

Supreme Court of the United States
**Self-Guide to the Building's
Exterior Architecture**





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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SUPREME COURT BUILDING

By law, the Supreme Court meets at the seat of the federal government. The Court met initially in **New York City** (1790), then **Philadelphia** (1791–1800). When the Supreme Court moved to **Washington, D.C.** in 1801, there were no plans to give the Court its own building. Most Court sittings took place in courtrooms set up in the North wing of the U.S. Capitol Building, an arrangement that lasted for more than 130 years.

While proposals to relocate the Court surfaced throughout the 19th century, the project to provide the Supreme Court a building of its own did not begin in earnest until the 1920s when the new Chief Justice, former President William Howard Taft, persuaded Congress to allocate \$9.7 million for the construction of a Supreme Court Building. In 1929, the Supreme Court Building Commission chose Cass Gilbert, the renowned architect behind New York City’s Woolworth Building and the Minnesota State Capitol, to complete the design.

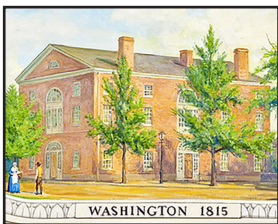
The plot of land that is today home to the Supreme Court Building has a long history. Following the burning of the Capitol by British troops in 1814, a temporary structure, known as the “**Old Brick Capitol**,” was built to house Congress on this site. The building later served as a boarding house and was converted into a federal jail, the “**Capitol Prison**,” during the Civil War. After the war, it was remodeled into three large row houses known as **Trumbull’s Row**. In 1921, the **National Woman’s**



Former meeting sites of the Supreme Court.
Clockwise from top left: The Exchange Building in New York City; Old City Hall in Philadelphia; and the U.S. Capitol Building, shown here circa 1848.

Party purchased Trumbull’s Row. At the time, it was one of approximately 200 structures, mostly residential, on the Court’s future site. On April 1, 1930, the government gave notice to all tenants living on the site to vacate, and the site was cleared by the end of the year. Construction commenced in 1931.

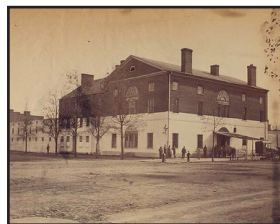
The Supreme Court Building was dedicated at a cornerstone laying ceremony in 1932, and construction moved forward during the Great Depression, which greatly decreased the costs for material and labor. Completed under budget — approximately \$94,000 was returned to the U.S. Treasury — the building opened to the public in the summer of 1935, and welcomed about 85,000 visitors before the Court’s first sitting on Monday, October 7, 1935.



Architect of the Capitol

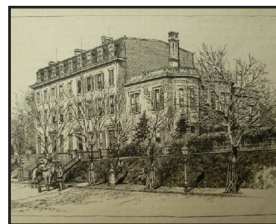
1815–1819

Old Brick Capitol



1861–1867

Capitol Prison



1868–1921

Trumbull’s Row



1922–1929

National Woman’s Party Headquarters

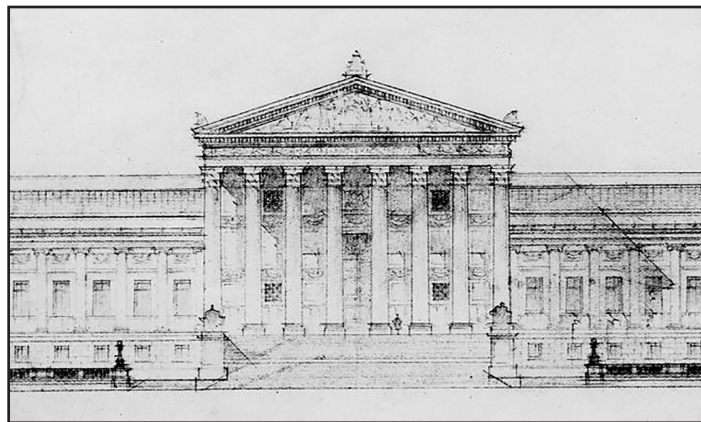
SYMBOLIC IDEALS OF LAW AND JUSTICE

When the Supreme Court Building opened in 1935, many saw it as a symbol of hope for a nation struggling through the Great Depression. Others, according to newspaper accounts of the time, saw it as an unnecessary and extravagant “marble palace” for “nine old men.” Whether acclaimed or criticized, the building’s design combines the power and authority of classical architecture with the symbolic ideals of law and justice. Together, they create a dignified atmosphere for the work of the nation’s highest court — a temple for American Justice.

