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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Supreme Court Building

and/or common

2. Location

street & number First and East Capitol Streets, NE ___ not for publication

city, town Washington ___ vicinity of

state DC code 11 county DC code 001

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	x public	x occupied	___ agriculture	x museum
x building(s)	___ private	___ unoccupied	___ commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational	___ private residence
___ site	**Public Acquisition**	**Accessible**	___ entertainment	___ religious
___ object	___ in process	x yes: restricted	x government	___ scientific
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial	___ transportation
		___ no	___ military	___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name United States Supreme Court

street & number First and East Capitol Street, NE

city, town Washington ___ vicinity of state DC

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Recorder of Deeds

street & number Sixth and D Streets, NW

city, town Washington, D state DC

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Historic American Buildings Survey has this property been determined eligible? ___ yes x no

date February 1975 x federal ___ state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records Library of Congress

city, town Washington state DC

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
X excellent	___ deteriorated	X unaltered	X original site
___ good	___ ruins	___ altered	___ moved date _____
___ fair	___ unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Supreme Court Building, 1st and East Capitol Streets, NE, in Washington, DC, is one of the last of the large neoclassical Federal buildings erected in the 1930s. It was designed by the noted architect Cass Gilbert who is best known as the architect for the Woolworth Building in New York City.[1]

The classical Corinthian architectural order of the building was selected because it best harmonized with nearby congressional buildings. The building was designed on a scale in keeping with the importance and dignity of the Court and the Judiciary as a coequal, independent branch of the United States Government, and as a symbol of "the national ideal of justice in the highest sphere of activity."

The general dimensions of the foundation are 385 feet east and west, from front to back, and 304 feet north and south. At its greatest height, the building rises four stories above the terrace or ground floor. Marble was chosen as the principal material to be used and three million dollars' worth was gathered from foreign and domestic quarries. Vermont marble was used for the exterior, while the four inner courtyards are of crystalline flaked, white Georgia marble. Above the basement level, the walls and floors of all corridors and entrance halls are either wholly or partially creamy Alabama marble. The wood in offices throughout the building such as doors, trim, paneled walls, and some floors is American quartered white oak.

The main entrance to the Supreme Court Building is on the west side, facing the United States Capitol. A few low steps lead up to the 100-foot-wide oval plaza in front of the building. Flanking these steps is a pair of marble candelabra with carved panels on their square bases depicting; Justice, holding sword and scales, and The Three Fates, weaving the thread of life. On either side of the plaza are fountains, flagpoles, and benches. Flower gardens are planted throughout the grounds and courtyards.

The bronze flagpole bases are crested with symbolic designs of the scales and sword, the book, the mask and torch, the pen and mace, and the four elements: air, earth, fire, and water.

On either side of the main steps are seated marble figures. These large statues are the work of 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.

Sixteen marble columns at the main west entrance support the portico. On the architrave above is incised "Equal Justice Under Law." Capping the entrance is the pediment, filled with a sculpture group by Robert Aitken, representing Liberty Enthroned guarded by Order and Authority. On either side are groups of three figures depicting Council and Research which Aitken modeled after several prominent personalities concerned with the law or the creation of the Supreme Court Building. At the left are Chief Justice Taft as a youth, Secretary of State Elihu Root, and the architect Cass Gilbert. Seated on the right are Chief Justice Hughes, the sculptor Aitken, and Chief Justice Marshall as a young man.

On the east front of the building is a sculpture group by Herman A. McNeil and the marble figures represent great lawgivers, Moses, Confucius, and Solon, flanked by symbolic groups representing Means of Enforcing the Law, Tempering Justice with Mercy, Carrying on of Civilization and Settlement of Disputes Between States. The Architrave bears the legend: "Justice the Guardian of Liberty."

The bronze doors of the west front weigh six and one-half tons each and slide into a wall recess when open. The door panels, sculpted by John Donnelly, Jr., depict historic scenes in the development of law: the trial scene from the shield of Achilles, as described in the Iliad; a Roman praetor publishing an edict; Julian and a pupil; Justinian publishing the Corpus Juris; King John sealing the Magna Carta; The Chancellor publishing the first Statute of Westminister; Lord Coke barring King James from sitting as a Judge; and Chief Justice Marshall and Justice Story.

