

A Brief History of the Courts of Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's judiciary began as a disparate collection of courts, some inherited from the reign of the Duke of York and some established by William Penn. They were mostly local, mostly part time, and mostly under control of the governor. All of them were run by non-lawyers. And although the Provincial Appellate Court was established in 1684, no court could be called the court of final appeal. Final appeals had to be taken to England.

Several attempts were made in the early years of the eighteenth century to establish a court of final appeal in Pennsylvania and to further improve and unify the colony's judicial system, but because the crown had final veto power over all colonial legislation, these attempts proved futile. Finally, in 1727 the crown sanctioned a bill that had been passed five years earlier.

The Judiciary Act of 1722 was the colony's first judicial bill with far-reaching impact. It established the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, providing for a chief justice and two justices who would sit twice yearly in Philadelphia and ride the circuit at other times; and it created the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia, Bucks and Chester Counties.

The court system in Pennsylvania did not change again until the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. By establishing the Courts of Sessions, Courts of Common Pleas and Orphans' Courts in each county, the constitution allowed Pennsylvania to see the beginning of a statewide framework for the development of its judicial system.

A new constitution in 1790 encouraged further development in the Commonwealth's judicial system by grouping counties into judicial districts and placing president judges at the heads of the districts' Common Pleas Courts. This was meant to ease the Supreme Court's rapidly increasing workload. Constitutional changes in 1838 and 1874 and a constitutional amendment in 1850 effected changes in the

Evolution of Pennsylvania's Judicial System

Judicial system of local magistrates and an appellate court exist in Pennsylvania's early settlements

Judiciary Act of 1722 renames Provincial Court the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, allowing for one chief justice and two associate justices

Constitution of 1790 groups counties into judicial districts, with president judges to head the Common Pleas Courts

Constitutional amendment makes the entire judiciary elective

Superior Court is created to ease burdens of the Supreme Court

Judicial Computer Project (JCP) linking state's 538 district justices is completed; planning begins for Common Pleas phase of JCP, but is halted in July 1994 for lack of funds

UJS takes a step closer to achieving constitutional mandate of being truly unified by bringing court administrators on board as UJS staff

1682

1684

Provincial Court established (future Pennsylvania Supreme Court)

1722

1776

Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 establishes Courts of Sessions, Common Pleas Courts and Orphans' Courts in each county; sets tenure at seven years for Supreme Court justices

1790

1838

Constitution of 1838 fixes tenure for justices of the Supreme Court at 15 years

1850

1874

Constitution of 1874 designates method for the popular election of judges, increases number of Supreme Court justices from five to seven and increases justices' tenure to 21 years

1895

1968

Constitution of 1968 reorganizes Pennsylvania's courts into the Unified Judicial System; includes creation of Commonwealth Court, Court Administrator of Pennsylvania and Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts

1992

1997

Supreme Court begins posting opinions on World Wide Web. Superior and Commonwealth Courts follow soon after

1999

jurisdiction, tenure, and election or appointment of members of the judiciary. In 1895 the General Assembly created the Superior Court to further ease the work of the Supreme Court, giving each appellate court separate jurisdictions.

The Constitution of 1968 initiated the most sweeping changes in Pennsylvania's judiciary in nearly a century, creating the Commonwealth Court to reduce the workload of the Superior and Supreme Courts by hearing cases brought against and by the Commonwealth; substantially altering the minor court system; and reorganizing the judiciary into the Unified Judicial System, consisting of the Supreme, Superior and Commonwealth Courts; Common Pleas Courts; Philadelphia Municipal Court; Pittsburgh Magistrates Court; Philadelphia Traffic Court; and district justice courts, with provisions for any future courts the law might establish.

Both judicially and administratively, the Supreme Court is, by constitutional definition, Pennsylvania's highest court. In matters of law, it is the Commonwealth's court of last resort. In matters of administration, the Supreme Court is responsible for maintaining a single, integrated judicial system and thus has supervisory authority over all other state courts.

In 1980 the legislature approved a decrease in the Supreme Court's mandated jurisdiction by expanding that of the Superior Court. Consequently, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, like the United States Supreme Court, can now exercise discretion in accepting or rejecting most appeals, allowing it to devote greater attention to cases of far-reaching impact, as well as to its constitutional obligation to administer the entire judicial system.