Cass Gilbert’s design centers on a classically inspired Greco-Roman temple. A grand staircase, flanked by allegorical statues, leads to a Corinthian portico with a triangular pediment. The prominence of the ceremonial temple over the administrative wings signifies their relative importance to the functions of the Court. Gilbert’s use of white marble and classical architecture links his design to a long line of buildings dating from antiquity to those on Capitol Hill. In this way, he shows that the building, like the law it serves, is built upon history and tradition.



Cass Gilbert



Study for the Supreme Court Building, October 1930.

Gilbert did not design the Supreme Court Building singlehandedly. While its final design is uniquely his, a team of architects, draftsmen, modelers, and sculptors helped to develop its complex architectural details. With the approval of the Supreme Court Building Commission, Gilbert chose five prominent artists who created the rich sculptural program that reflects the iconography of the Supreme Court. Individual sculptors had freedom to choose the symbolic elements, as long as their work was consistent with the overall classical style. Like the overall architectural style, the symbols they used were drawn from a long tradition in which symbols of justice, authority, and portrayals of the great lawgivers had been adorning courts of law for centuries.



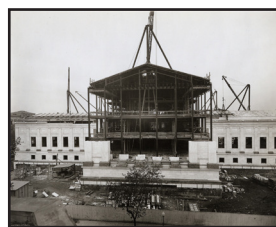
1929

Site Acquisition



1930

Groundbreaking



1931–1935

Construction



1935

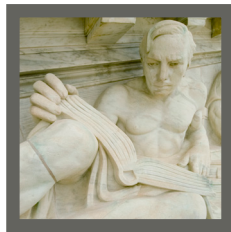
Completion

Front of the Building: The West Pediment

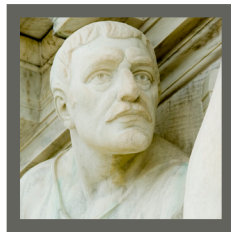
The **West Pediment**, located above the front entrance of the Supreme Court Building, is the work of American sculptor Robert I. Aitken. Cass Gilbert gave Aitken free rein to choose the subject matter for the sculpture, requesting only that the composition “be worthy of the great Supreme Court.” Aitken proposed a design incorporating nine allegorical figures. When the pediment was completed, many people were surprised to find that the six allegorical figures flanking the central group were, in fact, persons influential in the creation of the Court’s new home (including Aitken, himself).



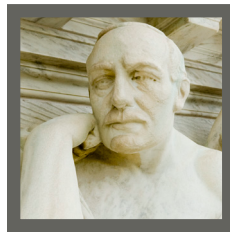
Pediment figures with allegorical meanings from left to right:



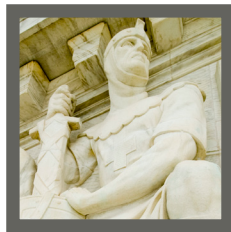
RESEARCH PRESENT
(William H. Taft)



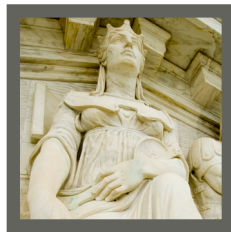
COUNCIL
(Elihu Root)



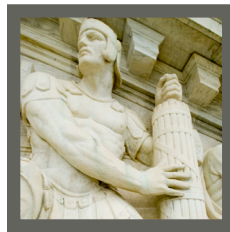
COUNCIL
(Cass Gilbert)



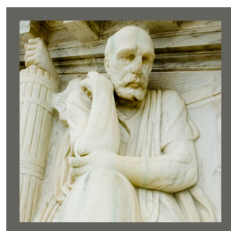
ORDER



LIBERTY ENTHRONED



AUTHORITY



COUNCIL
(Charles E. Hughes)



COUNCIL
(Robert I. Aitken)



RESEARCH PAST
(John Marshall)



Front of the Building: The West Pediment



EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW

Cass Gilbert's architectural firm submitted "*Equal Justice Under Law*" to the Architect of the Capitol, David Lynn. There is no known source for the inscription.