The main corridor is known as the Great Hall. At each side, double rows of monolithic marble columns rise to coffered ceiling. 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.

At the east end of the Great Hall, oak doors open into the Court Chamber. This dignified room measures 82 by 91 feet and has a 44-foot ceiling. Its 24 columns are Old Convent Quarry Siena marble from Liguria, Italy; its walls and friezes are Ivory Vein marble from Alicante, Spain; and its floor borders are Italian and African marble.

The raised Bench behind which the Justices sit during sessions, and other furniture in the Courtroom are mahogany. The Bench was altered in 1972 from straight-line to a "winged" or half-hexagon shape to provide sight and sound advantages over the original design.

At the left of the Bench is the Clerk of the Court's desk. The Clerk is responsible for the administration of the Court's dockets and arguments calendars, the supervision of the admission of attorneys to the Supreme Court Bar and other related activities. To the right is the desk of the Marshal of the Court. The Marshal is the timekeeper of Court sessions, signaling the lawyer by amber and red lights as to time limits. The Marshal's responsibilities include the maintenance and security of the building and serving as the Court's building manager, reporting to the Chief Justice.

The attorneys arguing cases before the Court occupy the tables in front of the Bench. When it is their turn to argue, they address the Bench from the lectern in the center. A bronze railing divides the public section from that reserved for the Supreme Court Bar.

Representatives of the press are seated in the red benches along the left side of the Courtroom. The red benches on the right are reserved for guests of the Justices. The black chairs in front of those benches are for the officers of the Court, visiting dignitaries, and include a special chair for the President of the United States, although the President's attendance is rare and limited to important ceremonial

occasions. Overhead, along all four sides of the Chamber, are sculpted marble panels, the work of Adolph A. Weinman.

Directly above the Bench are two central figures, depicting Majesty of the Law and Power of Government. Between them is a tableau of the Ten Commandments. The group at the far left represents Safeguard of the Rights of the People, and Genii of Wisdom and Statecraft. At the far right is the Defense of Human Rights.

To the right of visitors is a procession of historical lawgivers of the pre-Christian era: Menes, Hammurabi, Moses, Solomon, Lycurgus, Solon, Draco, Confucius and Augustus. They are flanked by figures symbolizing Fame and History.

To the left are historical lawyers of the Christian era: Napoleon, John Marshall, William Blackstone, Hugo Grotius, Saint Louis, King John, Charlemagne, Mohammed and Justinian. Figures representing Liberty and Peace and Philosophy appear at either end.

Symbolized on the back wall frieze is Justice with the winged female figure of Divine Inspiration, flanked by Wisdom and Truth. At the far left the Powers of Good are shown, representing Security, Harmony, Peace, Charity, and Defense of Virtue. At the far right the Powers of Evil are represented by Corruption, Slander, Deceit, and Despotic Power.

The main floor is largely occupied by the Justices' Chambers; included are offices for law clerks and secretaries, the large, formal East and West Conference Rooms, the offices of the Marshal, an office for the Solicitor General, the lawyers' lounge, and the private conference room and robing room of the Justices. This office space surrounds four courtyards with central fountains.

Most of the second floor is devoted to office space including the offices of the Reporter of Decisions. The Justices' library reading room and the Justices' dining room are also located here.

The library occupying the third floor has a collection of over 250,000 volumes. The library's main reading room is paneled, pilastered in hand carved oak. The wood carving here, as throughout the building, is the work of Matthews Brothers.

