

The Role of Circuit Courts in the Formation of United States Law in the Early Republic

Following Supreme Court Justices
Washington, Livingston, Story and
Thompson

David Lynch



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>Table of Cases</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
1. The Supreme Court Justices and the Circuit Court Experiment	1
A Team Effort	7
Why Washington, Livingston, Story, and Thompson?	15
2. The Federal Circuit Courts: Shaping Local and National Justice for an Emerging Republic	23
The Politics of Federal Law	23
The Grand Jury Charge: A Bond between Government and Citizen	32
The Circuit Court Discourse in the Constitutional Ratification and Senate Debates	37
The Jurisdiction of the Federal Circuit Courts	39
‘A Certain Uniformity of Decision in United States Law’	41
Conclusion	48
3. Bushrod Washington: The Role of Precedent and the Preservation of Vested Interests	51
A Federalist’s Journey from Revolutionary Virginia to the Supreme Court	52
Justice Washington and the Role of Precedent in the Federal Legal System	56
Property Rights and Commercial Law on Circuit	66
States’ Rights, the War of 1812, and Slavery	73
Conclusion	83
4. Henry Brockholst Livingston: Consolidating Mercantile Law	86
The Early Years: Political Allegiances: From Federalist to Republican	87
Commercial Law for New York State	91
A Republican on a Federalist Supreme Court	96
Maritime and Commercial Law for the United States	104
Conclusion	109

5. Joseph Story: Admiralty Expertise and the Importation of Common Law	111
A Modernising Influence on Law and Procedure on the First Circuit	121
Admiralty and the Enforcement of Embargo Laws.....	125
Consistency Through the Sharing of Expertise.....	138
The Supremacy of Federal Law	143
The Protection of Minority Groups.....	147
Importing Common Law into the Federal Legal System	151
Conclusion.....	153
6. Justice Smith Thompson: Promoting Commerce, State Sovereignty and the Protection of the Cherokee Nation	157
State Supreme Court: Statutory Interpretation and New York ‘Hard Law’	159
Contractual Obligations on the Second Circuit and on the Court	166
‘What is to be Left to the States?’	171
The Cherokee Nation and the African-American Slave	175
Conclusion.....	180
Conclusion	183
<i>Appendix A: Reversal Rates</i>	195
<i>Appendix B: Majority Opinions Delivered by the Justices</i>	198
<i>Appendix C: Legal Education and Prior Judicial Experience of United States Supreme Court Justices 1801–1835</i>	202
<i>Bibliography</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	219

TABLE OF CASES

<i>The Active</i> , 1 F Cas 69, Conn, April 1809,	103, 110: <i>see also</i> Ross v The Active; United States v Bright, 24 F Cas 1232, 1809
Adams v Story, 1 F Cas 141, New York, April 1817,.....	47, 98, 100, 101, 109
The Aeolus, 16 US 392 (1818),	106
Albee v May, 1 F Cas 134, Vermont, May 1834,.....	168
The Alexander, 1 F Cas 362, Mass, May 1823,	133
The Alligator, 1 F Cas 527, Mass, 1812,.....	128
The Amistad, 40 US 518 (1841),	149, 177, 178–9, 181
The Ann, 1 F Cas 926, Mass, May 1812,.....	126
The Ann, 13 US (9 Cranch), 289 (1815),	146
The Argo, 1 F Cas 1100, Mass, May 1812,.....	124, 125
Armroyd et al v Williams et al, 1 F Cas 1132, Penn, April 1811,.....	78
Arnold v United States, 13 US (9 Cranch), 104 (1815),.....	146
Balfour’s Lessee v Meade, 2 F Cas 543, Penn, April 1803,	68
Bank of Alexandria v Swann, 34 US 33 (1835),.....	170, 181
Bank of Columbia v Lawrence, 26 US (1 Pet) 578 (1828),	170, 181
Bank of the United States v Halstead, 23 US 51 (1825),	175, 180
Bank of the United States v Northumberland Union and Columbia Bank, 4 Peters 108, 1821,.....	47
Barker v Jackson, 2 F Cas 811, New York, October 1826,.....	167–8, 193
Barnes et al v Billington et al, 2 F Cas 858, April 1803,	43, 60, 61, 83
Barnewell v Church, Caines’ Reports, vol 1, 230, August 1803,.....	164–5
Baudy et al v Union Insurance Co, 2 F Cas 1039, Penn, October 1809,.....	72
Baxter v New England Ins Co Inc, 2 F Cas 1058, Mass, October 1822,.....	130
Bayard et al v Massachusetts Fire & Marine Ins Co, 2 F Cas 1065, Mass, October 1826,.....	130, 154
Beach v Woodhull, Trenton, New Jersey, April 1803 in Peters, Reports of the Third Circuit, 1803–1818, vols 1, 2,	62
Beardsley v Torry 2 F Cas 1188, Penn, October 1822,.....	59
Bell et al v Davidson, 3 F Cas 100, Penn, April 1818,	65
Bell v Morrison, 26 US (1 Pet), 351 (1828),.....	136, 189
The Betsey v Duncan, 3 F Cas 308, Penn, October 1808,.....	73
Blair v Miller, 4 US 21 (1800),.....	201
The Blairau, 6 US 240,	63
Bleeker v Bond, 3 F Cas 687, Penn, October 1819,.....	69–70
Bobyshall v Oppenheimer, 3 F Cas 785, Penn, October, 1822,	60, 83
The Bolina, 3 F Cas 811, Mass, 812, 1812,.....	46, 128
Bond v The Cora, 3 F Cas 838, Penn, 1807,.....	63, 83
Borden v Fitch, Johnson’s Reports, vol 15, 139, January 1818,	165

The Boston, 3 F Cas 925, Mass, October 1812,.....	126, 153
The Bothnea: The Janstoff, 3 F Cas 962, Mass, May 1814,.....	127, 153–6
The Bothnea 15 US 169 (1817),	127
Boyce & Henry v Edwards (1830),	170, 181
Brandt v Ogden, Caines' Reports, vol III, 10, May 1805,.....	95, 110
Brewster v Gelston, 4 F Cas 82, New York, April 1825,	168, 181
The Brig Struggle, 13 US (9 Cranch) 71 (1815),	106
Brown v Maryland, 25 US (12 Wheat) 419 (1827),.....	173–4, 180
Burrill v Phillips, 4 F Cas 832, Rhode Island, November 1812,	133
Burton et ux v Smith, 4 F Cas 876, Penn, October 1826,	61
Butler v Hopper, 4 F Cas 904, Penn, October 1806,	79
The Cadmus v Matthews et al, F Cas 977, New York, December 1830,.....	167
Calbraith v Gracy, 4 F Cas 1030, Penn, April 1805,	60
The Caledonian, 17 US (4 Wheat.), 100 (1819),.....	146
Calhoun v Vechio, 4 F Cas 1049, Penn, April, 1812,	65
Campbell et al v Claudius, 4 F Cas 1161, Penn, October 1817,	61
Carpenter v Butterfield, Johnson's Reports, 1799–1803, vol 3, 145, July 1802,.....	163–4
Carver v Jackson, 29 US (4 Pet) 1 (1830),.....	123
Casey v Brush, Caines' Reports, vol II, February 1805, 295,	94, 109–10
Charles River Bridge v Warren Bridge, 36 US 420 (1837),.....	66–7
Cherokee Nation v Georgia, 30 US 1 (1831),	12, 148, 174, 175–7, 182, 192, 199, 229
Childs v Corp, 5 Cas 622, Vermont, October 1810,.....	105, 109–10
Citizens Bank v Nantucket Steamboat Co, 5 F Cas 719, 1811,.....	44, 45, 124
Cloutman v Tunison, 5 F Cas 1091, Mass, May 1833,.....	129
Cobb v Haydock, 5 F Cas 1132, Conn, 1810,.....	104–5
Cochrane v Swartout, 5 F Cas 1144, New York, 31 October, 1834,.....	168
Codwise et al v Gleason et al 5 F Cas 1167, Conn, April 1808,.....	104, 109–10
Cohens v Virginia, 19 US 264 (1821),.....	198
Coles et al v Marine Insurance Co, 6 F Cas 65, Penn, April 1812,	71
Consequa v Willings, 6 F Cas 336, Penn, April, 1816,	65
Corfield v Coryell, 6 F Cas 546 (1823),.....	74, 84–5, 141, 193
Corfield v Coryell, 6 F Cas 551–552, Penn, April 1823,.....	75–7
Corser v Craig, 6 F Cas 601, Penn, April 1806,	70
Craig, Trenton, New Jersey, April 1803 in Peters, Reports of Third Circuit Cases, 1803–1818, vol 1, 1,.....	61, 83
Craig v Brown 6 F Cas 723, Penn, October 1819,.....	71, 84
Crawford et al v The William Penn, 6 F Cas 781, New Jersey, October 1819,.....	60, 62
Cross v United States, 6 F Cas 892, Mass, May 1812,	126–7
Croudson v Leonard, 8 US 434, 1808,.....	59–60, 83
Cruder v Pennsylvania Ins Co, 6 F Cas 921, Penn, October 1809,.....	71
Dartmouth College, Trustees v Woodward, 64 New Hamp 473 (1817),.....	108, 189
Dartmouth College, Trustees v Woodward, 17 US (4 Wheat) 518 (1819),.....	66, 81, 144, 198
Davidson v Seal-Skins, 7 F Cas 192, 194, 1835,	46
Delancy v M'Keen, 7 F Cas 371, Penn, April, 1806,.....	64, 83
Delaware Insurance Company v Hogan, 2 Peters 4, Penn, April 1807,	71, 84
Delovio v Boit et al 7 F Cas 418, Mass, October 1815,.....	131–2, 154, 189