Profile views of *Order* and *Liberty Enthroned*, two of the allegorical figures in the central group of the West Pediment.

Front of the Building: The Fraser Statues



Contemplation of Justice

The Supreme Court Building Commission selected American sculptor James Earle Fraser to sculpt the two statues that flank the steps in front of the building. Fraser completed preliminary models in 1933 and over the next year, continued to hone his work. The sculptures were installed in November 1935, a month after the building opened.

Fraser described the female figure to the left of the steps, *Contemplation of Justice*, as “a realistic conception of what I consider a heroic type of person with a head and body expressive of the beauty and intelligence of justice.” A book of laws supports her left arm and a figure of blindfolded *Justice* is in her right hand.

Front of the Building: The Fraser Statues



Authority of Law

Fraser described the male figure to the right of the steps, *Authority of Law*, as “powerful, erect, and vigilant. He waits with concentrated attention, holding in his left hand the tablet of laws, backed by the sheathed sword, symbolic of enforcement through law.” The Latin word for law, *LEX*, is inscribed on the tablet.



“I THINK...THE FIGURES MUST HAVE A MEANING, AND NOT BE PERFUNCTORY AND PURELY DECORATIVE, AND AFTER SEEING THE GRANDEUR AND SIMPLICITY OF THE SUPREME COURT ROOM, I FEEL MORE THAN EVER THAT THE FIGURES IN FRONT OF IT SHOULD SYMBOLIZE THAT FEELING AND BE A PRELUDE TO THE SPIRIT OF THE BUILDING.”

– JAMES EARLE FRASER , SCULPTOR

Front of the Building: The Bronze Doors

Designed by Cass Gilbert and John Donnelly, Sr., and sculpted by John Donnelly, Jr., the bronze doors signify the importance of the proceedings that occur within. Measuring 17 feet high, 9 ½ feet wide, and weighing about 13 tons apiece, each door is comprised of four bas-reliefs which illustrate significant events in the evolution of justice in the Western tradition. Arranged chronologically, the thematic sequence begins on the lower left panel and moves up to the top of that door. It continues with the bottom right panel and concludes with the upper right corner.

Note: Doors are typically closed, as pictured here, when the building is closed.

JUSTINIAN CODE

In the sixth century, Roman (Byzantine) Emperor Justinian ordered publication of the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which is considered the first codification of Roman law.

JULIAN AND SCHOLAR

Julian, one of the most prominent law teachers in Ancient Rome, instructs a pupil. According to the Donnellys, this represents “the development of law by scholar and advocate.”

PRAETOR'S EDICT

A Roman praetor (magistrate) publishes his edict proclaiming the validity of judge-made or “common” law. On the right is a soldier, who may represent the power of government to enforce the common law.

SHIELD OF ACHILLES

As described in Homer's *Iliad*, two men bring a dispute before the elders (not depicted) for judgment. The elder with the fairest verdict is awarded the two coins on the pedestal and the whole body adopts his verdict.

Front of the Building: The Bronze Doors



MARSHALL AND STORY
The Donnellys describe this event as Chief Justice John Marshall and Associate Justice Joseph Story discussing the 1803 *Marbury v. Madison* opinion in front of the U.S. Capitol. Note: Justice Story did not join the Court until 1812, nine years after this historic decision.



COKE AND JAMES I
England's Lord Chief Justice Coke bars King James I from the "King's Court," making the court, by law, independent of the executive branch of government.



WESTMINSTER STATUTE
King Edward I watches as his chancellor (secretary) publishes the Statute of Westminster in 1275. The Donnellys' description calls this, "The greatest single legal reform in our history."



MAGNA CARTA
In 1215, the barons coerced King John of England to place his seal upon Magna Carta.

"OUT OF ALL OF OUR MONUMENTAL PROJECTS, SPREAD OVER TWO LIFETIMES, THE SUPREME COURT DOORS ARE THE ONLY WORK THAT WE EVER SIGNED — THAT'S HOW IMPORTANT THEY WERE."

