

History of the Court

In 1681, the King of England granted William Penn a charter to land that would later become Pennsylvania. By the time Penn arrived here, a judicial system of local magistrates and an appellate court, the Court of Assizes, had evolved within the early settlements. This court of Dutch origin heard appeals from local courts.

After William Penn arrived, the early system of justice evolved from a Provincial Council providing appellate review to the Provincial Court, to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania as we know it today – which was first created by the Judiciary Act of 1722. This “new” court was merely a continuation of the old Provincial Court under a new name.



The early Supreme Court consisted of a Chief Justice and two Associate Justices. Sessions were held biannually and the Justices rode circuit, traveling across the commonwealth to hear cases when they were not in session. By the time of the Revolution, the Court possessed general appellate jurisdiction and original jurisdiction in capital cases and certain civil matters. If an original jurisdiction case involved issues of fact, the case was tried in the Supreme Court before a jury.

In Penn’s time, the judiciary was not viewed as an important branch of government. It wasn’t until the United States Constitution was ratified in Pennsylvania in 1787 that the judiciary was made one of the three co-equal branches of government.



During colonial times, nearly every man of distinction served at some time on the bench. In fact, early records from the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania contain documents and letters signed by people including William Penn, Aaron Burr, George Washington, James Monroe, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin and many other founders of our nation.

