

# *Supreme Court of the United States* **Guide to the Building's Interior Architecture**





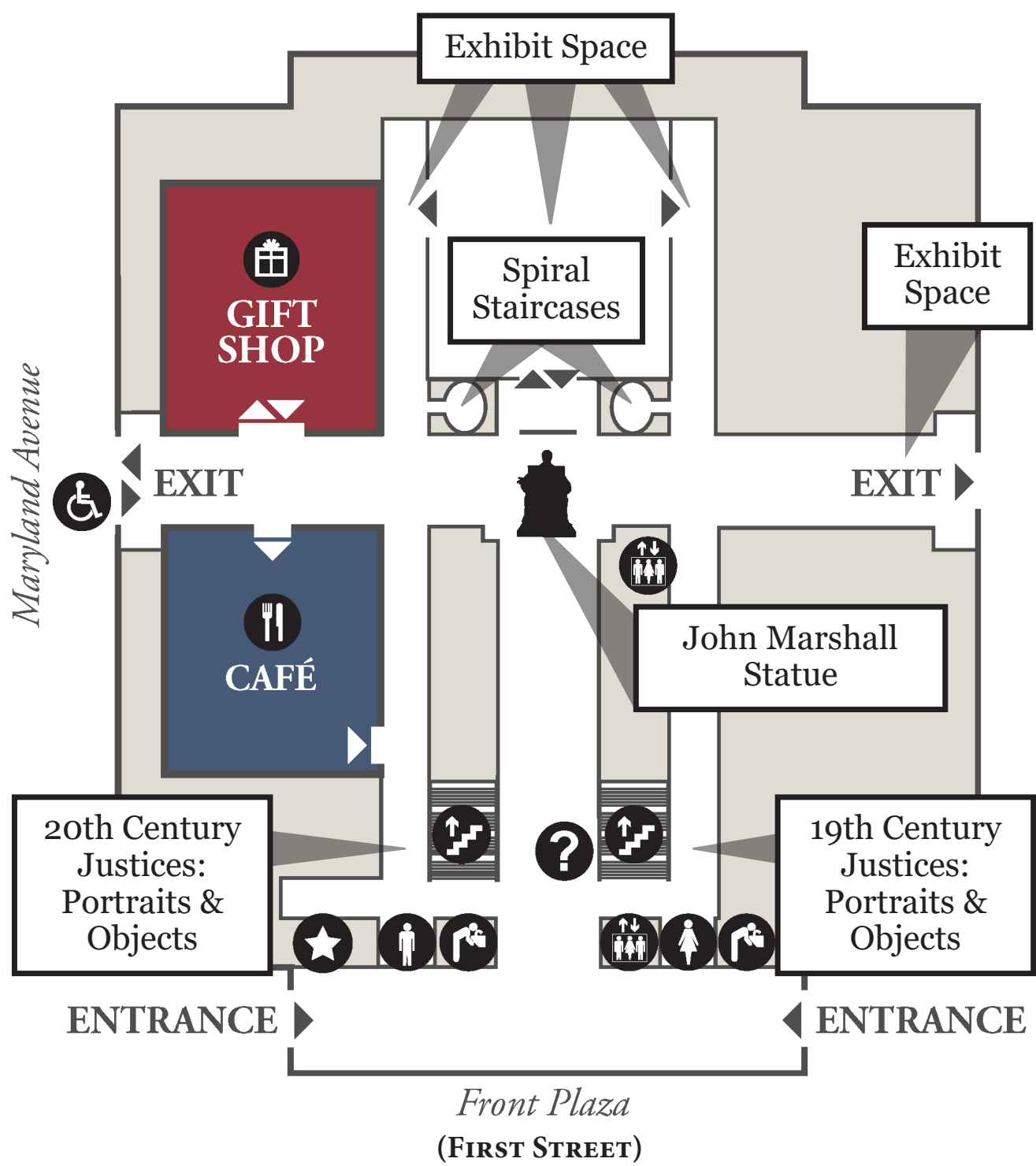




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# Ground Floor Highlights

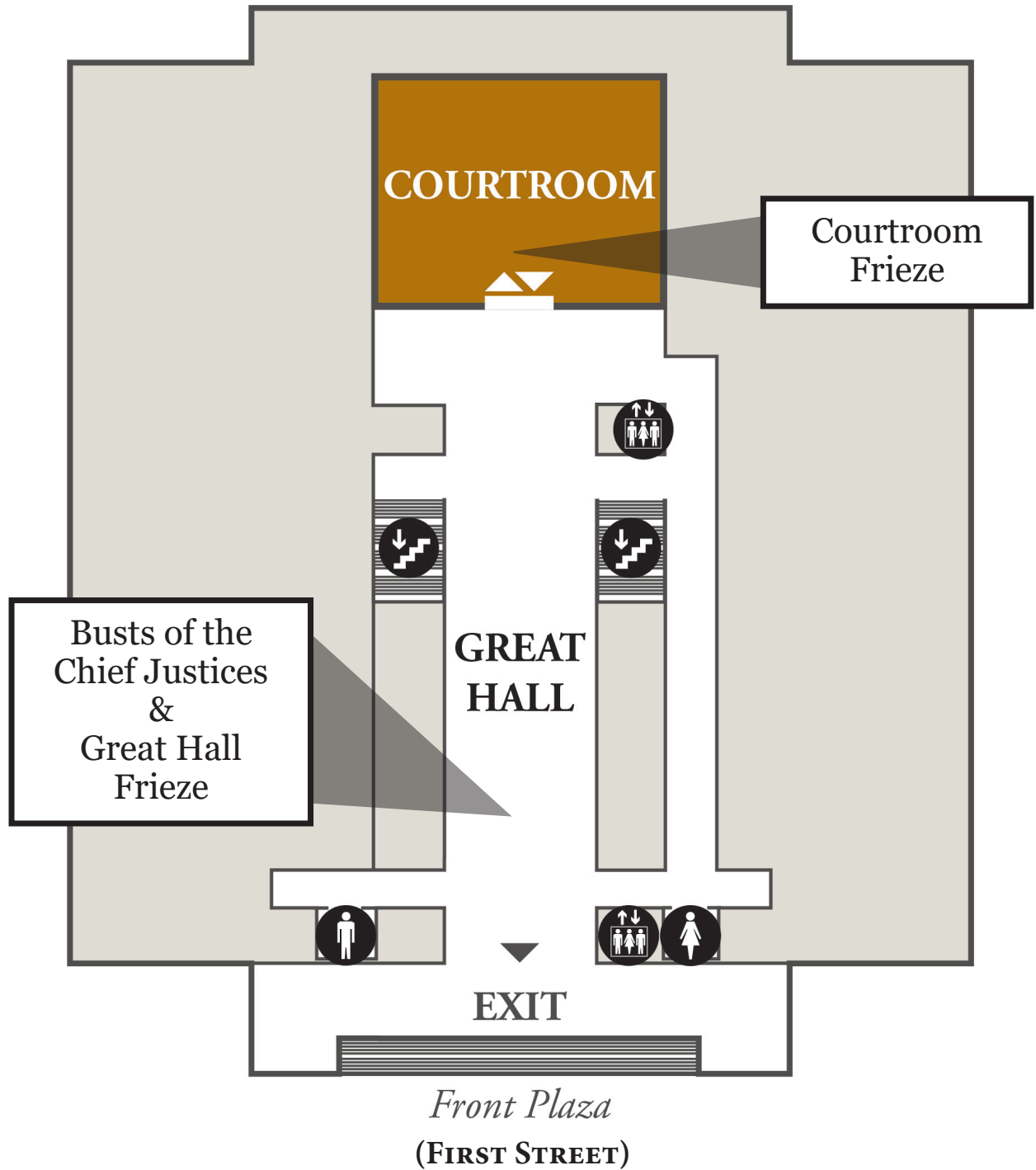


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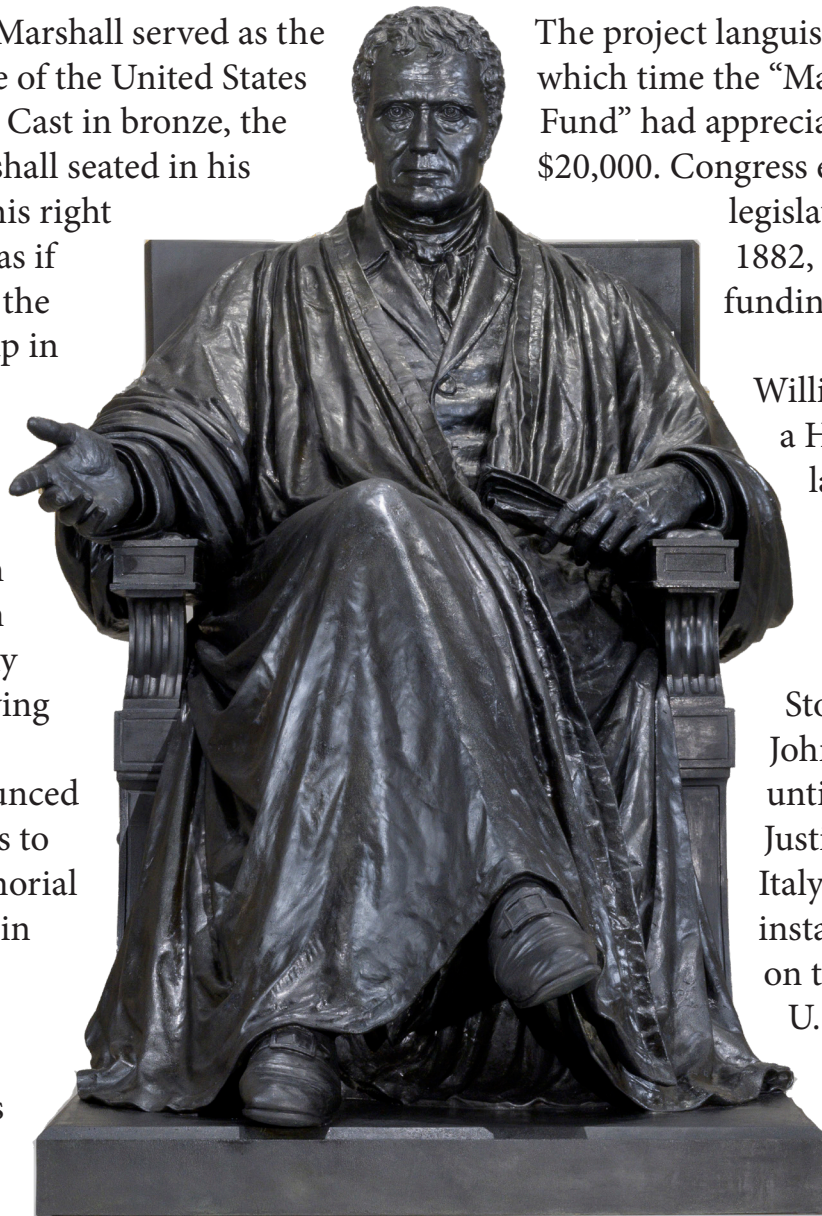
# First Floor Highlights



# John Marshall Statue

Chief Justice John Marshall served as the fourth Chief Justice of the United States from 1801 to 1835. Cast in bronze, the statue depicts Marshall seated in his judicial robe with his right hand outstretched as if he were discussing the document curled up in his left hand.

The statue's history begins following the death of John Marshall in Philadelphia on July 6, 1835. The following day, the Bar of Philadelphia announced it would raise funds to commission a memorial statue to be placed in the nation's capital. Donations were collected, but not enough money was raised to proceed so the funds were invested.



The project languished until 1880, by which time the “Marshall Memorial Fund” had appreciated to almost \$20,000. Congress eventually passed legislation on March 10, 1882, authorizing additional funding for its completion.

William Wetmore Story, a Harvard-educated lawyer turned sculptor, was commissioned to create the statue in 1882. Story was the son of Joseph Story, who served with John Marshall from 1812 until 1835 as an Associate Justice. Cast in Rome, Italy, the statue was finally installed with a ceremony on the West Front of the U. S. Capitol Building on May 10, 1884.