**– JOHN DONNELLY, JR.,
SCULPTOR**



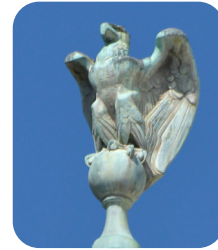
John Donnelly, Jr.'s signature appears in the bottom right corner of the Magna Carta panel.

Front of the Building: Flagpoles



The Supreme Court Building has two flagpoles located symmetrically on the front plaza. At 75-feet high, each pole assembly includes an eight-tiered bronze base, a fluted pole connecting the base to the flagpole, and an American eagle as the crowning ornamentation. The flagpoles were completed by the John Donnelly Company in 1935.

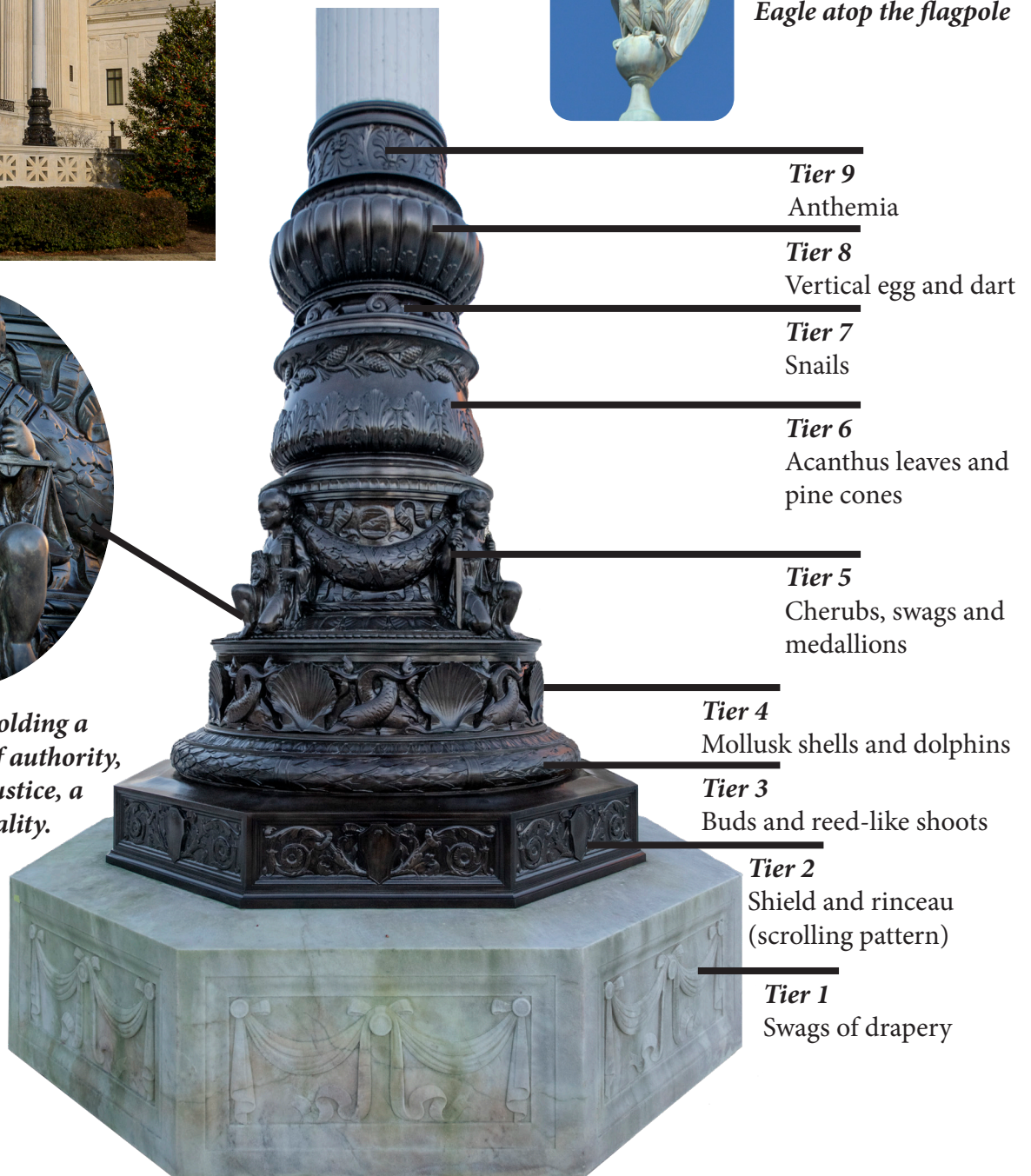
The bases of the flagpoles have elaborate decoration, as identified in the image below.



