

SUPREME COURT CASE STUDY *continued***Background of the Case**

The election of 1800 transferred power in the federal government from the Federalist Party to the Republican Party. In the closing days of President John Adams's administration, the Federalists created many new government offices, appointing Federalists to fill them. One of the last-minute or "midnight" appointments was that of William Marbury. Marbury was named a justice of the peace for the District of Columbia. President Adams had signed the papers, but his secretary of state, John Marshall, somehow neglected to deliver the papers necessary to finalize the appointment.

The new president, Thomas Jefferson, was angry at the defeated Federalists' attempt to "keep a dead clutch on the patronage" and ordered his new secretary of state, James Madison, not to deliver Marbury's commission papers. Marbury took his case to the Supreme Court, of which John Marshall was now the Chief Justice, for a writ of mandamus—an order from a court that some action be performed—commanding Madison to deliver the commission papers in accordance with the Judiciary Act of 1789.

Constitutional Issue

Article III of the Constitution sets up the Supreme Court as the head of the federal judicial system. Historians believe that the Founders meant the Court to have the power of judicial review, that is, the power to review the constitutionality of acts of Congress and to invalidate those that it determines to be unconstitutional. The Constitution, however, does not specifically give the Court this right.

Chief Justice John Marshall, as a Federalist, believed strongly that the Supreme Court should have the power of judicial review. When the Marbury case presented the perfect opportunity to clearly establish that power, Marshall laid out several points which the court believed supported the right of judicial review. At the time, the decision was viewed as a curtailment of the power of the president, but people today recognize that the case established, once and for all, the importance of the Supreme

The Supreme Court's Decision

Justice Marshall reviewed the case on the basis of three questions: Did Marbury have a right to the commission? If so, was he entitled to some remedy under United States law? Was that remedy a writ from the Supreme Court?

Marshall decided the first question by holding that an appointment is effective once a commission has been signed and the U.S. seal affixed, as Marbury's commission had been. Therefore, Marbury had been legally appointed, and Madison's refusal to deliver the commission violated Marbury's right to the appointment. In response to the second question, Marshall held that Marbury was entitled to some remedy under United States law.

The final question examined whether the Court had the power to issue the writ. Marshall explained that the right to issue writs like the one Marbury was requesting had been granted the Court by the Judiciary Act of 1789. This law, however, was unconstitutional and void because the Constitution did not grant Congress the right to make such a law.