*When the Supreme Court Building was under construction, architect Cass Gilbert recommended against relocating the statue to the new Supreme Court Building. It was not until 1980, in preparation for the Inauguration of Ronald Reagan — the first held on the West Front of the Capitol — that the statue was moved to its current location inside the Supreme Court Building.*



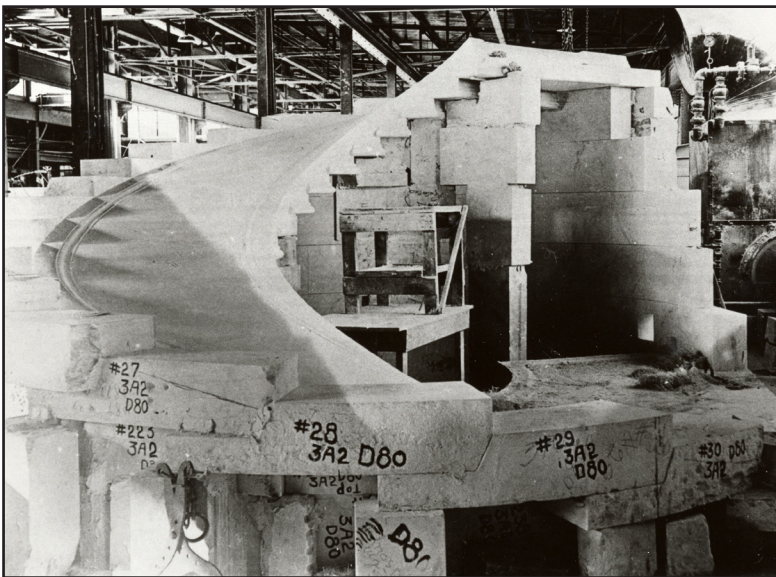
Library of Congress

John Marshall Statue on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol Building, c. 1909



# Spiral Staircases

The marble for the staircases came from the Moretti-Harrah Marble Company near Sylacauga, Alabama. In Knoxville, Tennessee, the Gray-Knox Marble Company finished the rough stone, cut the steps, and assembled the staircase upside down to make sure each piece was an exact fit. The cantilevered design of the staircases eliminates the need for a central support. Each step is anchored into the marble wall on one end and rests upon the step below it. Therefore, the staircases are held in place by fit and pressure rather than mortar and steel, as seen in the photo below.



*After numbering each piece, the staircases were dismantled and shipped to Washington, D.C. for installation at the Supreme Court.*

136  
steps

7  
spirals

5  
stories



# Great Hall



*Above: The Great Hall, present day. Below: The Great Hall under construction in the 1930s.*





# Great Hall

The column-lined Great Hall is a grand and majestic space. Built on a monumental scale using marble from Alabama, it is part of the architectural procession from the front plaza that culminates in the Courtroom. The hall functions as a queuing area for those attending oral argument and as a ceremonial gathering place.

36  
Doric  
Columns

1 column  
weighs  
14 tons

Each column  
is a single  
marble block



*Justice Thurgood Marshall's Lying in Repose ceremony in the Great Hall in January 1993.*



*A formal dinner set up in the Great Hall.*

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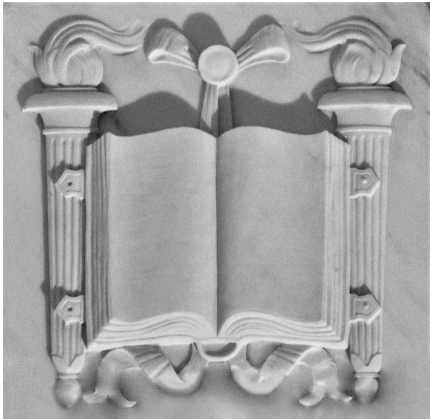
Today, the Great Hall still provides an impressive entrance to the Courtroom and is often used as the backdrop for special events.

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# Great Hall Frieze

About 40 feet above the floor, a large decorative frieze spans the perimeter of the Great Hall. The frieze consists of a series of relief panels featuring 15 individual metopes (*pronounced meh-toe-pees*). Borrowing from classical themes, the metopes depict animals, objects, gods and goddesses, and historic lawgivers.

*Stand in the center of the Great Hall and look up above the columns. How many metopes can you find?*