Eagle atop the flagpole



Detail of cherub holding a sword, a symbol of authority, and the scales of justice, a symbol of impartiality.



Tier 9

Anthemia

Tier 8

Vertical egg and dart

Tier 7

Snails

Tier 6

Acanthus leaves and pine cones

Tier 5

Cherubs, swags and medallions

Tier 4

Mollusk shells and dolphins

Tier 3

Buds and reed-like shoots

Tier 2

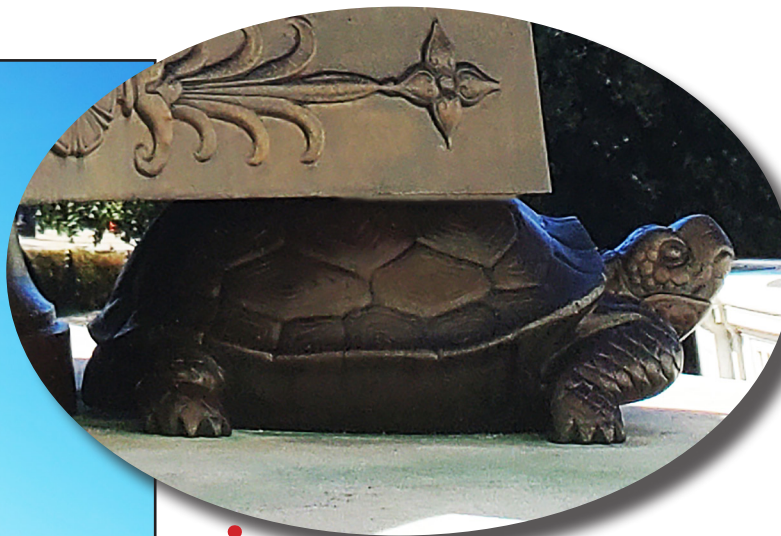
Shield and rinceau (scrolling pattern)

Tier 1

Swags of drapery

Front of the Building: Lampposts

While less elaborate than the flagpoles, bronze and marble lampposts in front of the Supreme Court Building also feature decorative elements consistent with themes of law and justice.



Bronze lampposts designed by Cass Gilbert's architectural firm feature four tortoises holding up the base. While there is no contemporaneous (1930s) documentation that states why the tortoises were chosen or whether they were chosen for any specific symbolic significance relating to the Court, over time tortoises have become generally associated with the "slow" or "deliberative" pace of justice.



The bases of the marble lampposts, designed by the John Donnelly Company, show bas-reliefs of blindfolded Justice holding scales in her left hand and a sword in her right hand.

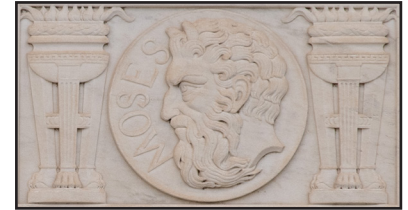


Perimeter of the Building: Medallions

Often overlooked in the architectural details of the Supreme Court Building are eight bas-relief medallions of famous lawgivers, jurists, philosophers, and advocates located in the upper corners of the building. They were designed by the John Donnelly Company under the direction of Cass Gilbert.



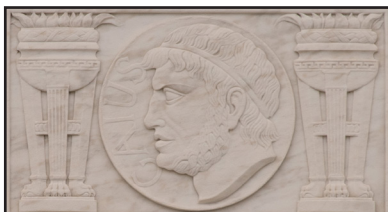
Hammurabi
Babylonian lawgiver
1810–1750 B.C.



