History

Serving Clients Since 1913

Steptoe has a long, vibrant history in Washington, DC, where the firm established an office in 1945. But Steptoe's origins go back much further, to a partnership established by two Virginia natives more than a century ago.

Upon his graduation from the University of Virginia School of Law in 1902, Philip Steptoe went to seek his fortune in Clarksburg, WV, at the time a booming oil and gas center. There, Mr. Steptoe formed a partnership with another attorney, John Rixey. In 1913, Steptoe invited Louis Johnson, who had graduated first in his class at UVA Law the previous year, to join the firm. When Mr. Rixey left the practice in 1916, the firm became known as “Steptoe & Johnson,” a name that has endured since that time.

The firm flourished in Clarksburg and became well known in the state of West Virginia, primarily concentrating in the energy, public utilities, banking, and insurance industries, as well as general legal representation for individuals. Historical accounts describe Mr. Steptoe as quiet and analytical, while Mr. Johnson was outgoing and a natural politician. Mr. Johnson’s first political office was as a member of the West Virginia House of Delegates, where he served in 1917 until entering the Army to serve in World War I. After the war, Mr. Johnson was active in the Army Reserve, where he attained the rank of Colonel. He was known in West Virginia and beyond as “the Colonel” for the rest of his life.

The firm continued to grow, with a reputation for excellence. In 1928, Steptoe & Johnson opened an office in Charleston, WV, to meet the expanding legislative and regulatory work available in the state capital. Meanwhile, Col. Johnson helped found the American Legion, bringing national prominence to himself and the firm when he served as the organization’s commander in the mid-1930s. President Franklin Roosevelt, impressed by Col. Johnson’s dedication to the nation’s military readiness, appointed him Deputy Secretary of War in 1937.

Serving in the war-time administration, Col. Johnson saw firsthand the tremendous growth in the federal government and great potential for his firm’s expansion. After leaving the Roosevelt administration, and with Mr. Steptoe and the partners’ blessing, Col. Johnson opened the Washington office of Steptoe & Johnson in 1945. Shortly thereafter, Col. Johnson was again tapped for public service, this time by President Harry Truman, for whom he served as Secretary of Defense until 1950.

The firm’s Washington office grew quickly under Col. Johnson’s influence. Among its first clients were the members of the growing airlines industry, as well as pipelines, railroads, and foreign companies whose assets had been seized during World War II. In assisting these clients and building on a string of successful representations, Steptoe gained a solid national and international reputation as a prominent firm in regulatory law, tax, and international trade.

In 1980, the firm began a period of dynamic growth, starting with an amicable separation of the Washington and West Virginia offices. Today, the West Virginia firm known as Steptoe & Johnson PLLC is still based in Clarksburg, WV.

In the years since, the Washington firm has grown steadily in the United States and abroad. Today, the firm has more than 500 lawyers and other professionals with offices in Beijing, Brussels, Chicago, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Washington. Steptoe and its lawyers routinely receive top rankings in many practice areas by organizations including Chambers, Legal 500, the American Lawyer, and Best Lawyers, to name just a few publications. The firm’s lawyers have continued Col. Johnson’s legacy of government service, with dozens of Steptoe lawyers having served in high-level government positions. The firm also has a strong and long-standing commitment to pro bono service and community involvement in all of the cities in which it has offices.

Today’s Steptoe is a recognized leader among the nation’s law firms, with acknowledged expertise in criminal defense and investigation, intellectual property, international trade, compliance, and investment, litigation, regulatory and legislative affairs, and tax. At the same time, the firm is widely known to be a collaborative partnership that appreciates each other’s successes in an effort to pursue and celebrate those of its clients. It is an institution of which Mr. Steptoe and Col. Johnson would be justly proud.