The ground floor is devoted to offices and public services, including the offices of the Clerk of the Court, the offices of the Administrative Assistant to the Chief Justice, security headquarters, the Public Information office and Press Room, the Curator's office and the Personnel office. A museum was established in the past decade depicting some of the Court's history; and a film further acquaints visitors with the history and workings of the Court. Here visitors can view one of the two marble, spiral staircases. Each ascends five stories and is supported only be overlapping steps and by their extensions into the wall. Additionally on the ground floor, there are a cafeteria and snack bar, public telephones, and restrooms.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
___ prehistoric	___ archeology-prehistoric	___ community planning	___ landscape architecture	___ religion
___ 1400–1499	___ archeology-historic	___ conservation	X law	___ science
___ 1500–1599	___ agriculture	___ economics	___ literature	___ sculpture
___ 1600–1699	___ architecture	___ education	___ military	___ social/ humanitarian
___ 1700–1799	___ art	___ engineering	___ music	___ theater
___ 1800–1899	___ commerce	___ exploration/settlement	___ philosophy	___ transportation
X 1900–	___ communications	___ industry	X politics/government	X other (specify) Constitutional History
		___ invention		

Specific dates 1935 - Present **Builder/Architect** Cass Gilbert

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Supreme Court Building is significant because of its association with the Supreme Court of the United States. At the laying of the cornerstone for the Supreme Court Building on October 13, 1932, Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes stated it best when he said: "The Republic endures and this is the symbol of its faith." Hughes perceived the new building as a national symbol -- a symbol of the permanence of the Republic and of the ideal of justice in the highest sphere of activity, in maintaining the balance between the Nation and the States and in enforcing the primary demands of individual liberty as safeguarded by the overriding guarantees of a written Constitution.[2]

BACKGROUND

The Constitution, ratified in 1788, provided in Article III for the creation of a new national judiciary, vesting the entire judicial power of the Federal government in one Supreme Court and in such inferior courts as the Congress might from time to time ordain and establish. Although the matter of constituting the structure of the judicial department of the Federal government was one of the first matters addressed by the Congress, and the first session of the Supreme Court was convened on February 1, 1790, it would take 145 years for the Supreme Court to find a permanent residence.[3]

During these years the Supreme Court lived a nomadic existence; on the move from one building to another, even from one city to another.

Initially, the Court met in the Royal Exchange Building in New York City. When the national capital moved to Philadelphia in 1790, the Court moved with it, establishing Chambers first in Independence Hall and later in the City Hall.[4]

When the Federal Government moved, in 1800, to the permanent capital in Washington, the court again moved with it. Since no provision had been made for a Supreme Court building, Congress lent the Court space in the new Capitol building. The Court was to change its meeting place a half dozen times within the Capitol. Additionally, the Court convened for a short period in a private house after the British had used Supreme Court documents to set fire to the Capitol during the War of 1812. Following this episode, the Court returned to the Capitol and met from 1819 to 1860 in a chamber that has recently been restored as the Old Supreme Court Chamber. Then from 1860 until 1935, the Court sat in what is now known as the Old Senate Chamber.[5]

Finally in 1929, former president William Howard Taft, who was Chief Justice from 1921 to 1930, persuaded Congress to end this arrangement and authorize the construction of a permanent home for the Court. Architect Cass Gilbert was charged by Chief Justice Taft to design a building of dignity and importance suitable for its use as the permanent home of the Supreme Court of the United States.[6]

In May 1929 Gilbert presented his preliminary sketches and plans to the Supreme Court Building Commission. The Commission accepted Gilbert's design and recommended the sum of $9,740,000 for the project. In December 1929, Congress adopted the Commission's report and recommendation, and authorized the Commission to proceed with construction.[7]

The construction of a building exclusively for the use of the Supreme Court was a reaffirmation of the nation's faith in the doctrine of judicial independence and separation of powers. The ideal of separation of powers had been of the utmost concern to the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. James Madison writing in The Federalist Papers, No. 47, stated "...the preservation of liberty requires that the three great departments of power should be separate and distinct."[8] The long overdue construction of a magnificent building exclusively for the use of the Supreme Court was a dramatic illustration of a commitment to the early Republic's faith in the separation of powers.[9]

