



The East Pediment

INFORMATION SHEET

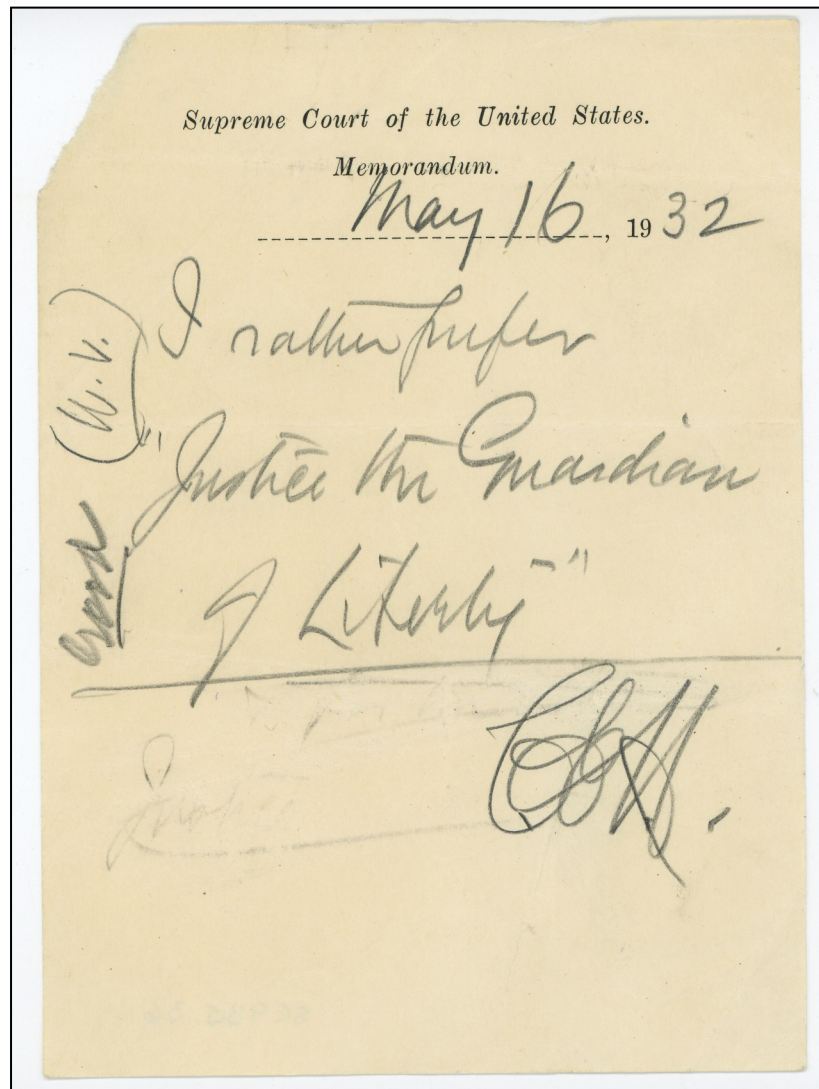
Visitors often miss the East Pediment of the Supreme Court Building because it is located at the rear of the building. This sculptural group was designed by Hermon A. MacNeil (1866–1947), an artist who studied under the masters of classical architecture and design. Cass Gilbert (1859–1934), the architect of the building, worked closely with MacNeil from 1932 to 1934 to create the thirteen symmetrically balanced allegorical figures. MacNeil submitted the following description of his work to the Supreme Court Building Commission:

“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. Moses, Confucius and Solon are chosen as representing three great civilizations and form the central group of this Pediment. Flanking this central group—left—is the symbolical figure bearing the means of enforcing the law. On the right a group tempering justice with mercy, allegorically treated. The ‘Youth’ is brought into both these groups to suggest the “Carrying on” of civilization through the knowledge imbibed of right and wrong. The next two figures with shields; Left - The settlement of disputes between states through enlightened judgment. Right—Maritime and other large functions of the Supreme Court in protection of the United States. The last figures: Left—Study and pondering of judgments. Right - A tribute to the fundamental and supreme character of this Court. Finale—The fable of the Tortoise and the Hare.”



The East Pediment by Hermon A. MacNeil

The inscription on the East Pediment—‘Justice the Guardian of Liberty’—is one of the few decisions regarding the architecture of the building that was made directly by one of the Justices. On May 2, 1932, David Lynn, the Architect of the Capitol, sent Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes a letter with Cass Gilbert’s suggestions for the East and West Pediment inscriptions. The Chief Justice agreed with the suggested inscription for the West Pediment, ‘Equal Justice Under Law’ but did not like the one proposed for the East Pediment, ‘Equal Justice is the Foundation of Liberty.’ Chief Justice Hughes sent a note (*below*) with a suggestion for a different inscription to Justice Willis Van Devanter, the only Justice beside Hughes and his predecessor, Chief Justice William Howard Taft, to serve on the Supreme Court Building Commission. Justice Van Devanter responded with a succinct reply: “Good (W.V.).” A few days later, the Chief Justice formally answered Lynn’s request by providing the alternate inscription, stating simply “We think that the inscription for the East Portico can be improved.”



*May 16, 1932 note regarding the East Pediment inscription.
The text, in the hand of Charles Evans Hughes, reads,
“I rather prefer ‘Justice the Guardian of Liberty’”*