



Associated Press
First published: Saturday, August 19, 2000

Ex-chief judge of state's top court dies at 85

Lawrence H. Cooke was a respected liberal voice and judicial reformer

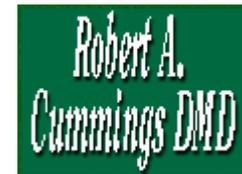
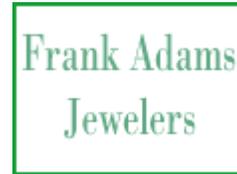
MONTICELLO -- Lawrence H. Cooke, who presided over the unification of New York's courts as chief judge of New York's highest court, died Thursday. He was 85.

Cooke, who had been in failing health, died at his home. In 1991, he had had a pacemaker installed after his heart stopped in the hospital.

Cooke was one of the last judges to be elected to the state Court of Appeals, in 1974, and in 1979 he was designated as chief judge of the court by former Gov. Hugh Carey.

He served until his mandatory retirement at age 70 in 1985.

During his tenure, Cooke was known as one of the more liberal voices on the court. Decisions he authored included those recognizing due process rights and right to counsel of defendants under the state constitution, which exceed those the federal courts had recognized under the U.S. Constitution.



Cooke also wrote decisions upholding a woman's right to receive seniority credit for maternity leave and several rulings defending adults' parental rights against termination.

Judith Kaye, the current chief judge of the Court of Appeals, grew up in Monticello and said she knew Cooke since she was a young child. Kaye said she'd frequently see Cooke in the local grocery store and in the clothing store Kaye's parents operated in the Catskill Mountain village.

Cooke was "universally beloved" in Monticello, Kaye said.

"He was on such a pedestal in many ways that (being a judge) was beyond my thinking," Kaye said. "But it certainly must have influenced my desire to become a lawyer."

Cooke became renowned for working long hours at the Court of Appeals, frequently arriving at his chambers at 3 a.m., Kaye said.

Cooke swore in Kaye when she joined the Court of Appeals in 1984.

"I had a year and a half with him" on the Court of Appeals, Kaye said Friday. "The hardest thing I had to do as a judge on the Court of Appeals was to call him Larry."

Though described as unfailingly courteous and kind, Cooke nonetheless tangled with governors over the budgets given the courts by the state while he was chief judge.

He angered upstate judges in 1979 by transferring 242 of them temporarily to reduce backlogs in downstate courts. In 1981, Cooke removed 97 acting state Supreme Court justices in New York City

because of concerns over favoritism -- a move that Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau challenged.

Cooke appeared before his own court as a litigant in that case. The court, with Cooke not participating, ruled the chief judge had exceeded his constitutional authority.

During Cooke's tenure as chief judge, the state also was in the process of unifying New York's court system above the level of town and village courts.

"Judge Cooke was a great New Yorker who furthered the great cause of justice throughout his long and distinguished career," Gov. George Pataki said Friday. "Chief Judge Cooke served this state with distinction, with dignity and intelligent good humor, and he will be sorely missed."

After retiring from the Court of Appeals, Cooke was appointed by Ronald Reagan to head the National Center for State Courts and became a law professor at Pace University. Pataki also appointed him to lead the state's Judicial Screening Committee.

Cooke graduated from Georgetown University and Albany Law School. He was supervisor in Thompson in Sullivan County and chairman of the county board of supervisors in 1947 and 1948.

Because he was from a small community, Cooke said he sometimes felt others believed he was a "country bumpkin."

"I went to the proper schools, I had been around, and I felt I could hold my own in any company," he told The New York Times just before leaving the court in 1985.

Cooke was survived by Alice, his wife of 61 years, and three children -- Edward, George and Lauren. He also had nine grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A wake was scheduled for Sunday afternoon at the Lawrence H. Cooke Sullivan County Courthouse in Monticello.

The funeral will be 11 a.m. Monday at St. Peter's Catholic Church in Monticello. Kaye will deliver the eulogy.

 [Send this story to a friend](#)

 [Return to Top](#)

Copyright 2000, Capital Newspapers Division of The Hearst Corporation, Albany, N.Y. The information you receive online from Times Union is protected by the copyright laws of the United States. The copyright laws prohibit any copying, redistributing, retransmitting, or repurposing of any copyright-protected material.