ARCHITECTURAL STATEMENT

Cass Gilbert, the architect of the Supreme Court Building, was trained in the best traditions of the beaux arts, and was previously associated with the well-known firm of McKim, Mead and White. For Gilbert, the commission to design a new courthouse for the Supreme Court of the United States was perceived as an opportunity to create a monument to the ideals of the Republic--to liberty, and equal justice for all under the law. With perfection as his goal, he designed a structure inspired by classical forms rich in history and symbolic significance. Constructed by skilled craftsmen working with the finest materials, the building was conceived from the beginning as more than a mere office or workplace--it would be a great national monument to the country's founding principles, and to the belief that the only sovereign of a free people is the law.[10]

While Gilbert succeeded in designing a magnificent home for the Supreme Court the building is not considered to be architecturally significant in the literature.[11] Opinion on the subject of Cass Gilbert, his buildings, and the importance of other beaux art buildings in the history of architecture appears to be fluid at this point in time. It is recommended that the Supreme Court Building be reconsidered for significance in Architecture when other beaux-art buildings in Washington are studied for designation as National Historic Landmarks under this theme.

FOOTNOTES

1 The description of the Supreme Court Building was taken directly from the following source: The Supreme Court of the United States (Washington, DC: Supreme Court Historical Society, no date), pp. 27-32.

2 Catherine Hetos Skefos, "The Supreme Court Gets a Home," Supreme Court Historical Society Yearbook, 1976, p. 26.

3 "Residences of the Court: Past and Present - Part I: The Early Years," The Supreme Court Historical Society Quarterly, Fall 1980, Vol. II, No. 4, p. 6.

4 The Supreme Court of the United States, pp. 26-7.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 "Residences of the Court: Past and Present - Part III: The Past Fifty Years," The Supreme Court Historical Society Quarterly, Spring 1981, Vol. III, No. 2, pp. 7-10.

8 Paul Goodman, ed., The American Constitution (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1970), pp. 160-61.

9 Skefos, p. 26.

10 "Residences of the Court: Past and Present -- Part III: The Past Fifty Years," pp. 8-9.

11 John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown make the following statement: "There were lingering classicists, like Cass Gilbert, John Russell Pope and Otto Eggers, who kept grinding out classic monuments at Washington; the Supreme Court Building and the National Gallery of Art--buildings of a hollow and pompous cast, despite materials so rich that any modernist envied them the opportunity." John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), p. 379.

Winston Weisman in his essay on Cass Gilbert states the following: "The buildings that followed were classically correct but cold and unoriginal. Considering the revolutionary developments in America and Europe by men such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, and Le Corbrusier, Gilbert's late works made little contribution to the history of architecture." Winston Weisman, "Gilbert, Cass," Macmillian Encyclopedia of Architects, (New York: The Free Press, 1982), II, 202-04.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anonymous. "Residences of the Court: Past and Present - Part I: The Early Years." The Supreme Court Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. II, No. 4 (Fall, 1980), pp. 6-7.

Anonymous. "Residences of the Court: Past and Present - Part III: The Past Fifty Years." The Supreme Court Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. III, No. 2 (Spring 1981), pp. 7-10.

Burchard, John and Bush-Brown, Albert. The Architecture of America. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966.

Greenberg, Allan and Kierman, Stephen. "The United States Supreme Court Building, Washington, DC." The Magazine Antiques, Vol. CXXVIII, No. 4 (October 1985), pp. 760-769.

Skefos, Catherine Hetos. "The Supreme Court Gets a Home." The Supreme Court Historical Society Yearbook, (1976), pp. 25-36.

The Supreme Court of the United States.: Washington, DC: Supreme Court Historical Society, no date.

Weisman, Winston. "Gilbert, Cass." Macmillian Enclyclopedia of Architecture. New York: The Free Press, 1982, II, 202-04.

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property Less than 10 acres

Quadrangle name Washington West

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	326120	4306340
B			
C			
D			
E			
F			
G			
H			

Verbal boundary description and justification

N/A

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Harry A. Butowsky

organization National Park Service, Division of History date December 1986

street & number P.O. Box 37127 telephone (202)343-8155

city or town Washington state DC

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

___ national ___ state ___ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title date

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest: date

Chief of Registration

GPO 911-399