Denniston et al v Imbrie, 7 F Cas 485, Penn, April 1818,.....	71
Doe on the Demise of Elmore v Goymes, 26 US (1 Pet), 469,.....	48
Dugan v United States, 16 US 172 (1818),.....	107
Dusar v Murgatroyd, 8 F Cas 140, 1803,.....	45
Edwards v Percival & Paulding (1827) (unreported),.....	160n18
The Elizabeth, 8 F Cas 468, New York, April 1810,.....	103, 110
The Elizabeth v Rickers et al, 8 F Cas 470, New York, December 1831,.....	167
The Emily and The Caroline, 22 US (9 Wheat) 381 (1824),.....	177–8
The Emulous, 8 F Cas 704, Mass, October 1832,.....	130
The Enterprise, 8 F Cas 732, 736, 1810,.....	47
The Estrella, 17 US (4 Wheat) 298 (1819),.....	106
Evans v Hettick, 8 F Cas 861, 1818. Affirmed, 7 Wheat (20 US) 453, Penn, October (1822),.....	46, 61–2
Evans v Jordan, 3 US (9 Cranch) 199 (1815),.....	82
The Experiment, 21 US (8 Wheat), 261 (1823),.....	146
Fales et al v Mayberry, 8 F Cas 970, Rhode Island, November 1815,.....	133
Ferguson v Zepp, 8 F Cas 1154, Penn, April 1827,.....	60, 83
Field v Joel Gibbs et al, 1 Peters 155, New Jersey, October 1815,.....	61
Finlay v King’s Lessee, 28 US 346 (1830),.....	160n18
Fisher v Harnden, 9 F Cas 129, New York, April 1812,.....	100, 109
Fitzsimmons et al v Ogden et al (1812) 7 Cranch 2,.....	13, 201
Fletcher v Peck, 10 US 87 (1810),.....	69–70, 118, 198
Foot v Tracy, Johnson, vol 1, 46, February, 1806,.....	166
Gallagher v Roberts, 9 F Cas 1089, Penn, April 1808,.....	70
Gammell v Skinner, 9 F Cas 1142, Mass, May 1814,.....	124
The George, 10 F Cas 196, Mass, October 1814,.....	127, 153, 154
The George, 10 F Cas 205, Mass, May 1832,.....	129, 193
Gibbons v Ogden, 22 US (9 Wheat) 1 (1824),.....	103, 172, 198
Ex parte Gilchrist, Federal Cases no 5420,.....	97–8
Gill v Brown, Johnson’s Reports, vol 12, p 386, October 1815,.....	162
Girard v Ware et al, 10 F Cas 441, Penn, April 1815,.....	73
Glass v The Sloop Betsey, 3 US 6 (1794),.....	201
Glidden v Manufacturers’ Ins Co, 10 F Cas 476, Mass, October 1832,.....	130, 154
Golden v Prince, 10 F Cas 542, Penn, April 1814,.....	70
Goodyear v Matthews (Case No 5576, F Cas),.....	46, 62
Gordon v Holiday, 10 F Cas 798, Penn, April 1805,.....	69, 84
Gordon v Kerr et al, 10 F Cas 801, Penn, October 1806,.....	68
Goyon v Pleasants, 10 F Cas 891, Penn, April 1814,.....	71
The Grand Turk, 10 F Cas 956, 1817,.....	45
Grant & Swift v M’Lachlin, Johnson’s Reports, 1806–1823, 39, February 1809,.....	164
Green v Beals, Caines’ Reports, vol II, November 1804, 255,.....	94, 109–10
Green v Biddle, 21 US (8 Wheat) 1 (1823),.....	81, 146
Green v Watkins, 19 US (6 Wheat) 260 (1821),.....	123–4
Griffith v Tunckhouser, 11 F Cas 42, Penn, April 1817,.....	69, 84
Griswold v Hill, 11 F Cas 60, New York, September 1825,.....	169
Harden v Gordon et al, 11 F Cas 480, Maine, October 1823,.....	129, 154
Harding et al v Wheaton et al 11 F Cas 491,.....	123

Harrison v Rowan, 11 F Cas 663, New Jersey, April 1820,	65–6, 83, 95
Hatch v Ellis, 11 F Cas 806, Mass, May 1812,.....	124
Henderson v Brown, Caines' Reports, vol I, 92, May 1803,	162, 181
Henderson v Brown, Caines' Reports, vol I, 94, May 1803,	94
Hills v Ross, 3 US 184 (1796),.....	201
Hodgson v Dexter, 5 US 345, 363 (1803),.....	162
Hodgson v Marine Insurance Co of Alexandria, 9 US 100 (1809),.....	201
Hogan v Jackson, Cowp. 299,	60
Hohn v United States, 524 US 236, 251 (1998),	58
House v Mayo, 324 US 42 (1945),.....	58
Houston v Moore, 18 US 1 (1820),	139
Hudson & Smith v Guestier, 10 US (6 Cranch) 281 (1810),.....	107–8
Hudson v Guestier, 11 US Reports, 1 (1812),.....	201
Huidekoper v Burrus, 12 F Cas 840, Penn, April 1804,.....	68–9, 84
Humphreys v Blight's Assignees, 12 F Cas 875, Penn, April 1803,.....	70, 84
Hunt v United States, 12 F Cas 948, Mass, May 1812,.....	128, 169
Hurst v Hurst, 12 F Cas 1028, Penn, April, 1803,	43, 83
Hurst v Hurst, 12 F Cas 1031, Penn, April 1807,	63
Hurst v Hurst, 12 F Cas 1031, Penn, April 1803,	61
Hylton v Brown, 12 F Cas 1122, Penn, October, 1805,.....	43
Hylton v Brown, 12 F Cas 1123, Penn, October 1806,	61
Hylton v Brown, 12 F Cas 1129, Penn, April 1806,.....	64
Imlay v Sands, Caines' Reports, vol 1, p 572, February 1804,	162–3, 181
The Industry, 13 F Cas 35, Mass, May 1812,.....	128
Insurance Co v Dunham, 78 US (11 Wall) 1, 77,.....	132, 154
Jackson, ex dem Van Vechten et al v Sill et al, 11 Johnson's Reports, 201, 220 (1814),.....	160–1, 181
Jackson v Horton, Caines' Reports, vol 3, 202, August 1805,.....	92
Jackson v Munson, Johnson's Reports, vol 1, 283, May 1806,.....	92
Jackson v Porter, 13 F Cas 235 New York, September 1825,	175
Jackson v Sill, 11 Johnson 201, NY, August 1814,.....	181
Jackson v Sprague, 13 F Cas 253, New York, September 1825,	168
Brig James Wells v United States, 11 US 22 (1812),.....	201
In the Matter of Jeremiah Ferguson, a Soldier in the United States Army, Johnson, vol 9, 241, (August 1812),.....	173
The Jerusalem, 13 F Cas 564, Mass, May 1815,.....	131
Johnson v M'Intosh, 12 US 571 (1823),.....	175
Johnson v M'Intosh, 21 US 543 (1823),.....	147–8
Johnson v Phoenix Insurance Co 13 F Cas 782, Penn, April 1806,	72
The Joseph Segunda, 18 US (5 Wheat) 338 (1820),	107
The Julia, 12 US (8 Cranch), 181 (1814),.....	146–7
Keene v United States, 9 US (5 Cranch) 304 (1809),.....	105
Ketland v Lebering, 14 F Cas 433, Penn, April 1808,.....	73
King v Delaware Ins Co 14 F Cas 516, Penn, October 1808,.....	61, 65
Kingston v Kincaid et al 14 F Cas 590, Penn, April 1806,	61
Kirkpatrick v White et al, 14 F Cas 685, Penn, April 1826,	59, 83
Koning v Bayard Jr et al, 14 F Cas 843, 845,.....	48

Krumbaar v Burt et al, 14 F Cas 872, Penn, October 1809,.....	61
Lambert's Lessee v Payne, 7 US (3 Cranch) 97 (1805),.....	80–1, 83, 201
The Langdon Cheves, 17 US (4 Wheat), 103 (1819),.....	146
Lanning, Lessee of v London, 4 Peters 332, Penn 1822,.....	79
Lanning v London et al 14 F Cas 1123, Penn, October 1821,.....	61
Lee v Lee, 33 US 44 (1834),.....	178
Lee v Munroe & Thornton, 11 US (7 Cranch) 366 (1813),.....	107
Lennox v Prout, 16 US 3 Wheat. 520 (1818),.....	110
Leroy v Lewis, May 1803, Caines' Reports, 175,.....	93, 109
Livingston & Gilchrist v Maryland Insurance Co. 11 US (7 Cranch), 506 (1813),.....	88
Livingston v Delafield, Caines' Reports, vol III, 53,.....	93
Livingston v Van Ingen, 9 Johns Report 507 (1812),.....	172
Livingston v Van Ingen, 15 F Cas 697, New York, April 1811,.....	103, 180
McConnell v Hampton, Johnson's Reports, vol 12, 235, May 1815,.....	165
McCulloch v Maryland, 17 US (4 Wheat) 316 (1819),.....	144–5, 198
McCutchen v Marshall, 33 US 220 (1834),.....	177
McDonough v Dannery, 3 US 188 (1796),.....	201
McFadden [aka McFaden or McFaddon] v The Exchange, 16 F Cas 85, Penn, October 1811,.....	62–3, 84, 99
McGregor v Insurance Company of Pennsylvania, 16 F Cas 129, Penn, April 1803,.....	71, 84
McMurtry v Jones, 16 F Cas 312, Penn, April 1813,.....	70
McMurtry v Jones, 16 F Cas 312, Penn, April 1913,.....	70, 84
Mandeville v Riggs, 27 US (2 Pet) 482 (1829),.....	124
Mandeville v Welch, 18 US (5 Wheat) 277 (1820),.....	147
Marbury v Madison, 5 US 137 (1 Cranch) (1803),.....	20, 27–8, 49, 143–4, 187, 198
Marine Insurance Co of Alexandria v Tucker, 7 US 357 (1806),.....	201
Marine Insurance Co of Alexandria v Wilson, 7 US Reports, 187 (1805),.....	201
Marshall v Beverley, 18 US (5 Wheat) 313 (1820),.....	108, 110
Marshall v Delaware Ins Co, 16 F Cas 838, Penn, April, 1807,.....	60, 61
Marshall v Union Ins Co, 16 F Cas 849, Penn, October 1809,.....	72
In re Martin, 2 Paine 348; 16 F Cas 881, 884,.....	180
Martin v Bank of the United States, 16 F Cas 885, 1821,.....	46, 62, 81, 83
Martin v Delaware Ins Co, 16 F Cas 894, Penn, October 1808,.....	71
Martin v Hunter's Lessee, 14 US 304 (1 Wheat) (1816),.....	141, 143, 144, 155
The Mary, 16 F Cas 938, 941,.....	47–8
Mason v Haile, 25 US (12 Wheat) 370 (1827),.....	80, 83, 174
Mellish v Arnold, Bumb 51,.....	95, 110
The Mentor, 17 F Cas 15, Mass, October 1825,.....	129
The Merino, 22 US 391 (1824),.....	81–2
Milligan v Dickson et al, 17 F Cas 376, Penn, April 1817,.....	68, 84, 193
Mills v Duryee, 11 U.S (7 Cranch) 481 (1813),.....	143
The Monte Allegro, 22 US (9 Wheat) 616 (1824),.....	170, 181
Mossman v Higginson, 4 US Reports, 12 (1800),.....	201
Mott v Maris, 17 F Cas 905, Penn, April 1808,.....	61, 63–4, 83, 188
Mumford v M'Pherson, Johnson's Reports, 1806–1823, vol 1, 417, August 1806,.....	164
New Jersey v Babcock, 18 F Cas 82, New Jersey, April 1823,.....	59
The New York, 16 US (3 Wheat) 59 (1818),.....	106