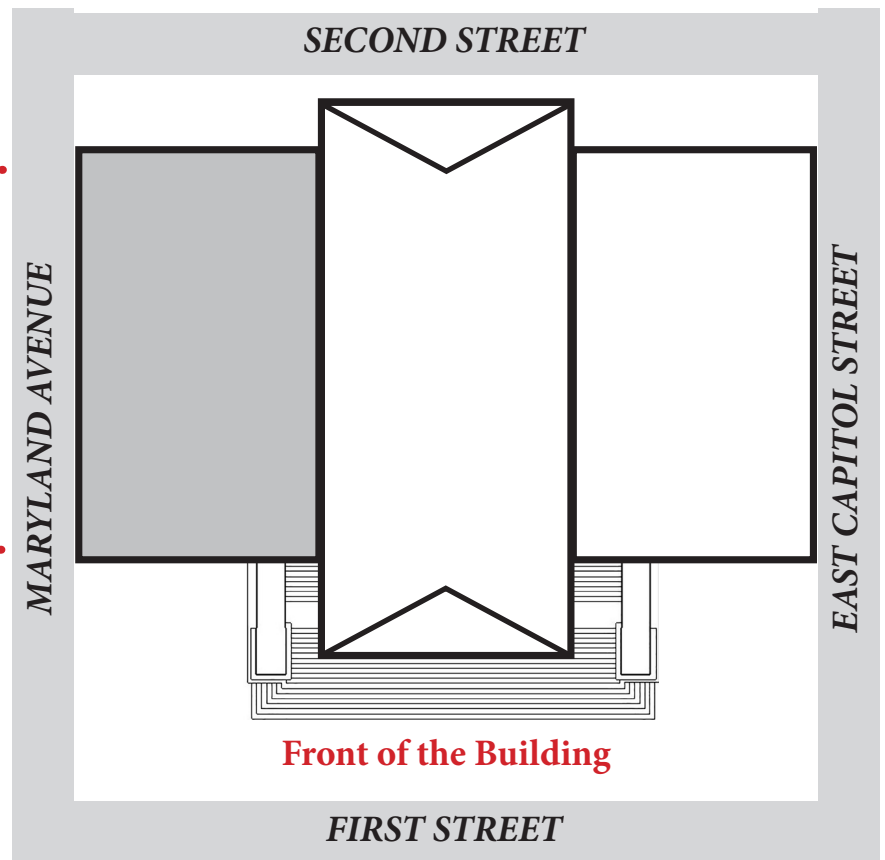
Moses
Hebrew lawgiver
14–13th century B.C.



Julian
Roman jurist, A.D. 330–363



Gaius
Roman jurist, 157–86 B.C.



Perimeter of the Building: Medallions



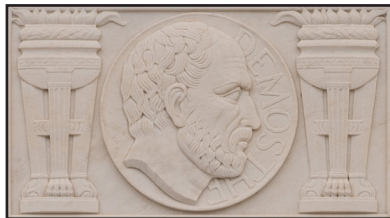
Plato

Greek philosopher, 428–348 B.C.



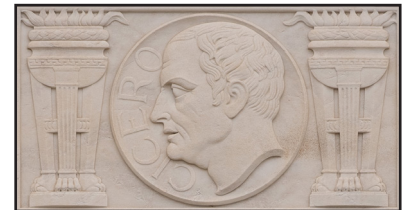
Aristotle

Greek philosopher, 384–322 B.C.



