging the compliment, she nevertheless withdrew her name from consideration.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy appointed Judge Hughes to the federal district court, making her the first woman federal district court judge in Texas. Two years later, Judge Hughes swore in President Lyndon B. Johnson after the assassination of President Kennedy.

In 1964, Judge Hughes was the first recipient of the Federal Bar Association’s Outstanding Woman Jurist Award; that award was presented to her by then-FBA president, Ramsey Clark.

Judge Hughes was active in professional and community organizations. She served as the National President of the Business and Professional Women’s Clubs; was a founding member of the Hoblitzelle Foundation; was a trustee for both Goucher and Bishop colleges; served as president of the Dallas Zonta Club; and was a dedicated member of the United Nations Association, the State Bar of Texas, the Dallas Bar Association, and the American Association for University Women.

Judge Hughes was honored with the George Washington University Alumni Achievement Award (1937) and the Zonta Service Award (1946). She was named the Outstanding Woman in the Field of Law by Who’s Who In American Women (1968).

While often described as diminutive, Judge Sarah T. Hughes stood tall among the leaders for civil rights in Texas and the nation. “She was the champion of lost causes, of the little person, of the underdog.”