Ninety-five Bales of Paper v United States, 18 F Cas 266, New York, April 1820,.....	102, 110
The Ship Octavia, (Nicholls et al, claimants), 14 US 20 (1819),.....	146–7
Odlin v Insurance Company of Pennsylvania, 18 F Cas 583, Penn, October 1808,.....	62, 84, 98–9
Ogden v Saunders, 25 US (12 Wheat) 213 (1827),.....	59, 60, 64, 82, 83, 101, 158, 173, 180, 198–9
Orne v Townsend, 18 F Cas 825, Mass, October 1827,.....	130, 154
Osborn v The Bank of the United States, 22 US (9 Wheat) 738 (1824),.....	175, 180
Otis v Watkins, 13 US (9 Cranch) 339 (1815),.....	106–7
Parker v United States, 18 F Cas 1179, Penn, October 1809,	78, 84
Payne v Tennessee, 501 US 808 (1991),.....	58
Peisch v Ware (1808) 8 US 347,.....	14
Pendleton v Evans, 19 F Cas 140, Penn, October 1823,.....	61
Penhallow v Doane, 3 Dall (3 US) 54 (1795),.....	74–5
Penn v Klyne et al, 19 F Cas 166, Penn, April 1817,.....	60
Penny v New York Insurance Company, Caines' Reports, vol III, August 1805, 157,.....	93, 109
The People v The Utica Insurance Co, 15 Johnson's Reports, 380–81 (1818),	161–2
Perry et al v Crammond et al, 19 F Cas 277, Penn, April 1804,	70, 84
The Phoebe v Dignum, 19 F Cas 530, Penn, April 1803,.....	73
The Pizarro, 15 US (2 Wheat) 227 (1817),.....	123, 138
The Plattsburgh, 23 US (10 Wheat) 133 (1825),	149
Potts v Gilbert, 19 F Cas 1203, Penn, April 1819,	61
Priestman v United States, 4 US 28 (1800),.....	201
Prigg v Pennsylvania, 41 US 539 (1842),.....	121, 149–50, 191
Ramdulollday v Dariieux, 2 F Cas 211 Penn, April 1821,	61
Randolph v Ware, 7 US 503 (1806),.....	201
Renner v Bank of Columbia, 22 US 581 (1824),	170, 181
Rhinelander v Insurance Company of Pennsylvania, (1807) 8 US 29!,	14
Rhoades et al v Selin et al, 20 F Cas 631, Penn, October 1827,	60
Ricard v Williams, 20 US 59 (1822),	147
Ridgway v Underwood, 20 F Cas 760, New Jersey, October 1821,.....	61
Riggs v Lindsay, 11 US (7 Cranch) 500 (1813),.....	108, 110
The Robert Fulton, 20 F Cas 869, New York, April 1826,.....	173
Robinson v Hook, 20 F Cas 1017, Maine, October 1826,	128, 153
The Rosalie and Betty, 2 C. Rob Adm. 343,.....	127
Ross v The Active, 20 F Cas 1231, Penn, October 1808,.....	72:
	<i>see also The Active</i>
The Rugen: Buhring, Claimant, 14 US 62 (1816),.....	106
Rust v Low, 6. Massachusetts Reports, 90,	114
Rutherford v Moore, F Cas 12174, C.C.D.C. 1807,	135n135
The St Lawrence, 13 US (9 Cranch), 120 (1815),	146
The St Lawrence, 21 F Cas 180, New Hampshire, October 1813,.....	126
The Sally, 12 US (8 Cranch), 382 (1814),.....	146
The Sally, 21 F Cas 243, Mass, 1813,.....	125–6
The Santa Maria, 20 US (7 Wheat) 490 (1822),	106
The Schooner Exchange (McFadden [aka McFaden or McFaddon] v The Exchange), 16 F Cas 85, Penn, October 1811,.....	62–3, 84, 99

Scriba v Insurance Co of North America, 21 F Cas 874, Penn, October 1807,.....	59, 83
Seamen v Patten, Caines' Reports, vol II, February 1805, 314,	94
Seixas v Woods, 2 Caines' Reports, 48, New York, 1894,.....	163, 176, 181
The Short Staple, 22 F Cas 23, Mass, May 1812,.....	126, 127, 153–4
Ex parte Simmons, 27 F Cas 151, Penn, October 1823,	79
Sims v Jackson, 22 F Cas 183, Penn, April 1806,.....	73
Six Hundred and Fifty-One Chests of Tea v United States, 27 F Cas 253, New York, April 1826,.....	167
Slaughterhouse Cases, 86 US 36 (1873),.....	78
Slocum et al v Hathaway, 22 F Cas 339, 1820,	45
Smith v Barker, 22 F Cas 454, Conn, April 1809,.....	104
Smith v Barker, 22 F Cas 454, Conn, September 1808,	45
Smith v Cheetham, 3 C.R. 57,.....	110
Smith v Chetham, Caines' Reports, vol III, May 1805 p 58,.....	95
Smith v Jackson, 22 F Cas 576, 577–578, 1825,	46
Smith v Smith, 2 Johnson's Reports, 241 (1807),	163
Sperry v Delaware Ins Co (Penn, October 1808),.....	61
Spurr v Pearson, 22 F Cas 1011, Mass, October 1816,.....	129
Stevens v Columbian Insurance Company, Caines' Reports, vol 3, 46, May 1805,.....	164
Stuart v Laird, 5 US 299 (1803),.....	20, 49, 187, 199
Sturges v Crowninshield, 17 US (4 Wheat) 122, 1819,.....	58–9, 83, 100–1, 108, 144
Swift v Tyson, 41 US 1 (1842),.....	152–3, 154, 192
Talbot v Simpson, 23 F Cas 644, Penn, October 1815,.....	61
Ten Hogsheads of Rum, 16 F Cas 932, Mass, October 1812,	126, 153
The New York, 16 US (3 Wheat) 59 (1818),	105
Thurston v Martin, 23 F Cas 1189, Rhode Island, June 1830,	132–3
Tidmarsh v Washington Fire & Marine Ins Co, 23 F Cas 1197, Mass, October 1827,.....	130, 154
Tillman v Lansing, 4 Johnson's Reports 45 (1809),.....	162, 181
Torrey v Beardsley, 24 F Cas 65, Penn, April 1818,.....	69, 84
Treadwell et al v Bladen, 24 F Cas 144, Penn, October 1827,.....	46, 62, 83
Tryphenia v Harrison, 24 F Cas 252, Penn, October 1806,	78–9, 85
Tuttle v Beebee, Johnson's Reports, 1806–1823, vol 8, 154, May 1811,	164
Two Hundred Chests of Tea, US 430 (1822),.....	147
United States v Allen, Cas 772, 1810,	47
United States v Ashton, 24 F Cas 873, Mass, May 1835,.....	129
United States v Astley et al 24 F Cas 875, Penn, October 1819,	61
United States v Barker, 24 F Cas 987, September 1816,.....	105, 109
United States v Barker et al 24 F Cas 985, Mass, October 1829,	129
United States v Bass, 24 F Cas 1028, New York 1819,.....	102
United States v Battiste, 24 F Cas 1042, Mass, October 1835,.....	133
United States v Bright, 24 F Cas 1232, 1809,.....	57, 74, 75, 76–7, 83, 84, 85, 193: <i>see also The Active</i>
United States v Bryan & Woodcock, 13 US (9 Cranch) 374 (1815),	107
United States v Burr, 25 F Cas 30 (1807),	193
United States v Charles Stephens (1827) (unreported),	160n18
United States v Clark, 25 F Cas 441, Mass, October 1813,.....	152, 154

United States v Colt, 25 F Cas 581 Penn, April 1818,	61
United States v Coolidge, 14 US 415 (1816),	152, 154
United States v Coolidge, 25 F Cas 622, Mass, May 1815,	133
United States v Dixey et al, 25 F Cas 871, Penn, April 1811,	78, 84
United States v Five Packages of Linen (no citation found),	110
United States v Freeman, 25 F Cas 1208, Mass, October 1827,	130
United States v Giles, 13 US (9 Cranch 212) (1815),	107
United States v Halstead, 23 US 51 (1825),	174–5
United States v Hamilton, 26 F Cas 93, Mass, October 1818,	129
United States v Haskell et al, 26 F Cas 207, Penn, October 1823,	66, 83
United States v Hatch, 26 F Cas 220, New York, April 1824,	167, 193
United States v Hoxie, 26 F Cas 397, Vermont, October 1808,	102
United States v Hudson and Goodwin, 7 Cranch 32 (1812),	151–2, 154
United States v The James Wells, 26 F Cas 585, Conn, September 1808,	102, 110
United States v Kelly, 24 US 417 (1826),	82
United States v Kelly, 26 F Cas 700, Penn, October 1825,	82
United States v Kennedy et al, 26 F Cas 15524, Ill1843,	135n135
United States v La Coste 26 F Cas 826, Mass, October 1820,	133
United States v La Vengeance, 3 US 297 (1796),	201
United States v Lawrence, 3 US Reports, 42 (1795),	201
United States v Lee, 26 F Cas 15586, C.C.D.C., 1834,	135n135
United States v Lowry et al, 26 F Cas 1008, Penn, April 1808,	75
United States v Mann, 26 F Cas 1153, New Hampshire, October 1812,	124
United States v Mantor, 26 F Cas 1157, October 1820,	128
United States v Marchant & Colson, 25 US (12 Wheat) 489 (1827),	146
United States v Morgan et al, 26 F Cas 1315, Penn, April 1811,	78, 84
United States v Morris, 23 US (10 Wheat.) 246 (1825),	170–1
United States v Morrow, 26 F Cas 1352, Penn, October 1827,	65
United States v Moses, 27 F Cas 5, 1827,	46, 62
United States v Nine Packages of Linen, 27 F Cas 154, New York, April 1818,	102
United States v Parmele, 27 F Cas 415, Conn, April 1810,	104
United States v The Paul Sherman, 27 F Cas 467, New Jersey, April 1815,	77–8, 84
United States v Perez, 27 F Cas 504, New York, September 1823,	168
United States v Phelps, 27 F Cas 526, Connecticut 1810,	102
United States v Rice, 17 US (4 Wheat), 246, (1819),	146
United States v Ross, 27 F Cas 572, Mass, October 1813,	129
United States v Ruggles, 27 F Cas 912, Rhode Island, November 1828,	130, 154
United States v The Schooner Little Charles, 26 F Cas 15612, Virginia, May 1818,	138–9
United States v Sears et al, 27 F Cas 1006, October 1812,	128
United States v Sixteen Packages, 27 F Cas 1111, Mass, October 1819,	126, 128
United States v Skinner et al, 27 F Cas 1123, New York 1818,	102
United States v Slade, 27 F Cas 1125, Mass, May 1820,	136, 188–9
United States v Smith, 18 US (5 Wheat) 153, 164–83 (1820),	102, 147
United States v Smith, 27 F Cas 1166 (1816),	129
United States v Smith, 27 F Cas 1167, Mass, October 1820,	133
United States v Smith, 27 F Cas 1247, Penn, October 1819,	72–3
United States v Sturges et al, 27 F Cas 1358, 1362, 1826,	47–8, 169