► **BOOK & TORCHES**  
*Education and Knowledge*



**SOLOMON** ◀  
*Wisdom and Magnificence*



► **JUNO**  
*Genius of Womanhood*  
*Guardian of the Female Sex*



**OWL** ◀  
*Wisdom and Meditation*

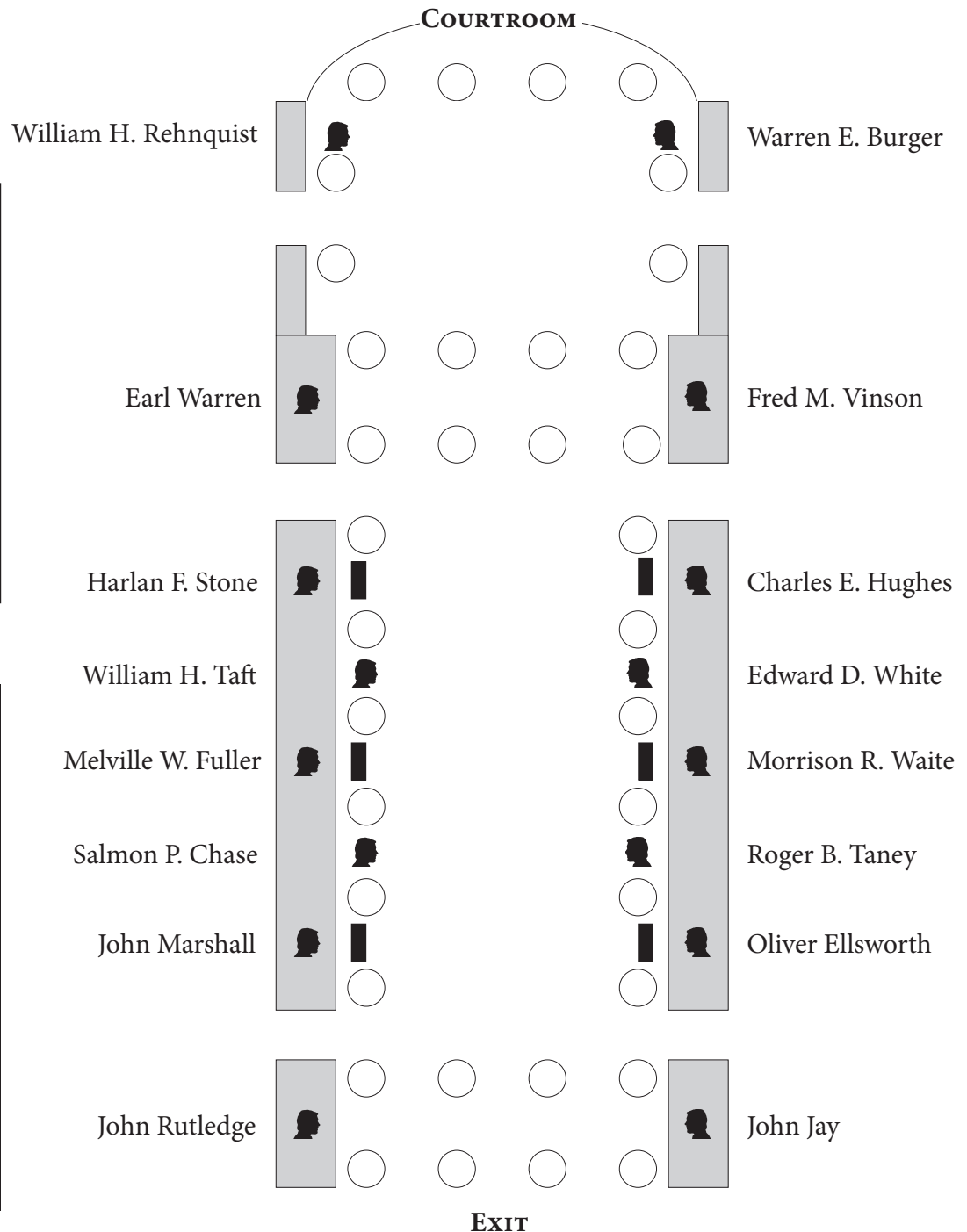
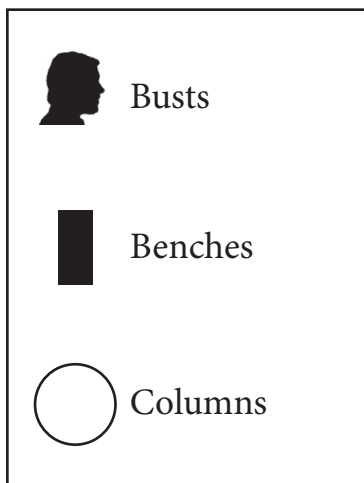


# Busts of the Chief Justices



Marble busts of all 16 former Chief Justices line the sides of the Great Hall. The collection began in 1831, when Congress appropriated funds to commission a bust of John Jay, the Court's first Chief Justice. Busts of the Chief Justices continue to be added to the Court's Collection.