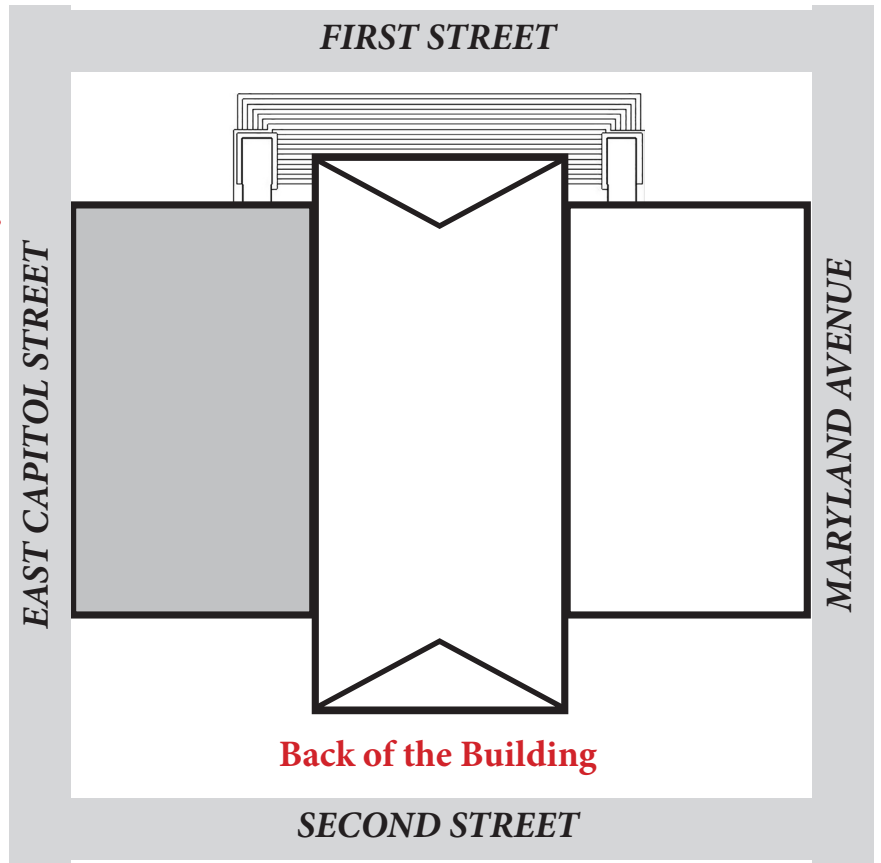
Demosthenes

Greek advocate, 384–322 B.C.



Cicero

Roman advocate, 106–43 B.C.



Back of the Building: The East Pediment

Hermon A. MacNeil, an American sculptor who studied under the masters of classical architecture, designed the sculptural group in the **East Pediment**. According to MacNeil, "Law as an element of civilization was normally and naturally derived or inherited in this country from former civilizations. The 'Eastern Pediment' of the Supreme Court Building suggests therefore the treatment of such fundamental laws and precepts as are derived from the East."

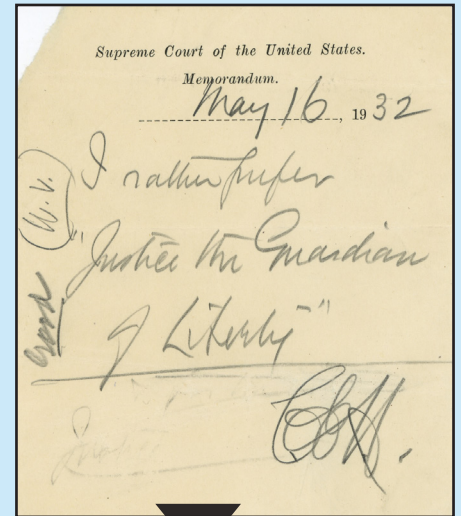


MacNeil's descriptions of the pediment figures:

1. Hare - *The fable of the Tortoise and the Hare*
2. *Study and pondering of judgments*
3. *The settlement of disputes between states through enlightened judgment*
4. *Symbolical figure bearing the means of enforcing the law*
5. Confucius (551–478 B.C.) Chinese philosopher
6. Moses (c. 1300s B.C.) Prophet, lawgiver, and judge of the Israelites
7. Solon (c. 638–558 B.C.) Athenian lawgiver
8. *Group tempering justice with mercy, allegorically treated*
9. *Maritime and other large functions of the Supreme Court in protection of the United States*
10. *A tribute to the fundamental and supreme character of this Court*
11. Tortoise - *The fable of the Tortoise and the Hare*



Back of the Building: The East Pediment



“Justice the Guardian of Liberty”

is one of the few architectural decisions made directly by a Justice. While reviewing the proposed inscription, *“Equal Justice is the Foundation of Liberty,”* Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes wrote a note to Justice Willis Van Devanter stating, “I rather prefer *Justice the Guardian of Liberty.*” Van Devanter agreed and a few days later, Chief Justice Hughes sent the alternative inscription to David Lynn, the Architect of the Capitol, informing him, “We think that the inscription for the East Portico can be improved.”



The Central Group: Confucius, Moses, and Solon represent “three great civilizations.”



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ed. 1/19/2024*