United States v Tillotson (1823) (unreported),..... 160n18
 United States v Webber 28 F Cas 507, Mass, May 1813,.....126
 United States v White, 28 F Cas 580, Mass, October 1826, 135–6
 United States v Williams, 28 F Cas 608, New York, April 1826,.....169
 United States v Wonson, 28 F Cas 745, Mass, May 1812,.....122
 United States v Worrall, 2 Dallas 384 (1798),.....151
 Vale v Phoenix Insurance Co 28 F Cas 687, Penn, April 1805,72, 84
 Van Ness v Pacard, 27 US (2 Pet) 137 (1829),136, 151
 Vermont v The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 28 F Cas 1155, 1827,43, 188
 Wakefield v Ross, 28 F Cas 1346, Rhode Island, November 1827,..... 134–5
 Walden v Chamberlain, 28 F Cas 1353, Penn, April 1814,.....72
 Walker v Swartout, Johnson’s Reports, vol 12, 445, October 1815,162, 181
 Walter v Perrin, Case no 17121 in F Cas,.....62
 Ward v Arrendo, 29 F Cas 167, New York, April 1825,.....173
 Watson v Delafield, Caines’ Reports, vol II, 224, November 1804,.....93, 109–10
 Wheaton v Peters, 33 US (8 Pet) 591, 668 (1834),.....172–3, 180
 Williams et al v Armroyd et al 7 Cranch (11 US) 423,.....78
 Williamson v Kincaid, 4 US 20 (1800),.....201
 Willings v Consequa, 30 F Cas 55, Penn, October 1815,.....63, 78, 99
 Willis v Bucher et al 30 F Cas 63, Penn, April 1818,..... 65–6, 69, 83, 84, 95, 181
 Worcester v Georgia, 31 US (6 Pet) 515 (1832),..... 12, 148–9, 176–7, 192, 199
 Young v Grundy, 11 US (7 Cranch) 548 (1813),108, 110

INTRODUCTION

I make it plain from the outset that this volume is not a legal, political, economic or constitutional history of the Early Republic. Its object is to record the results of my research into the part played by four prominent United States Supreme Court Justices in the development of United States law through their work in the circuit courts during the Chief Justiceship of John Marshall.

Having been involved in the study of English law for over 60 years, my life has revolved around guideline cases of the House of Lords and Court of Appeal with only a passing interest in United States law. It was whilst, after retirement, having commenced a Master of Research degree which included a dissertation on 'Cherokee Removal Discourse in Jacksonian America' that my interest in the early days of the United States Supreme Court began. I read the Court's Native American opinions and, in particular, those affecting the rights of Cherokees. Having been impressed by the measured dissent in favour of the Cherokee Nation by Justice Smith Thompson, joined in by Justice Joseph Story, in the 1831 case of *Cherokee Nation v Georgia*, I was interested in a closer examination of the contribution of both justices to the growth of United States law.

Whilst aware of the Supreme Court justices' role when sitting together in the nation's capital, further investigation revealed the significant impact they had on the development of federal law when sitting on circuit at first instance or by way of appeal from a district judge. Having reviewed the modern scholarship, it quickly became clear that much time and effort had been properly paid to the role of the Supreme Court in the formation of federal law, but the workload of the early 'inferior' federal courts had received scant attention despite calls by several scholars to examine the place of the circuit courts in United States legal history.

Frankfurter & Landis (1928) were alert to the need for detailed studies of the circuit and district courts for a better understanding of the nation's history.¹ Scholars have examined different aspects of their suggested research. In a 1970 exploratory essay on Justice Story's time on the First Circuit, Newmyer, when referring to the circuit courts, observed that 'there has been no comprehensive effort to understand their operation or assess their influence on society and on the development of American law and legal institutions.'² Tachau (1978) also appreciated

¹ Felix Frankfurter and James M Landis, *The Business of the Supreme Court: A Study in the Federal Judicial System* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 52–53, n 174. Originally published in 1928 by The Macmillan Company.

² R Kent Newmyer, 'Justice Joseph Story on Circuit and a Neglected Phase of American Legal History' (1970) XIV *The American Journal of Legal History* 112–35.

the need for further circuit court research when examining the cases of District Judge Harry Innes, the federal district judge of Kentucky between 1789 and 1816, who exercised circuit court jurisdiction in Kentucky until the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Thomas Todd to the 7th Circuit in 1807.³ In 1997, Johnson was another who felt that the justices' work on circuit 'deserves far more attention than it has been given in the past'.⁴ He began the task of remedying that neglect in a book chapter on 'The Circuit Courts and the Projection of Federal Power'.⁵ In a 2009 essay on Justice Bushrod Washington, Johnson, when referring to the justices' circuit work, declared that 'It is in this multitude of cases that Washington and his fellow justices made their greatest contribution to the advancement of federal justice in the young republic', pointing to the 30 volumes of the *Federal Cases* as a starting point, in the case of Washington, to prove his worth as a judge.⁶

More recently, Graham (2010), citing Frankfurter, Landis and Tachau, noted that 'legal historians have focused on the significance of the Supreme Court, its decisions, and its justices', complaining that 'not only have the lower courts been ignored, their significance has even been questioned'.⁷ Graham has furthered the scholarship on the 'inferior courts' by a detailed study of the circuit and district courts of Rhode Island, a constituent part of the First Circuit, between 1790 and 1812. La Croix (2012) is another who writes of the tendency of historians 'to focus on the on the Supreme Court alone, to the exclusion of the lower federal courts'. She observes that those who have devoted attention to the lower federal courts 'have largely neglected the history of how those courts developed beyond the early moments of the Constitutional Convention and the First Congress'.⁸ LaCroix's paper does not seek to examine the workload of the circuit courts. Rather it is a penetrating insight into the Federalist view that extending judicial power to the 'inferior' federal courts was key to national supremacy.⁹

The nature and extent of the research referred to above will be developed in greater detail in later chapters. Here I have given only a brief outline to justify a

³ Mary K Bonsteel Tachau, *Federal Courts in the Early Republic: Kentucky, 1789–1816* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978). Tachau records the arrival on circuit of Justice Todd but does not examine his circuit work as her focus is on District Judge Harry Innes. Her pupil Glenn Forrester Taylor continued this aspect of research in a 1989 MA thesis at the University of Louisville entitled, 'Jurisdiction in the 7th Circuit, District of Kentucky, 1807–1817'.

⁴ Herbert A Johnson, *The Chief Justiceship of John Marshall, 1801–1835* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 6.

⁵ *ibid.*, 112–37.

⁶ Herbert A Johnson, 'Bushrod Washington' (2009) 62(2) *Vanderbilt Law Review* 447–90 at 488–89.

⁷ D Kurt Graham, *To Bring Law Home: The Federal Judiciary in Early National Rhode Island* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 5. Graham's reference to the questioning of the value of circuit court opinions stems from the unreliable statistics of the number of successful appeals from circuit opinions which Charles Warren took from *Niles Register* of 10 April 1830 and used in his *A History of the American Bar* (Boston: Little Brown, 1911), 406.

⁸ Alison L LaCroix, 'Federalists, Federalism, and Federal Jurisdiction' (24 February 2010) Final revised edition of 8 November 2012 in (2012) 30 *Law and History Review*, 205–44 at 206. University of Chicago Public Law Working Paper No 297. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1558612>.

⁹ *ibid.*, 207.

response to the calls for further research into the role of the early circuit court in the development of United States law. Whilst using several sets of reports, I followed Johnson's suggestion of the *Federal Cases* as the basis of any investigation into the value of the justices' time on circuit. I extracted, read and noted up the 1377 reported circuit court opinions of the 14 Marshall Court associate justices. Having taken the view that scholars of legal history have focused on Chief Justice Marshall and that his associates had received comparatively scant attention, I decided not to examine the opinions of the Chief Justice but those of his brethren.

As an analysis of the circuit opinions of the Chief Justice and all 14 justices was clearly beyond the scope of a doctoral thesis, I decided to read those of four prominent associates (Washington, Livingston, Story and Thompson) who sat in busy commercial centres and whose tenures, taken together, spanned the era of the Marshall Court. Those circuit court opinions were key to ascertaining how the circuit experience shaped Supreme Court attitudes and the Chief Justice's opinion assignment choices. I also explored, at a time when there were few federal statutes and Supreme Court opinions to guide them, the sources upon which the justices drew to establish a body of federal law and how they attempted to achieve a consistent approach to federal law and procedure across the circuits. Today's judges have the advantage of law reports immediately available online or on disc and an experienced colleague within easy reach to help resolve a difficult point of law or procedure. Not so in the early days: a justice might find himself on circuit without a law library requiring assistance with an unfamiliar branch of the law when support from colleagues was only available through an extremely slow and sometimes unreliable exchange of letters.

An outline of some of the political and economic events of the period is given only to background the many issues which fell to the justices to determine to establish an in-depth examination of a large number of representative opinions and to show how vital the circuit work of these four justices was in the shaping of United States law in those very early years.

INDEX

Note: author names only include an initial or forename if needed for disambiguation. Chief justices, justices, district and probate judges are distinguished by ‘CJ’, ‘J’, ‘DJ’ and ‘PJ’. Other names have initial or first name with an indication of office as appropriate. Law Reports listed at pp 207–8 are indexed under ‘law reports (as listed at pp 207–8)’ rather than under the reporter. References are included in the index only when something of substance is said about the reports or the reporter.

- Abraham (1974), 159, 180
Adams, H (1889), 28–9
Adams (US President 1797–1801): *see also*
 Judiciary Act 1801
 Alien & Sedition Acts 1798 and, 49, 90
 appointment of Federalist judges, 26, 40
 Washington J, 56
 Jefferson’s defeat of, 91, 113
 Livingston J’s opposition to, 91
admiralty law: *see also* embargo laws; embargo laws, jurisprudence (Story J); embargo laws, jurisprudence (Washington); marine insurance; maritime, prize and marine insurance, jurisprudence; seamen, protection of
 Court of Appeals in Prize Cases, 74, 131n99
 district court jurisdiction, 41
 English common law and, 21, 45, 46, 59–60, 152
 Johnson J and, 137
 jurisdiction, 40–1
 seamen on board ship, 128–9
 Livingston J and, 45, 93–4, 95, 96
 Marshall CJ and, 137, 138, 139
 Peters J and, 29n27
 Story J and: *see* admiralty law (Story J)
 Thompson J and, 46, 137, 164
 Washington J and, 59–60, 63, 74–5, 77–8, 190
admiralty law (Story J)
 attempts to import English common law, 21, 111, 131, 152, 153–4
 customs law enforcement, 115–17, 125–8, 146, 153–4
 case-list, 146n162
 Harden v Gordon, 154
 Orne v Townsend, 154
 The Pizarro, 123, 138
 Ruggles, 154
 embargo laws: *see* embargo laws, jurisprudence (Story J)
 as major contributor to, 3, 137, 155
 strict enforcement of, 153–4
Alien & Sedition Acts 1798, 28, 36n65, 49, 90–1, 185
 Chase on, 185
 free speech (Constitution, First Amendment), 185
 Patterson on, 185
 political abuse of, 90
Anderson (1914), 26
Annis (1974), 55, 120
appeals
 admiralty cases, 41
 circuit court to Supreme Court
 availability of judge from state from which appeal came, xi, 25
 binding effect of decision, 169
 Judiciary Act 1789, 39
 rarity, xi, 2, 5
 uniformity and, 2
 Washington J’s concerns, 59, 83
 Court of Appeals in Prizes Cases, 74, 131n99
 Court for the Correction of Errors, 92, 93, 172, 180
 district court to circuit court, 39, 41, 167–9
 limitation to civil maritime and admiralty cases, 122
 participation of district judge, 39, 41, 131–2
 limitation to matters of law, 38, 84, 122
 New York Supreme Court judges’ role, 92–3
 participation of judge previously involved in the case, 39, 46, 82, 92–3, 131–2, 146, 201
 reversal rates
 by court, 195–6
 by justice, 196–7
 Story J’s rulings on, 122
 writ of error, 2, 93, 122, 124, 143, 201
Arlidge (2017), 53n5
Articles of Confederation 1781
 drafters, 53n5
 prize courts, 74
Ashmore (2006), 144

