

SEATAC MUNICIPAL COURT

Your City.



Your Court.

“SCOTUS”

Did you know.....?

- The average length of a US Supreme Court Justice’s tenure is 16 years.
 - The longest term served by a Supreme Court Justice was served by Justice William O. Douglas who served for over 36 years from 1939 to 1975.
 - The Justice who served the shortest term was Justice John Rutledge, who served just over one year beginning in 1790.
- The youngest Justice to be appointed to the Supreme Court was Joseph Story, who served from 1811 to 1845 and was 32 years old when he took his oath of office.
- The oldest Justice to be appointed to the Supreme Court was Horace Lurton (1910-1914), who was 65 years old when he took his oath of office.
- The oldest person to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States was, of course, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who served from 1902 to 1932 and was 90 years old when he retired from the Court.

How many of us have a comfortable familiarity with the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), its history, its general operations, and day to day functions? While we hear daily events in the news about the operations and issues facing our United States Senators and Representatives, as well as the daily events occurring within the United States Executive branch, the same cannot be said of our Supreme Court, which tends to only capture headlines when the issue of appointment arises or a case before the Supreme Court has been hotly debated in the media. *(Continued on page 2...)*



*Supreme Court of the United States, courtesy, www.supremecourt.gov;
Back row: Justice Elena Kagan, Justice Samuel Alito, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Justice Neil Gorsuch; Front row: Justice Ruth Bader-Ginsburg, Justice Anthony Kennedy, Chief Justice John Roberts, Justice Clarence Thomas, Justice Stephen Breyer.*

You do not need to travel to Washington DC to hear arguments before the US Supreme Court. You can listen to oral arguments going on-line and clicking on the audio link for the case you wish to hear at: <https://www.supremecourt.gov/>



Seal of the Supreme Court of the United States

A Supreme Court Term consists of alternating “sittings,” when the Court hears cases and delivers opinions, and “recesses” when the Court considers other business and writes opinions. During each “sitting,” which lasts about two weeks, the Court may hear up to twenty-four cases. In each case, the parties are allowed no more than 30 minutes to present their argument.

All of the current Supreme Court Justices are law school graduates of either Yale or Harvard, with the exception of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who graduated from Columbia.

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The Court consists of one Chief Justice and eight Associate Justices, who are nominated by the President of the United States. Justices have life tenure unless they resign or retire.

Each year approximately 7,500 new cases are filed in the Supreme Court. A case selected for argument before the Supreme Court usually involves interpretations of the US Constitution or federal law. At least four Justices must select the case as being of such importance that the Supreme Court must resolve the legal issues.

Plenary review, with oral arguments by attorneys, is granted in about 80 of those cases each term. The Court also disposes of approximately 100 cases each term without plenary review. A written opinion can consist of thousands of pages and include concurring and dissenting opinions, as well as Court Orders. During the drafting process, the opinions are often revised more than a dozen times before they are announced and published for public consumption.

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Every year, the US Supreme Court Chief Justice issues an End of Year Report, which can be found at <https://www.supremecourt.gov/publicinfo/year-end/year-endreports.aspx>. The 2016 End of Year Report is very interesting and educational, as it provides many fascinating historical facts about the appointment of our first US Supreme Court, as well as other informative details about court operations.

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The Supreme Court building is fascinating in its own right. Prior to its construction, the Supreme Court resided in a space within the Capitol Building lent by Congress until 1929, when Chief Justice William Howard Taft (who had previously served as President of the United States from 1909 to 1913) persuaded Congress to authorize construction of a permanent Supreme Court Building. Construction was completed in 1935, and was styled in the classical Corinthian architectural style to harmonize with nearby Congressional buildings.

If you ever go to visit the Supreme Court, take note of the outside façade. On either side of the main steps sit marble figures. On the left is the “Contemplation of Justice.” On the right sits the “Guardian or Authority of Law.” Capping the entrance is a sculpture depicting Liberty Enthroned guarded by Order and Authority. On the east side of the building, the marble figures in the pediment represent great lawgivers, Moses, Confucius, and Solon. The pediment bears the words, “Justice the Guardian of Liberty.”

The bronze doors weigh 6.5 tons each and depict historic scenes in the development of law through the ages including King John sealing the Magna Carta, the trial scene from the shield of Achilles as described in the Iliad, and Chief Justice Marshall.

Since at least 1800, it has been traditional for Justices to wear black robes. Initially, all attorneys wore formal “morning clothes” when appearing before the court. In the 1890’s, Senator George Wharton Pepper of Pennsylvania was a young attorney arguing before the Supreme Court. He arrived in “street clothes.” Justice Horace Gray was overheard sniping to a colleague, “Who is that beast who dares to come in here with a grey coat?” Senator Pepper was refused admission to the Court until he borrowed a “morning coat.” Today the tradition of formal dress is only followed by the Department of Justice and other attorneys representing the United States Government.

Quill pens are still used in Court today. Reminiscent of the early days of the Supreme Court, white quill pens are placed on counsel tables each day that the Court sits in session.

SCOTUS early years

The Judiciary Act of 1789 established the Federal Judiciary, dividing the country into 13 judicial districts, which were organized into three circuits: Eastern, Middle, and Southern. For the first 101 years of the Supreme Court, the Justices were required to “ride circuit,” holding circuit court twice a year in each judicial district. The burdens of “riding circuit” using primitive means of travel became exceedingly difficult for the Justices. Justice John Jay resigned from the Court in 1795 to become Governor of New York, and would not accept reappointment in 1800 despite the pleas of President John Adams. So, shortly before the end of his term President Adams appointed John Marshall of Virginia to be the fourth Supreme Court Chief Justice. Chief Justice Marshall remained on the bench for more than 34 years, and he played a crucial role in the development of the Supreme Court and its prominent role in American Government.

The SCOTUS “Conference handshake” has been a long standing tradition since the late 19th century. When the Justices assemble to go on the Bench each day and at the beginning of the private Conferences in which they discuss decisions, every Justice shakes hands with each of the other eight. The practice was instituted by Chief Justice Fuller as a reminder that any differences of opinion did not preclude the overall harmonious purpose of the Court.



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