The busts line the Great Hall in chronological order, with the most recent Chief Justices closest to the Courtroom and the earliest closest to the building's exit.



# Courtroom

There is only one Courtroom in the Supreme Court Building and it sits at its heart — a symbolic reminder of its importance. In an effort to make this room stand out from the rest of the building, Cass Gilbert deliberately used imported materials for the major architectural features in the room. The marble comes from Spain, Italy, and Algeria and has a warmer color than the bright white domestic marble found elsewhere in the interior and exterior of the building.

The Courtroom has remained largely the same since 1935, with one major exception. Originally, the Justices' Bench ran straight across the front of the Courtroom. However, over time, the Justices noted difficulties seeing and hearing their colleagues. In 1972, triangular pieces were inserted into the original Bench to angle it into the shape seen today, affording the Justices a better view and better acoustics.



*Each time a new Justice joins the Court, a custom bench chair is made. Although each Justice receives their own chair, the chairs are designed to appear uniform. When a Justice dies or retires, their chair is removed, leaving a vacant spot until a new Justice is confirmed.*



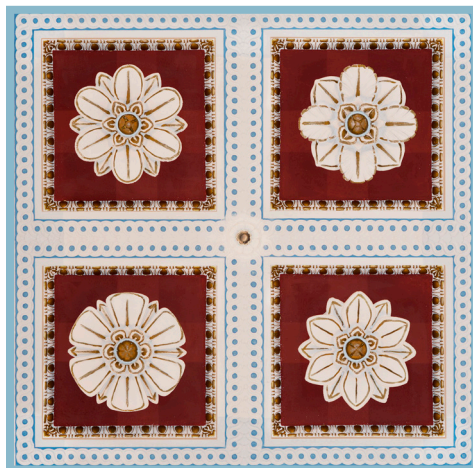
Attorneys stand at the lectern in front of the Bench to deliver their oral argument. Two lights atop the lectern help the attorneys keep track of time. The white light serves as a five-minute warning. The red light indicates time is up.



# Courtroom



The Courtroom ceiling is 44 feet high and features a repeating pattern of four distinct white plaster rosettes decorated with gold leafing. In a building filled with symbolism, these flowers are simply decorative.



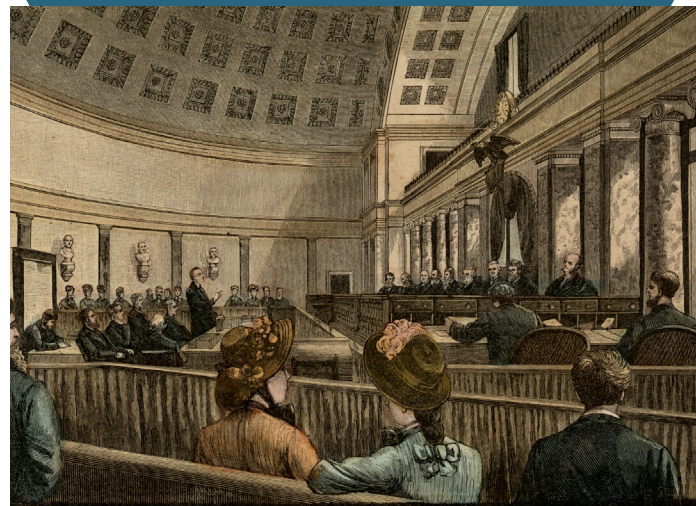
Prior to 1935, the Supreme Court met in various spaces within the U.S. Capitol.