- associate judges
 Judiciary Act 1789 provisions, 39
 significance, xiii, 4, 8, 10–11, 120, 193–4
 Washington G's considerations when appointing, 24–5, 49
- Austin (2010), 11n41
- Bailyn (ed) (1993), 38
- Baker, HR (2014), 121
- Baker, L (1974), 8
- Baldwin J, judicial experience and legal education, 204
- Balleisen (2001), 101
- bankruptcy/debt
 Bankruptcy Act 1841, 101
 bills of exchange/promissory notes as discharge, 104, 164–5
 English authorities and, 61
 imprisonment for debt, 162, 169
 Johnson J and, 158n8
 jurisprudence
Adams v Story, 98, 100
Carpenter v Butterfield, 163–4
Mason v Haile, 80, 173–4
Mott v Morris, 63–4
Ogden v Saunders, 64, 82, 98, 158, 173
Sturges v Crowninshield, 100–1, 144
Tillman v Lansing, 162
US v Dugan, 107
US v Giles, 107
US v Morris, 170–1
 Livingston J and, 47, 98, 100–1, 107
 Marshall CJ and, 101, 199
 remission of forfeiture, 170–1
 states' rights and, 47, 59, 82, 100–1
 statutory interpretation, 63
 Story J and, 98, 101, 115, 144, 158n8
 Thompson J and, 158, 162, 167, 169, 173–4
 Washington and, 59, 61, 67, 80, 82, 158n8
- Beeman (2009), 38
- Bernstein (2003), 27–8
- Beveridge (1916), 7–8
- Bickford and Bowling (1989), 24n2, 37, 39
- bills of exchange/promissory notes: *see also* commercial law/trade promotion
 Livingston J on, 21, 104–5, 108, 110, 191
 Story J on, 118, 147, 150
 Thompson J on, 70–1, 84
 Washington J on, 70–1, 84
- Blackstone's *Commentaries*, 20, 44, 57–8, 93, 112–13, 135, 165–6: *see also* Tucker's *Blackstone*
- Blaustein and Merskey (1969), 54, 59
- Bourguignon (1977), 131n99
- Bozzo et al, 11n41
- Briceland (1996), 97n47
- Burr, A (US Vice-President/trial for treason), 9–10
 Hamilton's attacks on, 88n10
 Jefferson's aggression towards, 26n15, 29, 31
 Livingston J and, 88
 Marshall CJ and, 37, 139, 193
- Capon (ed) (1939), 28
- Casper (2008), 54–5
- Catanzaritu (2000), 53
- caveat emptor*, 163, 170, 181
- certainty of the law, 164, 169, 170
- certificate of division of opinion, use of, 79, 92, 131–2, 168, 195–6, 200
 as aid to uniformity, 3, 136, 189
- Chase J
 abuse of grand jury charge, 4, 33–4, 35, 36–7, 49
 on the Alien & Sedition Acts, 185
 a 'boorish Federalist', 10
 circuit riding and, 187n5
 on crime and the common law, 151–2
 education and legal experience, 203
 impeachment, 4, 28–9, 31, 33–4, 36–7, 49
 majority opinions, 200
 reversal rates, 196
- Chernow (2004), 88n10
- Chernow (2010), 25
- Cherokee Nation v Georgia*: *see* Native American rights
- Chiorazzi and Most (2005), 42
- circuit courts: *see also* grand jury charge;
 political tensions; Supreme Court
 appeals from: *see* appeals, circuit court to Supreme Court
 constitutionality of Supreme Court justices as judges, 187
 as forums to hone skills/gain experience, 3, 4, 183–4
 jurisdiction, 39–41
 seamen on board ship, 128–9
 key issues considered by, 2–3
 local ties, importance/disadvantages, 3–5, 6–7, 21, 23–5, 34, 38, 49, 74–7, 100–1, 121, 136, 146, 183–4, 189–90, 193
 modernization under Story J, 121–5
 political function/promotion of federal system, 1, 6–7, 494
 role in the development of federal law, xi, xiii, 1, 2, 5, 46–8, 185–6
 workloads of circuit courts and Supreme Court compared, 1–2, 3–4
- circuit riding
 abolition, 5–6, 27
 English practice, 6–7
 importance to the federal system of justice, 6, 21
 physical and emotional hardships, 5–7, 27, 96, 122, 183
 collegiality, 48

- commercial law/trade promotion: *see also*
 bills of exchange/promissory notes; marine insurance; seamen, protection of
 commerce clause (Constitution I(8)(3)), 72, 75–6, 100, 103, 144–5
 expanding economy, influence, 192–3
 New York, importance of, 17–18
 commercial law/trade promotion, jurisprudence (including cases on contract and negotiable instruments), 84
Carpenter v Butterfield, 163–4
Casey v Brush, 94
Corser v Craig, 70
Craig v Brown, 71, 84
Dartmouth College, 66, 81
Dugan v US, 107
Gallagher v Roberts, 70
Gibbons v Ogden, 103
Grant & Swift v M'Lachlin, 164
Green v Beals, 94
Henderson v Brown, 94
Humphries v Blight's Assignees, 70, 84
Keene v US, 105
Lee v Munroe & Thornton, 107
Lennox v Prout, 110
Livingston v Van Ingen, 103
McMurtry v Jones, 70, 84
Mandeville v Welch, 147
Marshall v Beverley, 110
Mumford v M'Pherson, 164
The New York, 106
Otis v Watkins, 106–7
Perry v Crammond, 70, 84
Riggs v Lindsay, 108, 110
Seaman v Patten, 94
Seixas v Woods, 163
Smith v Barker, 104
Stevens v Columbian Insurance Company, 64
Swift v Tyson, 152
Tittle v Beebee, 164
US v Barker, 105
US v Giles, 107
US v Hoxie, 102
Van Ingen, 103
Young v Grundy, 108, 110
 commercial law/trade promotion (Livingston J)
 bills of exchange/promissory notes, 21, 104–5, 110, 184, 191
 commerce clause (Constitution I(8)(3)), 103
 maritime cases, 102–3, 108
 partnerships, 94, 109–10, 191
 significance of/frequency of opinions on, 3, 21, 86–7, 92, 94, 96, 104–8, 109–10, 190, 191
 commercial law/trade promotion (Marshall CJ), 103, 106–7
 commercial law/trade promotion (Story J)
 applicability of state/English common law to federal cases, 21, 147, 152–3, 155, 163, 191–3
 contract obligations, emphasis on
 sanctity of, 66
 diversity cases, 152–3
 embargo laws, 115–17
 negotiable instruments, 147
 partnerships, 133
 promotion of certainty, 70–3
 protection of seamen and, 192–3
 significance of/frequency of opinions on, 19, 133, 137, 190
 commercial law/trade promotion (Thompson J), 169–72, 181, 182, 184, 190, 192–3
 bills of exchange/promissory notes, 170, 181, 184
caveat emptor, 163, 170, 181
 contract obligations, emphasis on sanctity and clarity, 162–5, 166
 evaluation, 169–72, 190
 frequency of opinions on, 169–70
 inflexibility, 181
 partnerships, 167, 170
 protection of seamen and, 167, 192–3
 commercial law/trade promotion (Washington J), 190, 192–3
 bills of exchange/promissory notes, 70–1, 84
 contracts clause (Constitution I(10)(1)), 66, 67, 69–70, 80–1, 100, 144, 173, 198
 as federalist, 57
 limited experience, 53–4
 protection of seamen and, 72–3, 192–3
 protection of vested commercial rights/sanctity of contract, 66
 Commission of the Bicentennial of the United States (1992), 5, 172
 common law (state/English)
 commercial law, 21, 147, 152–3, 155, 191–3
 copyright law, 171–2
 criminal law, 21, 151–2
 limitations of state common law/importance of federal system, 152–3
 Livingstone J, 93, 109
 as means of clarifying American law (Story), 21, 111, 154, 184
 modification of English common law to meet American needs, 151, 154
 New York State practice, 44, 93
 Story J, 3, 21, 45–6, 111, 112–13, 127, 131, 135–6, 151–3, 191–2
 common law (state/English), jurisprudence
Clark, 152, 154
Coolidge, 154
Hudson, 151–2, 154
Leroy v Lewis, 93, 109
Penny v New York Insurance Company, 93, 109
Swift v Tyson, 152–3, 154, 192
Van Ness v Pacard, 151
Worrall, 151

