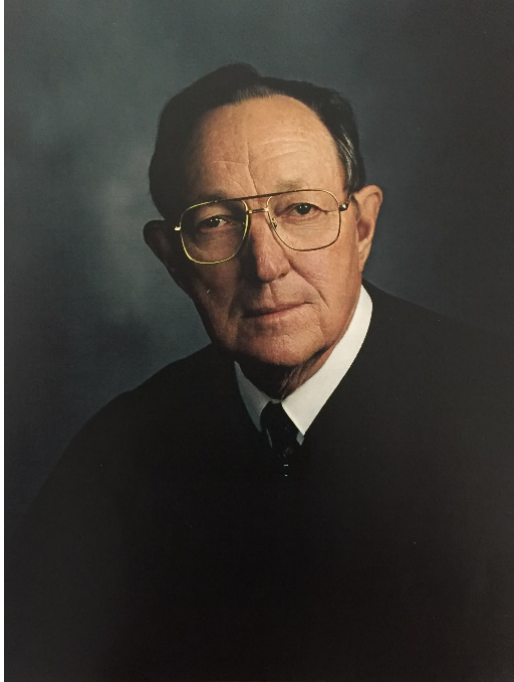


U.S. District Judge James P. Churchill

1924-2020



Lives and careers often are shaped by the people we meet. For James Churchill, a high school student from Imlay City, that person was Robert Griffin, a high school student from Garden City. They met at Wolverine Boys State, a summer leadership and civics training program in Lansing.

The two boys became lifelong friends. In the years that followed, Griffin would become an influential United States Senator. And, with Griffin's help, Churchill would become a U.S. District Court judge for the Eastern District of Michigan.

"We kinda took to each other and he certainly had a major influence on my life later," Churchill told the Historical Society for the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, in 1992.

James P. Churchill, 96, died peacefully at an assisted living facility in Harbor Springs on June 29, 2020, following a brief illness.

He was born April 10, 1924, in Imlay City, the youngest child of a bank cashier turned prosperous insurance and real estate broker. His mother was a schoolteacher.

After graduating from high school in 1941, Churchill enrolled at the University of Michigan to study business. In March 1943, he volunteered for the draft, dropped out of school, and wound up in the Army, which was preparing for the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II. The Army placed him in a specialized training program at Oklahoma A & M University and later assigned him to an artillery unit of the 103rd Infantry Division.

"In theory, I was a clerk, but I never saw a typewriter again after we landed in Europe," Churchill recalled in the historical society interview. He said he spent the rest of the war in combat firing 105-millimeter howitzers.

After being discharged in February 1946, Churchill returned to the University of Michigan and received a business degree in 1947. Though he had planned to become an accountant, Churchill said he took a vocational test which showed he was far better

suited to become a lawyer. So, he enrolled in the U-M Law School and obtained his law degree in 1950 along with his classmate, Robert Griffin.

Churchill returned to Imlay City and worked in a dry-cleaning plant until he passed the bar exam and opened a law practice in Vassar, 45 miles away. In 1950, he married Ann Muir. In the years that followed, they had three children: Nancy, David and Sally Jo.

Practicing law was a 90-hour-a-week job and involved a lot of drudgery, Churchill recalled.

He said he prepared deeds and mortgages, wills, land contracts, income tax returns and handled divorces.

“I’d have even shoveled your sidewalk, if you’d given me a chance,” Churchill told the historical society. “A small-town lawyer is like a small-town family doctor. You do everything. You prepare papers. You do litigation. You handle divorce work, which I didn’t like, but it was a bread and butter thing.”

In 1965, after 15 years of practicing law, Churchill was elected circuit judge for Tuscola and Lapeer counties.

In 1974, he ran for Michigan Court of Appeals, but was narrowly defeated in the primary. Four days later, Churchill’s longtime friend, U.S. Sen. Robert Griffin, asked Churchill if he would be interested in a bigger prize – being appointed federal district judge in Detroit.

On Dec. 2, 1974, President Gerald Ford, a former Michigan congressman and Griffin ally, nominated Churchill to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. The Senate confirmed Churchill’s appointment on Dec. 20, 1974. Churchill was a Democrat; Ford and Griffin were Republicans.

In the years that followed, Churchill sat in federal courthouses in Detroit, Flint, Bay City and on occasion in Tennessee. He also presided over several newsworthy cases.

In December 1975, he made national headlines by ordering three mob-connected New Jersey Teamsters – prime suspects in the disappearance of Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa – to appear for a police lineup at the Oakland County Jail. But a secret witness who may have observed Hoffa’s abduction could not identify the suspects as his kidnappers.

In February 1976, he ruled that the City of Detroit discriminated against white firefighters by promoting less-senior black firefighters during Mayor Coleman Young’s effort to

integrate the city's overwhelmingly white Fire Department. Churchill said he was sympathetic to the city's arguments but had to follow the law.

In January 1977, he ordered a major Detroit-area real estate company to stop discriminating against black homebuyers by steering them away from white neighborhoods. He ordered the company to retrain its sales staff, encourage black agents to work in suburban real estate offices and provide every employee with a copy of his decision.

The following July, he ordered Detroit schools to stop disciplining students by withholding their federally subsidized hot lunches and liquids with their meals. Churchill said the punishments discriminated against needy pupils.

In 1981, the U.S. 6th Circuit Court of Appeals sent Churchill to Nashville, Tenn., to preside over the criminal case of six aides of Gov. Ray Blanton who were accused of selling pardons, paroles and commutations to prisoners serving time for crimes ranging from armed robbery to murder. The case resulted in multiple convictions and prison terms.

Later that year, Churchill handed down prison sentences to the leaders of a tax protest, calling their claims that federal income tax laws were unconstitutional "unadulterated snake oil... The income-tax law has been part of the United States structure for 60 years and has been abided by hundreds of thousands of people," Churchill said.

And in October 1986, he sentenced two Catholic nuns to several months in jail for repeatedly trespassing on federal property while protesting nuclear weapons at the Wurtsmith Air Force Base in Oscoda.

Churchill served as chief judge from Feb. 7, 1989, until he took senior status with a reduced caseload on Dec. 30, 1989. He went on inactive status in late 1995.

Asked in early 2018 how he would like to be remembered, Churchill said: "As a good judge."

When asked to elaborate, Churchill replied: "'Good judge' covers everything."

Judge Churchill is survived by his widow, Ann; children Nancy Ann Nyquist (Michael Blohm) of Menominee; David (Kathy) Churchill of Lapeer; and Sally Jo Churchill (Edward Kulka) of Ann Arbor; six grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Interment will take place at the Readmond Township Cemetery on a date to be determined. Memorial contributions may be made to the Readmond Friendship, Cross Village Fire Department, 6043 Wormwood Lane, Harbor Springs, MI, 49740, or the

University of Michigan Law School Fund, 4000 Jeffries Hall, 701 State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.

Researched and written by David Ashenfelter, Public Information Officer, U.S. District Court.