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In this image we see Isaac C. Parker as he appeared in 1874, the year before President U.S. Grant appointed Parker as a judge of the Federal District Court for the Western District of Arkansas. Click on the public-domain image for a better view. Online via the U.S. National Archives.

When 35-year-old Isaac Parker arrived in Fort Smith, Arkansas—on the 4th of May, 1875—the place had no paved roads, no streetlights, no sidewalks, no factories, no good hotels and no schools. The new Judge himself described the primitive nature of his surroundings:

...the facilities for transport are meager and primitive. The country is sparsely settled.

One thing Judge Parker's territory did have. Criminality.

After the Civil War, a tide of unchecked lawlessness and racial violence swept the area. Criminals outrunning the law arrived in Indian Territory where they raped, murdered and looted with little intervention by mostly powerless local authorities.

Judge Parker's job was to stem the growing anarchy, in a territory covering over 74,000 square miles, but he couldn't do it alone. He appointed former Confederate General James Fagan as a U.S. Marshal, then told him to hire 200 deputies.

The deputies would police the land, stop the violence and bring the criminals to justice. That, at least, was the plan.

Although Parker received a salary of \$2,000 a year, his deputy marshals were only paid if they captured criminals. Bounties and rewards were the source of income for federal marshals, which meant these 200 men took their jobs very seriously.

It took little time for Judge Parker to earn his new nickname—"The Hanging Judge." Within months after first presiding over the federal district court, for the Western District of Arkansas, Parker issued his first death sentences.

On the 3rd of September, 1875, six men were hanging from Fort Smith's new gallows.



During his tenure as a federal judge, Parker handled a staggering number of cases. His courtroom was open for business six days a week. Surviving records tell us he had 13,490 trials. Of those thousands of trials, 344 were for capital offenses (meaning the defendants faced the death penalty).

Of the 9,454 convictions (or plea bargains) in Parker's court, the judge sentenced 156 men and 4 women to death by hanging. Seventy-nine of those sentences were actually carried out. All 79 were male defendants.

Parker's courthouse, in Fort Smith, soon became the most-famous of the American frontier. Perhaps that's because it was also the scene of more judicial executions than any other place in American history.

In an interesting twist of irony, however, Parker personally opposed capital punishment. During an interview he had with the *St. Louis Republic*, in September of 1896, Parker said:

...I never hung a man. It is the law.

The "Hanging Judge"—a moniker perhaps unfairly given—also hoped that capital punishment would be abolished:

I favor the abolition of capital punishment, too. Provided that there is a certainty of punishment, whatever that punishment may be. In the uncertainty of punishment following crime lies the weakness of our "halting crime." (For both Parker quotes, see *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture's* entry on "Isaac Charles Parker; 1838-1896.")

After 21 years of presiding over non-tribal crimes committed in Indian Territory, Judge Parker lost all of his jurisdiction involving Native-American lands in 1896. In that year, the federal government shifted power to a more-centralized authority.

How did Judge Parker's 200 deputy marshals fare during that same 21-year time frame? Of the original group of men, around 65 died doing their jobs.

If Judge Parker was the most-famous Judge of the American frontier, then surely one of his deputy marshals was the most-famous lawman. His name was Bass Reeves ... and ... he was African-American.

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