- consistency: *see* uniformity/consistency, need for/aids to achieving
- Constitution by article
- I(8) (powers of Congress), 171–2
 - I(8)(1) (power of Congress to provide for general welfare of the US), 144–5
 - I(8)(3) (commerce clause), 72, 75–6, 100, 103, 144–5
 - I(9)(1) (ban on Congress amendment of right to trade in slaves), 2–3, 177
 - I(10)(1) (contracts clause), 66, 67, 69–70, 80–1, 100, 144, 173, 198
 - I(10)(2) (power to levy import and export duties), 100
 - III(1) (courts/judges), 91
 - III(2) (jurisdiction over disputes between different states), 176–7
 - IV(1)(3) (recapture of person held to service), 149–50
 - V (ban on constitutional amendment of Constitution I(9)(1)), 177
- Constitution (Amendments) by article
- First (freedom of speech), 185
 - Fifth
 - 5 (grand jury charge), 32
 - 6 (due process including protection of property rights), 66
 - Thirteenth (abolition of slavery), 179, 193
- constitutional rights and freedoms, 76
- contracts clause (Constitution I(10)(1)), 66, 67, 69–70, 80–1, 100, 144, 173, 198
- contractual law: *see also* commercial law/trade promotion
- applicable law, strict compliance with, 163–4
 - Thompson J and, 163–4
- Coquille (1996), 97
- Court for the Correction of Errors, 92, 93, 172, 180
- Crimes Act 1790, 42, 129, 152
- Crimes Act 1825, 152, 154, 192
- criminal jurisdiction
- Crimes Act 1825, 152
 - seamen on board ship, 128–9
- criminal law
- applicability of state/English common law, 21, 48, 151–2
 - codification, 21
 - Story J and, 21, 132–3, 147
 - uniformity and consistency problems, 48
- criminal law (Story J)
- codification (later Crimes Act 1825), 21, 152, 154, 192
 - common law and, 21, 151–2, 184
 - interest in/rarity of opinions, 147
- cross-circuit consistency, 169
- Cushing J
- circuit riding, 5–6
- constitutionality of Supreme Court Judges as circuit court judges, 187
- death/succession to, 32, 117, 118, 122
- grand jury charges, 4, 35n56
- illness, 122
- judicial experience and legal education, 202
- judicial record, 15–16
- certificates of division, 197
 - majority opinions, 199
 - reversal rates, 196
- Marshall CJ's approach for advice, 9–10, 139, 193
- customs law enforcement, 94, 100–1, 128
- Livingston J on, 102, 167
 - Story J on, 128, 145
- Darbyshire (2007), 6–7
- Declaration of Independence 1776
- 'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness', 76
 - signatories, 25, 33, 53
- Dewey (1986), 112n3
- dispute resolutions, desiderata
- certainty of the law, 164, 169
 - speedy resolution of disputes, 165
- dissents: *see also* opinions
- advantages of system, 187
 - data relating to, 159
 - identification of dissenting judges, 139n131, 152
 - increase in, 12, 140
 - Johnson J, 10, 48, 97, 148, 159, 171, 189, 199
 - Livingston J, 10, 92, 99, 100–1, 108, 189, 199
 - Marshall CJ, 58, 106, 107–8, 139, 158–9
 - dislike of, 12, 140
 - in the Marshall courts, 12, 140, 187
 - subsumption within CJ's opinion, 14–15
 - record of, 139n131
 - seriatim opinions distinguished, 11
 - Story J, xi, 139, 153–4, 175, 189
 - Thompson J, 12, 47, 158–9, 171–2, 173–4, 175–80, 182, 192
 - value of, 12
 - Washington J as reluctant dissenter, 59, 80–1, 83
 - as weakening of the Court's authority, 11, 59, 80–1, 83, 122
- district court jurisdiction, 40–1
- diversity jurisdiction, 21, 41, 152–3, 154, 192
- Swift v Tyson*, 152–3, 154, 192
- Domnarski (1996), 2, 13–14
- Dunne (1966), 86, 121
- Dunne (1969), 18, 86–7, 96, 97, 108, 120–1, 132, 157–9, 171–2, 180
- Dunne (1970), 120–1, 157–9
- Duvall J, life and career
- judicial experience and legal education, 204

- judicial record, 8, 10, 15, 16, 117, 118–19, 137, 158, 172, 190
 certificates of division of opinion, 197
 majority opinions, 200
 reversal rates, 197
- Duxbury (2008), 59
- Egerton (1993), 55
- Ellis, JE (2004), 37
- Ellis, RE (1971), 26n15
- Ellsworth CJ (1796–1800), *seriatim* vs single opinions, 11, 201
- embargo laws: *see also* maritime, prize and marine insurance, jurisprudence
 assessment of impact, 116–17
 Embargo Act 1807, 77, 102, 115–16, 125n68
 Embargo Act 1808, 106
 Embargo Act 1813, 117, 125n68
 Livingston J and, 105–7
 Non-Intercourse Act 1809, 77
 Story J and, 115–17, 125–8
 Trading with the Enemy Act 1812, 125
 Washington J on, 77–8
- embargo laws, jurisprudence (Story J)
The Argo, 126
The Boston, 153–4
The Bothnea; The Janstoffs, 127, 153–4
Cross, 126–7
The George, 127, 153–4
 reversals, 127
Robinson v Hook, 128, 153–4
The Rosalie and Betty, 127
The St Lawrence, 126, 146
The Sally, 125–6, 146
The Short Staple, 126, 127, 153–4
Ten Hogsheads of Rum, 126, 153–4
Two Hundred Chests of Tea, 147
Webber, 126
- embargo laws, jurisprudence (Washington J)
Parker v US, 78
The Paul Sherman, 77–8
US v Dixey, 78
US v Morgan, 78
- English law: *see* sources of law, English authorities
- Epstein et al (2003), 25, 44
- Evarts Act 1891, 5–6
- Faber (2000), 18
- Farrand (ed) (1937), 37–8
- Fay PJ, Story J's letters to, 13, 48, 119, 123, 137, 138
- Fede (2017), 15
- federal law, supremacy of (including in particular Story-related jurisprudence), 143–7
Green v Biddle, 146
McCulloch v Maryland, 144–5
- Marbury v Madison*, 143–4
- Martin v Hunter's Lessee*, 143, 144
- Mills v Duryee*, 143
- Prigg*, 119, 121, 149–50
- Sturges v Crowninshield*, 59, 83, 100–1, 108, 115, 144
- federal system of justice: *see also* Jefferson (US President, 1801–9); Judiciary Act 1789; Judiciary Act 1801; Judiciary Act 1807; states' rights/state sovereignty
 Anti-Federalist opposition, 23–4, 48–9
 circuit court vs district court judge, value of opinions, 5
 circuit/district court jurisdiction, 39–41
 Constitutional Conventions, 1787 and 1788
 debates, 37–8, 48–9
 cost issue, 39
 difficulties of reconciling federal and state jurisdictions, 34
 promotion of
 appointment of Federalist judges, 24
 appointment of justices from different states/regional diversity, 25, 49
 charges to the jury, 33–7: *see also* grand jury charge
 circuit riding, importance, 6, 21
 state courts' jurisdiction
 concern about independence as reason for limiting, 39
 Judiciary Act 1789 and, 38–9
 'the keystone of our political fabric' (President Washington), 24
 uniformity, importance: *see* uniformity/consistency, need for/aids to achieving
- Finkelman (1994), 121, 127
- Forbes (1938), 116n26
- Ford (ed) (1904), 28, 30, 32n39
- Frank (1964), 13
- Frankfurter, Landis and Tachau (1928), xi–xii
- Freeman et al (2005), 87, 89
- Friedman LM (1973), 44
- Fugitive Slave Act 1793, 121, 150, 179, 191
- Garrison (2002), 165–6
- Goebel (1971), 1n1
- Graham (2010), xii, 3–4
- grand jury charge, 32–7
 criticised charges
 Chase J, 4, 33–4, 35, 36–7, 49
 Iredell J, 35–6
- effectiveness/demise, 36–7, 49
- English practice, 33
- Fifth Amendment, 32
- impeachment threat as disincentive, 186
- judicial independence, effect, 186
- as means of promoting the federal cause, 3–4, 32, 49, 186–7

- model charges
 Cushing J, 4, 35n56
 Jay CJ, 34–5, 186
 Story J, 35n60
 Story J's 1812 charges, 4
 Walton J, 33
 Wilson J, 34–5
 modern and 17th/18th century charges
 distinguished, 32–3
 promotion of the federal system and, 33–7
 publication of charges, 33
 Gunther (ed) (1969), 145
- Hall, KL and Hall, MD (eds) (2007), 25
 Hall, TI (2001) ('Henry Brockholst Livingstone'), 89
 Hall, TI (2001) ('Smith Thompson'), 158–9, 180, 182
 Hamilton, A
 death in duel, 88
Federalist Papers, 7n20, 27
 Livingston J and, 88
 separation of powers and, 25–6
 views on precedent, 58
 Haskins and Johnson (1926), 1n1
 Haw et al (1980), 19, 33–4, 35, 121
 Heaney (1958), 121
 Henderson (1971), 2, 32–3
 Heubner (1999), 147n167
 Hickey (1981), 116–17
 Hobson (1996), 8–9, 37n66, 140, 150
 Hobson (2006) (articles), 8–9, 20n28, 57
 Hobson (2006) (edited version of Johnson's 1794 *Papers of John Marshall*), 2, 8, 37, 140, 142, 155, 187, 193
 Hobson (2013), 155
 Hodgson (1824), 54
 Hoffer, Hoffer and Hull (2016), 150
 Hoffer and Hull (1984), 28, 30
 Holdsworth (1928), 156
 Holmes (*Collected Legal Papers* (Smith)), 150–1, 155
 Holt (1989), 46
 Horwitz (1977), 67, 70n93, 153, 170
 Hudson (ed) (1987), 38
 Hughes and Cain (1998), 67
- impeachment
 of Chase J, 4, 28–9, 31, 33–4, 36–7, 49
 as deterrence to grand jury charges, 186
 Jefferson's policy of, 20, 28–32, 186–7
 for judicial misbehaviour, 30
 Pennsylvania Republican party's campaign, 30–1
 of Peters DJ, 29
 of Pickering DJ, 28–9, 30
 Indian rights: *see* Native American rights
 Iredell J
 circuit riding, 6n17
 grand jury charge and, 35–6
 Isenberg (2007), 31, 88
 Israel (1966), 31
- Jay CJ, legal attitudes
 grand jury charges, 34–5, 186
 separation of powers, 25–6
 seriatim opinions, 11, 201
- Jay CJ, life and career
 circuit riding, 5–6, 7n20, 39, 80, 89
 diplomatic role
 as envoy to Great Britain, 7n20
 Jay Treaty (1794), 89
 Minister to Spain, 87–8
 Paris Treaty (1783), 88
 as Federalist, 34, 87–8
Federalist Papers, 7
 as first Chief Justice (1789–95), 87–8
 Governor of New York State (1795–1801), 89
 political and judicial career, 87–8
 relations with Livingstone J (brother-in-law), 87–8, 89, 98
 resignation (1789)/refusal to return (1801), 7, 89
- Jefferson (US President, 1801–9): *see also*
 political tensions
 common law and, 117
 federalist Supreme Court, suspicion of/attacks on, 24–32
 appointment of Anti-Federalist judges as intended remedy, 96, 97–8
 impeachment policy, 20, 28–32, 186–7
 Jefferson's Vendetta, 26–32
 Judiciary Act 1802, 26
Marbury v Madison, 20, 27–8, 49, 143–4, 187, 198
 separation of powers issues, 25–6
 hatred of Britain, 89
 Johnson J and, 97–8
 Livingston J and, 96
 views on
 Marshall CJ, 9, 27–8, 186–7
 Story J, 116, 117
 Washington J, 53
- Johnson (1974) (edited by Hobson (2006)) (*Papers of John Marshall*), 2, 8, 37, 140, 142, 155, 187, 193
 Johnson (1997), xii, xiii, 4, 8n27, 9
 Johnson (2000), 11
 Johnson (2009), 4, 11
 Johnson J, legal attitudes
 bankruptcy/debt, 158n8
 precedent, 48
 state rights, 171
 Johnson J, life and career
 admiralty cases, 137
 circuit riding, 5–6

