

# Supreme Foundation

*Capitol Chamber Witnessed Some of the Nation's Bedrock Judicial Decisions*

Down a stone-paved hallway in the lower level of the U.S. Capitol Building, past scores of doors made of dark varnished wood, an unremarkable entryway opens on a hushed, dramatic scene. Beneath a low vaulted ceiling, in dim light that evokes an ecclesiastical aura, tables and chairs are arranged with the clear purpose of officialdom, while squat columns, arcades, and marble busts declare a calling higher than mere governance.

This is where the United States Supreme Court met during the formative years of the republic. From Thomas Jefferson's presidency to the dawn of the Civil War, justices, lawyers, court officials, and spectators witnessed many of the 19th century's most important legal cases. Some altered history.

The court occupied the chamber from 1810 to 1860. In the 149 years since, it has been used as a law library, a committee room, and a storage space. It was restored for the nation's bicentennial in 1976 and has been open for tours since. Recently, at the request of the Archi-



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tect of the Capitol, the place was photographed by the Historic American Buildings Survey of the National Park Service, with the architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle doing drawings to HABS standards in a cooperative role. Says architectural historian Bill Allen of the office of the Architect of the Capitol, "In case of any kind of disaster we would not have had the [information] necessary to rebuild, so the Senate [wanted] this level of documentation."

The chamber was at first the home of the U.S. Senate, which was forced to move out by poor construction after only six years in the building. In 1806, Benjamin Latrobe, the Surveyor of Public Buildings and one of the most influential forces in early American architecture, began a complete redesign of the inside of the north wing. When that was finished, the Senate moved to the second floor, and the court moved into the lower chamber. Latrobe's presence permeates the space, says Allen. "It is one of the chief landmarks of his work," he says. Latrobe, a proponent of vaulted construction and Grecian architecture, designed a low, semicircular dome with a se-

ries of ribs radiating out from its center. The curved form repeats throughout the room, complemented by Doric columns. The dramatic, sweeping lines, the cloister-like effect of successive arches, and the visual centerpiece—a relief sculpture above a fireplace—combine to produce an atmosphere of both solemnity and inspiration. To carry the weight of the vaulted ceiling, Latrobe incorporated the columns, locating them inside the room, where they serve both a practical and aesthetic purpose. The dome exists fully supported within the original walls of the building. Allen says, "He overcame incredible challenges to provide a one-story vaulted structure within an envelope that was never intended to be vaulted."

**During the War of 1812, the British marched into Washington** and set fire to the Capitol and many other buildings. The chamber was damaged and Latrobe dismantled the dome and rebuilt it as part of the extensive repairs.

Over the years, the chamber was the scene of a host of landmark decisions. In *Dartmouth College v. Woodward*, the court blocked a move by the state of New Hampshire to take over Dartmouth, a private institution established under a pre-Revolutionary charter with the King of England. The ruling established the sanctity of contracts and the state's inability to interfere with them. The case was argued by Dartmouth alumnus Daniel Webster.

**ABOVE AND RIGHT:** Two views of the chamber's vaulted space.

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**YOU HAVE THE JUDICIAL HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY BROUGHT TOGETHER IN THIS ONE ROOM, WHICH IS ONE OF THE MOST HISTORIC ROOMS, PROBABLY, ANYWHERE IN THE COUNTRY.**

**—CAPITOL HISTORIAN BILL ALLEN**

The chamber was also the setting for 1857's infamous Dred Scott decision, which cut to the heart of slavery. Scott worked for an army surgeon in the free Wisconsin Territory. When the surgeon died, Scott sued for freedom, arguing that he was living in a place that prohibited his enslavement. The court ruled that people of African descent were not citizens, could not file for redress, and that Congress could not deny slavery in the territories. This invalidated the Missouri Compromise, which had permitted some territories to be free while others perpetuated slavery. The ruling deepened the divisions that led to civil war.

**Today, guided tours usher visitors** through the hushed space, looking down into the lowered area where lawyers presented their cases. The tables, settees, and writing desks are a deep mahogany, with the dim lighting intended to approximate the glow of the original oil lamps. A reporter once described the court as a “dark, low, subterranean apartment.” Justices who died early deaths were thought to be victims of its dampness and poor ventilation. There were windows along one wall, but these did little to alleviate the dimness. Today they are blocked by a 1950s-era addition to the Capitol and artificially lit.

The nine justices sat at one end on a platform slightly raised above the lawyers and spectators. In the center are the tables at which the lawyers sat, each with an oil lamp and a set of quill pens. On the opposite side of the room from the judges, there is a large arch and a relief sculpture depicting Justice, a winged youth representing America, and an eagle guarding a stack of books—to symbolize the law. Mounted around the room are marble busts of the earliest chief justices, with more than half of the furnishings original. Says Allen, “You have the judicial history of the United States and its architectural history brought together in this one room, which is one of the most historic rooms, probably, anywhere in the country.” And thanks to the partnership with Beyer Blinder Belle, the documentation yielded “a great set of measured drawings,” says HABS architect Robert Arzola, who reviewed the work for conformance to the survey’s standards.



**LEFT AND ABOVE:** *The drama of the space, in both main chamber and halls, with lighting to suggest the glow of oil lamps—once used along with sets of quill pens.*