

# Visitor's Guide to the Supreme Court

The Supreme Court is the highest tribunal in the nation for all cases and controversies arising under the Constitution or the laws of the United States. The Court stands as the final arbiter of the law and guardian of constitutional liberties. Its charge, emblazoned over the doors of this building, is to ensure “equal justice under law.”

The Supreme Court is “distinctly American in concept and function,” as Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes observed. Few other courts in the world have the same authority of constitutional interpretation and none have exercised it for as long or with as much influence.

This building, majestic in size and rich in ornamentation, serves as both home to the Court and the manifest symbol of its importance as a coequal, independent branch of government.

It surprises many visitors to learn the Supreme Court was not provided with its own building until 1935, the 146th year of its existence. Until then, the Court had sat in various locations, including in the U.S. Capitol. Finally in 1929, Chief Justice William Howard Taft, who had been President of the United States from 1909 to 1913, persuaded Congress to authorize the construction of a permanent home for the Court.

Architect Cass Gilbert designed the building in a classical Corinthian architectural style to create harmony with nearby congressional buildings. Its design details depict both American and legal themes. Some highlights include:

- The statues of seated figures on the sides of the front stairway, created by sculptor James Earle Fraser. On the left is a female figure, the *Contemplation of Justice*. On the right is a male figure, the *Guardian or Authority of Law*.
- An architrave above the 16 marble columns at the front entrance, on which is inscribed the famous phrase “Equal Justice Under Law.”
- The bronze doors at the West front entrance, each of which weighs six and one-half tons. The door panels, sculpted by John Donnelly, Jr., depict historic scenes in the development of law.
- The grand corridor leading to the Courtroom, known as the Great Hall. Busts of all former Chief Justices are set alternately in niches and on marble pedestals along the side walls. The frieze is decorated with medallion profiles of lawgivers and heraldic devices.
- The Court Chamber, measuring 82 by 91 feet and rising 44 feet to a coffered ceiling. It is flanked by 24 marble columns. The raised Bench, behind which the Justices sit during sessions, and other furniture in the Courtroom are mahogany. Overhead, along all four sides of the Chamber, are sculpted marble panels depicting legal themes and famous lawgivers.
- The statue of John Marshall, the fourth Chief Justice, located at the end of the Lower Great Hall on the ground floor. Sculpted by William Wetmore Story in 1883, the statue stood on the west lawn of the U.S. Capitol until 1981, when it was moved to the Court.
- The two marble and bronze spiral staircases. Each ascends five stories and is supported only by the overlapping steps and their extensions into the wall. Few others exist in the world.

## Listening to Oral Argument

Beginning the first Monday in October, the Court generally hears two one-hour arguments a day, at 10 a.m. and 11 a.m., with occasional afternoon sessions scheduled as necessary. Arguments are held on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays in two-week intervals through late April (with longer breaks during December and February).

An oral argument usually lasts one hour, with an attorney for each side of a case given 30 minutes to make a presentation to the Court and answer questions posed by the Justices.

Visitors are invited to attend oral arguments, but seating is limited and on a first-come, first-seated basis. Before a session begins, two lines form on the plaza in front of the building. One is for those who wish to attend an entire argument. The other is a three-minute line for those who wish to observe the Court in session for a brief time. The locations for these lines are marked with signs and there is a police officer on duty to answer your questions.

In mid-May, after the oral argument portion of the Term has concluded, the Court takes the Bench Mondays at 10 a.m. for the release of orders and opinions. This practice continues until all the cases heard during the Term are decided, usually the last week in June. These sessions, which typically last between 15 and 30 minutes, are also open to the public. Copies of the Court's opinions are available from the Public Information Office on the ground floor approximately 30 minutes after they are announced from the Bench.