- dissents, 10, 48, 97, 148, 159, 189, 199
- Jefferson J and, 97–8
- judicial experience prior to appointment to the Supreme Court, 8, 171
- judicial record
- certificates of division of opinion, 197
 - reversal rates, 196
- Judicature Act 1891 (Evarts Act), 5–6
- judicial independence: *see also* separation of powers
- federal courts' contribution to, 3–4
 - grand jury charge and, 185
 - tenure during good behaviour (Constitution III(1)), 91
- judicial review (including *Marbury v Madison*), 1–2, 27–8, 198
- Judiciary Act 1789
- circuit court provisions, 39–41
 - constitutionality (*Marbury v Madison*), 27–8, 143–4, 187
 - Federalists vs Anti-Federalists/Republicans, 23–4, 27–8, 39–40, 185
 - legislative history/sticking points, 38–9
 - number of Supreme Court justices, 169n58
 - uniformity/consistency of decision-taking and, 46
 - Washington and, 46–7
- Judiciary Act 1789 by section
- 1 (relaxation of circuit riding requirement), 39
 - 2 (districts), 39
 - 3 (district courts), 39
 - 17 (oaths and affirmations), 135n117
 - 22 (appeals from district court), 65
 - 25 (appellate jurisdiction), 143
 - 30 (depositions), 135n117
 - 34 (applicability of state laws), 42
- Judiciary Act 1801
- number of Supreme Court justices, 169n58
 - political manoeuvring against President Jefferson, 39–40
 - relief of circuit riding duties (s 3), 39–40
 - repeal, 27
- Judiciary Act 1802
- Chase J's attack on, 35
 - dismissal of newly appointed federal circuit judges/reintroduction of circuit riding (s 4), 26, 40, 49, 187
 - Stuart v Laird*, 187
 - suspension of Supreme Court proceedings, 49, 186–7
- Judiciary Act 1807, 169n58
- jury system
- criminal cases and, 132–3
 - Livingston J on, 21, 93–5, 102, 110, 165
 - Story on, 132–3
 - Thompson J and, 164–5, 168
 - Washington J on, 65–6, 83, 95
- Kadish (1996), 33
- Kaufman (2003), 135
- Kelsh (1999), 12
- Kent J
- caveat emptor* and, 163
 - choice of reporter, 97n5
 - Commentaries on American Law*, 155–6
 - Erie Canal Bill and, 161
 - Livingston J and, 91
 - as possible successor to, 199
 - Story J and, 155–6
 - Thompson J and, 160, 173, 204
 - Washington J and, 61
- Kerber (1970), 40
- Killenbeck (2006), 145
- Krauss (2012), 33
- Kutler (1971), 66, 67
- LaCroix (2012), xii, 23
- Lamoine (ed), 33
- land titles: *see* property rights/vested interests
- Langbein (1993), 97
- Langbein (2004), 112
- law reports (as listed at pp 207–8)
- Note*: references are included in the index only when something of substance is said about the reports or the reporter.
 - Caines (*Reports of the New York Supreme Court, 1803–1805*), 92, 93n27, 94, 97, 165, 180n96
 - Federal Cases, 1789–1880*, xii–xiii, 15–16, 17, 43–4, 45, 46, 47–8, 96–7, 119, 122, 124n65, 130, 166–7
 - Gallison (*First Circuit Reports, 1812–1815*), 64, 119
 - Johnson (*Law Reports of the New York Supreme Court*), 43–4, 92, 93n27, 97, 165–6
 - Kirby (*Reports of Cases Adjudged in the Superior Court of Connecticut*), 42
 - Mason, WP (*First Circuit Reports*), 17, 119, 141
 - Paine (*Second Circuit Reports*), 17, 96–7, 166–7
 - Peters (*Reports of the Third Circuit*), 16n61, 17, 61, 171–2
 - Quincy (*Massachusetts Reports*) (1865), 42, 97n47
 - Story (*First Circuit Reports*) (1842–1845), 17, 119
 - Sumner (*Reports of Cases*), 17, 119
 - United States Reports 1790–1835*, 12, 15–16, 80, 109–10, 119, 137, 138, 149, 159n11, 174n76, 195
 - Wallace (*Third Circuit Reports*) (no references in the text)
 - Wharton (*State Trials during the Administrations of Washington and Adams*) (no references in the text)

- law reports (general): *see also* sources of law
 establishment of precedent/importance of
 quality, 47, 62, 165, 189
 paucity of federal cases/Supreme Court
 reports/slowness to appoint official
 reporter, 96–7, 102
 Wheaton, appointment, 97
- Lee (1999), 58–9
- Lind (1930), 117
- Livingston J (1808–23), legal attitudes
 admiralty law/marine insurance, 45, 93–4, 96
 bankruptcy/debt, 47, 98, 100–1, 107
 bills of exchange/promissory notes, 21, 104–5,
 110, 191
 commercial law/trade promotion: *see*
 commercial law/trade promotion
 (Livingston)
 criminal cases, 102
 customs law enforcement, 102
 embargo laws, 105–7
 jury system, 21, 93–4, 102, 110, 165
 key features, 3
 marine insurance, 93–4
 precedent, 98–9, 100, 109
 slavery/slave trade, 1007
 sources of law
 circuit opinions, 47
 English common law/authorities, view of,
 45, 93, 109
 states' rights: *see* states' rights/state sovereignty
 (Livingston)
 uniformity/consistency/dependence on
 precedent, 47, 98–9, 100, 109, 188
- Livingston J (1808–23), life and career
 appointment to New York Supreme Court
 (1802), 91
 appointment to the Supreme Court (1807), 96
 Burr and, 88
 candidates to succeed, 159n13
 characteristics
 fiery temper/duelling record, 87, 88–9
 flexibility, 109
 self-assurance, 98
 circuit riding, 96
 district judges, 99–100
 geographical range, 99–100
 death, 110
 dissents, 10, 92, 99, 100–1, 108, 189, 199
 education and early career, 87
 family connections, 87, 89, 91
 judicial record
 certificates of division of opinion, 197
 evaluation, 109–10
 majority opinions, 199
 paucity of federal case reports, 96–7, 102
 reversal rates, 197
 specialisms, 105–6, 109–10
 Kent J and, 91
- legal studies under Yates, 88
 loss of the *Diana* (*Livingston & Gilchrist
 v Maryland Insurance*), 88
 low profile, 86–7
 Marshall CJ's respect for, 105, 109
 New York Supreme Court (1802–6), 91–6
 tally and scope of opinions, 92
 opinions
 brevity and plain language, 98–9
 humour, 99
 political affiliations
 fluidity, 87–91, 191
 reversion to federalist principles, 98
 relations with Jay CJ (brother-in-law), 87–8,
 8998
 Story J and, 98, 108
 Looney (ed) (2008), 112n3
- McClellan (1971), 18–19, 114, 118, 120–1, 151,
 155
- McGarvie (2016), 135
- MacGill and Newmyer (2008), 165–6
- McLean J, judicial experience and legal
 education, 204
- McMaster (1883–1913), 116n28
- Madison (US President, 1809–17)
 Alien & Sedition Acts 1798, 90–1
Federalist Paper No. 10 (property rights), 57
Marbury v Madison, 20, 27–8, 49, 143–4, 187,
 198
 political affiliations, 90–1
 majority opinions: *see* opinions
- Mann (2002), 101n61
- Marcus (1985–2007), 1n1, 4, 6n, 17, 7n20, 24n5,
 33, 34n49, 35–6, 184
- marine insurance: *see also* maritime, prize and
 marine insurance, jurisprudence
 jurisdiction, confusion over, 131–2
 Livingston J on, 93–4
 Story J on, 122, 130–2, 154
 Thompson J on, 164
 Washington J on, 67, 71–2, 77, 80, 84
- maritime, prize and marine insurance,
 jurisprudence
The Active, 103, 110
Armroyd v Williams, 78
*Bayard et al v Massachusetts Fire & Marine Ins
 Co*, 130, 154
Coles et al v Marine Insurance Co, 71
Cruder v Pennsylvania Ins Co, 71
Delaware Insurance Company v Hogan, 71, 84
Delovio v Boit, 131–2, 154, 189
The Elizabeth, 103
Glidden v Manufacturers[x2019] Ins Co, 130,
 154
Goyon v Pleasants, 71
Harden v Gordon, 154
Insurance Co v Dunham, 132, 154

- The James Wells*, 102, 110
The Jerusalem, 131
Kohne v Insurance Company of North America, 72
McGregor v Insurance Company of Pennsylvania, 71, 84
Ninety-Five Bales of Paper v US, 110
Odlin v Insurance Company of Pennsylvania, 84
Penny v New York Insurance Company, 93
Ross v The Active, 72
Tidmarsh v Washington Fire & Marine Insurance Co Inc, 130, 154
US v Five Packages of Linen, 110
Vale v Phoenix Insurance Co, 72, 84
- Marshall CJ, legal attitudes
 admiralty law, 137, 138, 139
 bankruptcy/debt, 101, 199
 circuit riding, 187n 5
 commercial law/trade promotion, 103
 Indian/Native American rights, 175n81, 176
 personal liability for public contract, 162
 precedent, 58–9
 uniformity/consistency, need for/aids to achieving, 9, 46–7, 138–43, 154–5
- Marshall CJ, life and career
 Burr and, 37, 139, 193
 decision-making process: *see* opinions
 Jefferson's views on, 9, 11
 judicial experience and legal education, 8, 203
 judicial record
 admiralty expertise, 10
 certificates of division of opinion, 197
 circuit opinions, importance, 10
 dissents, 58, 106, 107–8, 139, 158–9
 majority opinions, 12, 198–9
 Story J and, 10, 12, 32, 114, 138, 139–42, 187
 Virginia Ratifying Convention (1788), 38
 Washington J and, 52–3
- Mason, G's opposition to the federal judicial system (1788), 38, 171
- Meacham (2008), 149n174
- Meacham (2012), 29
- minority rights: *see* Native American rights; slavery/slave trade
- Moore J, judicial experience and legal education, 203
- Morgan (1954), 13–14, 55, 120, 159
- Morison (1921), 116n26
- Morris, J.B. (1987), 6
- Morris, R.B. (1979), 6n18
- Munger (1991), 67–8
- Native American rights
 Constitution 3(2), 176–7
 Indian Removal Act, 149n174
 jurisprudence
 Cherokee Nation v Georgia, 12, 148, 174, 175–7, 182, 192, 229
 Johnson v M'Intosh, 175
 Worcester v Georgia, 12, 148–9, 176–7, 192
 Marshall CJ on, 176
 Story J on, xi, 147–9, 175n81, 176, 189
 Thompson J on, 175–7
 Treaties of Hopewell (1785) and Holston (1791), 176
 New York Constitution 1777, applicability of British statute and common law, 93
 New York Council of Revision, 161, 192
 'hard law', 159–66
 New York Supreme Court
 applicability of British statute and common law (New York Constitution 1777), 44, 93
 equally divided court, handling of, 91–2
 'hard law', 159–66
 law reports, 97, 165–6
 Livingston J's tenure (1802–6), 91–6
 participation in appeal by judge previously involved in the case, 92–3
 Thompson J's tenure (1802–18), 159–66
 workload, 92
 Newmyer (1970), xi, 4–5
 Newmyer (1985), 8, 9, 18–20, 120–1, 122, 185
 Newmyer (2001), 175n81
 Newmyer (2012), 31n35
 Non-Intercourse Act 1809: *see* embargo laws
 North, 116n28
 Novak (1966), 2
- O'Connor (1979), 19, 120
- opinions: *see also* dissents
 circuit opinion as indicator of justice's opinion, 185
 decision-making process (Marshall Court), 11–15
 compromise, 9, 12, 20, 27–8, 101, 137, 185, 187
 congeniality/collegiality, 11–13, 48, 49–50, 140, 154–5, 187, 189
 European Court of Justice compared, 11
 'king on a throne' or collaborative team-worker?, 7–11
 opinion assignment, xiii, 3, 14–15, 82, 105, 109, 138, 146, 189–90
 preference for the single opinion/delivery of majority of opinions himself, 11, 12, 140
 small group dynamics, 11
 drafting practice (Story J), 132n105
 drafting practice (Thompson J), 175–6
 formality of deliberations (*Hudson and Smith*), 107–8
 from seriatim to single/majority opinion, 11–12, 13–14, 32n39, 80, 201

