



Chief Justice John Marshall's Bench Chair

INFORMATION SHEET

Among the treasured objects in the Supreme Court's historical collection is this mahogany bench chair used by Chief Justice John Marshall from 1819 to 1835. While documentation of the chair's maker is not definitive, it is most likely the work of Benjamin Belt, a local Washington, D.C. cabinetmaker who was hired to make seven desks and seven chairs for the Supreme Court to replace those lost after the British burned the United States Capitol in 1814.

Following the death of Chief Justice Marshall in 1835, a new set of furniture was made for the Courtroom. When the old furniture was sold as excess property, Deputy Clerk D. W. Middleton purchased the chair used by Marshall and placed it in his home. In 1900, the Middleton family sold the chair and the new owner bequeathed it back to the Court in 1936.



The Late Federal style chair incorporates neoclassical elements popular at the time. The scroll back flows down into the rear legs while the armrests curl forward. Applied bosses give the illusion of carved details on the arms and back. The turned front legs are rounded with simple decorative elements. All of the legs have their original casters. Black horsehair upholstery covers the seat and backrest, which is held in place with brass nail trim. The padded armrests have been recovered.

Since 1972, the chair has been used as part of the Investiture Ceremony for each new Justice. The chair is positioned in front of the Bench, just below the Clerk of the Court's desk, and the incoming Justice occupies it prior to taking the Judicial Oath in the Courtroom.