## 1810–1860—The Old Supreme Court Chamber



*Sketch by Betty Wells*

## 1860–1935—The Old Senate Chamber



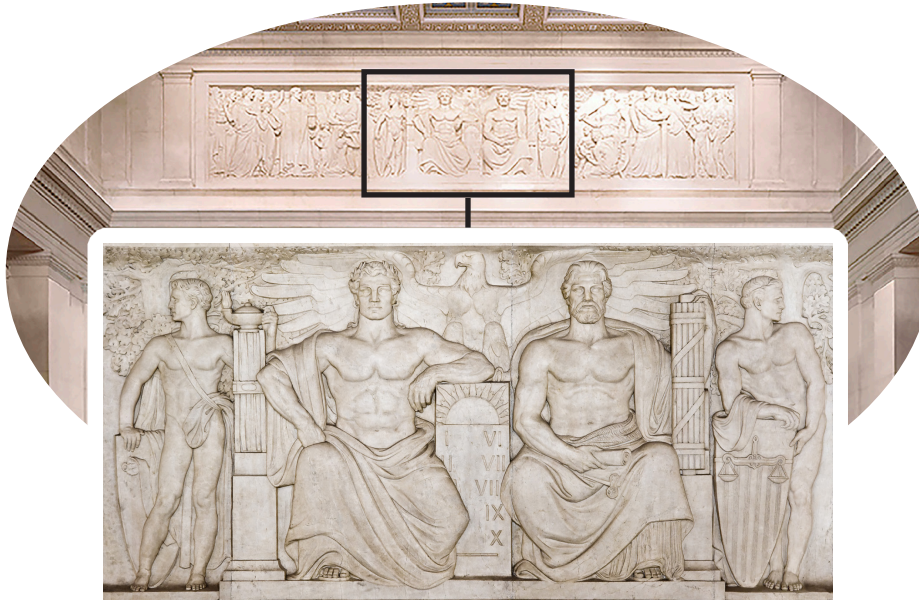
While Article III of the U.S. Constitution provides for “one Supreme Court,” it does not specify the number of Justices. It is left up to Congress to determine the number of seats. The Judiciary Act of 1869 set the number at nine, where it remains today.



# East Frieze



Adolph Weinman designed the Courtroom frieze — four sculpted marble panels each measuring 40 feet long by 7 feet 2 inches high — that adorn the walls of the Courtroom.



**EAST FRIEZE (ABOVE THE BENCH):** The two central male figures are the *Majesty of the Law* (left) with a book of law at his side and the *Power of Government* (right) holding the fasces, an ancient Roman symbol of authority. Behind them, an American bald eagle, a symbol of the United States, spreads its wings. According to Weinman, the tablet beneath the eagle represents “the ten amendments to the Constitution known as the ‘Bill of Rights.’”







**WEST FRIEZE (TOWARDS THE BACK OF THE COURTROOM):** The two central female figures are *Justice*, leaning on a sheathed sword representing her might, and a winged figure — *Divine Inspiration* — holding the Scales of Justice. Flanking these figures are *Wisdom*, with an owl perched on his shoulder, and *Truth*, holding a mirror and a rose.



## West Frieze



# South Frieze



## MENES

(c. 3200 B.C.)

In the 1930s, Menes [*me-knees*] was thought to be the first King of the first dynasty of ancient Egypt and credited with unifying Upper and Lower Egypt.



## MOSES

(c. 1300s B.C.)

Prophet, lawgiver, and judge of the Israelites depicted with two overlapping tablets, written in Hebrew, representing the Ten Commandments.



## CONFUCIUS

(551–478 B.C.)

Chinese philosopher whose teachings stressed harmony, learning, and virtue. His teachings were later used by the Chinese state as the basis for government.



“Great Lawgivers of History,” chosen by Adolph Weinman, show the progression of law over time. Interspersed in the panels are winged allegorical figures. The chronology begins on the South Frieze (right side of the Courtroom, facing the Bench) and continues on the North Frieze (left side of the Courtroom, facing the Bench).







### CHARLEMAGNE

(c. 742–814)

King of the Franks and Roman Emperor who united most of Western Europe by 804 and reformed the legal and judicial system.



### KING JOHN

(1166–1216)

King of England whose policies and taxation caused his barons to force him to seal *Magna Carta*, depicted here as a scrolled document in his hand.



### JOHN MARSHALL

(1755–1835)

Chief Justice (1801–1835) who wrote the opinion in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), establishing the power of judicial review for the Supreme Court.



**LAWGIVERS ON THE SOUTH FRIEZE** (pictured at top, proceeding from left to right): Menes, Hammurabi, Moses, Solomon, Lycurgus, Solon, Draco, Confucius, and Octavian.

**LAWGIVERS ON THE NORTH FRIEZE** (pictured below, proceeding from right to left): Justinian, Muhammad, Charlemagne, King John, Louis IX, Hugo Grotius, Sir William Blackstone, John Marshall, and Napoleon.



## North Frieze





*One of the Supreme Court Building's four interior courtyards.*

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*Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are from the Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States.*

*ed. 3/2025*