- single opinion
 - as counter to Republican opposition, 11, 14–15, 187
 - as Marshall's preferred option, 11, 12, 140
- time taken to prepare, 132n105, 144n156

- Paris Peace Treaty (1783), 60, 69, 88, 100
- partnerships, 94–110, 133, 167, 170, 191
- patents
 - Story J, 133
 - Washington J, 46, 61–2, 67–8, 69, 80, 82
- Paterson J, life and career
 - Alien & Sedition Acts 1798, 185
 - circuit riding, 187n5
 - judicial experience and legal education, 202–3
 - majority opinions, 199
- Pauw and Bickford (eds) (1972–2017), 24n2
- personal property rights: *see* property rights/ vested interests
- Peters (ed) (*The Public Statutes at Large of the United States*), 42
- Peters J
 - admiralty law and, 29n27
 - on Washington J, 79
- Peterson (ed) (1984), 9, 32, 90n20, 191
- Pfister (2016) (*Charting an American Republic*), 7
- Pfister (2016) ("The Legacy of John Jay"), 7
- political parties, emergence of, 24n2, 185
- political tensions: *see also* impeachment;
 - Jefferson (US President, 1801–9); Judiciary Act 1789; Judiciary Act 1801; Judiciary Act 1807; states' rights/state sovereignty
 - Alien & Sedition Acts 1798, political abuse of, 90–1, 185
 - political fluidity, 87–91, 191
 - Republican Congress vs Federalist Supreme Court, 2, 20, 21, 118, 187–8
 - single opinion/consistency of Supreme Court decisions as defence, 11, 14–15
 - shared backgrounds of Supreme Court justices, 57, 108, 186
 - Story J, impact on, 113
- precedent
 - Blackstone on, 57–8
 - circuit opinions, 46–8
 - decision-taking in the absence of, 166
 - English authorities: *see* sources of law, English authorities
 - Hamilton on, 58
 - Johnson J and, 48
 - Kennedy J (*House v Mayo/Hohn*), 58
 - Livingston J and, 98–9, 100, 109, 188
 - Marshall CJ on, 58–99
 - non-binding effect, 46–7
 - reliable law reports, dependence on, 47, 62, 165, 189
 - risks of over-dependence on, 59–60, 85, 172, 184
 - as stabilizing factor, 52, 57–9, 84, 85, 184, 188
 - Story J, 47, 131n99, 138–43, 154–6
 - striking the balance, 58–9
 - Thompson J and, 47–8, 160–1, 165–6, 169, 172, 181, 188
 - Thurgood Marshall CJ (*Payne*), 58
 - precedent (Washington J)
 - collection of, 57
 - Anton v Fisher*, 60
 - Barnes v Billingham*, 43, 60, 61, 83
 - Bobyshall v Oppenheimer*, 60, 83
 - Campbell v Claudius*, 61
 - Craig*, 61
 - Crawford v The William Penn*, 60, 62
 - Croudson v Leonard*, 59–60
 - Ferguson v Zepp*, 60–1, 83
 - Hurst v Hurst*, 61
 - Krumbar v Burt*, 61
 - Ricord v Bettenham*, 60
 - English jurisprudence and, 59–61, 188
 - jurisprudence
 - Bank of the US v Northumberland Union and Columbia Bank*, 46–7
 - Beach v Woodhull*, 62
 - Croudson v Leonard*, 59–60, 83
 - Dartmouth College*, 81
 - Evans v Hettick*, 46, 62
 - Hurst v Hurst*, 63
 - Hylton v Brown*, 64
 - Kirkpatrick v White*, 59, 83
 - Martin v The Bank of the US*, 46, 62
 - Metcalf v Hervey*, 64
 - Mott v Morris*, 63–4, 188
 - Odlin v Insurance Co of Pennsylvania*, 62
 - Ogden v Saunders*, 59–60
 - Schooner Exchange*, 62–3
 - Scriba v Insurance Co of North America*, 59, 83
 - Sturges v Crowninshield*, 59
 - Treadwell v Bladen*, 46, 62
 - US v Bright*, 56–7, 83
 - US v Moses*, 46, 62
 - Walter v Perrine*, 62
 - key feature of judicial record, 46–7, 51–2, 83–5, 184, 188
 - lack of confidence, as solution to, 62–6, 83–4
 - law reports, quality requirement, 62
 - rigidity/caution, 58–9, 184
 - statutory interpretation and, 59
- Presser (1982), 29, 52n3
- Presser (1990), 114, 155
- Preyer (1986), 152
- Prize Court of Appeals in Prize Cases, 131n99:
 - see also* embargo laws; embargo laws, jurisprudence (Story J); embargo laws, jurisprudence (Washington J); marine insurance; maritime, prize and marine insurance, jurisprudence; seamen, protection of

- procedural matters
 certificate of division of opinion, 3, 79, 92,
 131–2, 168, 189, 195–6, 200
 cross-circuit consistency, 169
 death of party, 168–9
 discharge of jury, 168
 dissents: *see* dissents
 efficient despatch of business, 169
 opinions: *see* opinions
 Thompson J and, 168–9
- promissory notes: *see* bills of exchange/
 promissory notes; commercial law/trade
 promotion
- property rights/vested interests
 contracts clause (Constitution I(10)(1)) and,
 66, 67, 69–70, 80–1, 100, 144, 173, 198
 due process (Constitution, Fifth
 amendment), 66
Federalist Paper No. 10 (Madison), 57
- jurisprudence
Bleeker v Bond, 69–70
Charles River Bridge, 66–7
Dartmouth College, 66
Fletcher v Peck, 69–70, 118, 198
Golden v Prince, 70
Gordon v Holiday, 84
Griffith v Tunckhouser, 69, 84
Huidekoper v Burrus, 84
Milligan v Dickson, 84
Torrey v Beardsley, 69, 84
Willis v Bucher, 69, 84
- justices' determination to preserve, 24, 57,
 66, 184
- military bounty-land, 167–8
- public benefit as object, 66–7
- Thompson J and, 164, 166, 167–8
- Washington J and, 66–70, 84
- preservation of titles as a priority, 69
- recognition of public interest obligation, 70
- Quincy (*Figures of the Past*) (1883), 187
- Rakove (ed) (1999), 90
- real property: *see* property rights/vested interests
- Remini (2001), 149
- reports: *see* law reports (as listed at pp 207–8);
 law reports (general)
- Richardson (1905), 28
- Ritz (1990), 42
- Robarge (2000), 9–10
- Roper (1963/1987), 18, 120, 157–8, 159, 162
- Rossiter (2003), 58
- Rustein (2012), 125
- Schwartz (1972), 33
- seamen, protection of
 jurisprudence
Barnewell v Church, 164–5
- Girard v Ware*, 73
Ketland v Lebering, 73
Smith v Jackson, 73
US v Smith, 72–3
- Story J and, 129–30, 192–3
- Thompson J and, 167, 192–3
- Washington J and, 72–3, 192–3
- Sedition Act 1798: *see* Alien & Sedition Acts 1798
- separation of powers: *see also* judicial
 independence
 Jay Courts, 25–6
 judicial vs Congress responsibility for defining
 the law, 82
 New York Council of Revision and, 161, 192
- seriatim opinions: *see* opinions
- Sewall J, 112–13
- Seymour (1992), 179
- Sheppard (ed) (2010), 25, 112
- single opinions: *see* opinions
- slavery/slave trade
 constitutional provisions, 2–3, 177, 178–80
 Constitution IV(1)(3) (recapture of person
 held to service), 149–50
 Thirteenth Amendment (abolition of
 slavery), 179, 193
 as a fact of American life, 2–3, 55–6
 Judson DJ on, 179n93
- legislation
 Fugitive Slave Act 1793, 121, 150, 179, 191
 Slave Trade Act 1794, 78–9, 81–2, 177–8
 Slave Trade Act 1807, 149
 Slave Trade Act 1810, 81–2
- Livingston J on, 107
- Story J on, 4n6, 121, 133–5
- Thompson J on, 177–80
- Washington J on: *see* slavery/slave trade
 (Washington J)
- slavery/slave trade, jurisprudence
The Alexander, 133
The Amistad, 149, 177, 178–9, 181
Butler v Hopper, 79
The Emily and The Caroline, 177–8
Fales v Mayberry, 133
The Joseph Segunda, 107
La Jeune Eugenie, 134
Lee v Lee, 178
McCutchen v Marshall, 179
Re Martin, 179–80
The Plattsburgh, 149
Prigg, 121, 149–50, 191
Ex parte Simmons, 79
Tryphenia v Harrison, 78–9
- slavery/slave trade (Washington J), 54–6, 78–9,
 81–2
- respect for rights of owners of slaves already
 in the US, 56, 78–9, 85, 191
- Snell (2007), 131
- sources of law: *see also* law reports (general)

- absence of precedent, 42: *see also* precedent
 circuit opinions, xi, xiii, 1, 2, 5, 46–8
 constitutional gap/paucity, xiii, 41–2, 49–50, 183
- English authorities: *see also* Blackstone's
Commentaries; common law (state/
 English); common law (state/English),
 jurisprudence; precedent (Washington J),
 English jurisprudence and; Tucker's
Blackstone
 common law, 20, 23, 37, 44–5, 49–50, 93,
 112–13, 165–6, 184, 191–2
 English statutory law, 44, 46, 61
 Jefferson on, 117
 Livingston J on, 44, 109
 as means of clarifying American law
 (Story), 21, 111, 154, 184
 Story on, 21, 45–6, 111, 112–13, 127, 131,
 135–6, 151–3, 184, 191–2
 Thompson J on, 46, 163, 165–6, 171–2
- federal statutes, 23
 New York Constitution 1777, 93
 Story J, 45–6, 135–6, 165–6
 Story J on, 21, 45–6, 112–13, 127, 135–6,
 191–2
 Story J's emphasis on the importance of, 132
 Supreme Court opinions, paucity, 1, 3, 5, 11,
 20, 49–50, 184
 'the laws of the several states' (Judiciary
 Act 1789, s 34), 42, 43–4
 uniformity of decision making,
 importance to, 23
- sovereignty of states, 2–3, 20, 21–2, 24, 172
Augusta Chronicle, 35–7
 Spaeth and Segal (1999), 58
 Stahr (2005), 91
- state sovereignty: *see* states' rights/state
 sovereignty
- states' rights/state sovereignty: *see also* federal
 system of justice
 Anti-Federalists' opposition to interference, 3,
 23, 24, 35–6, 48–9
 bankruptcy/debt, 47, 59, 82, 100–1
 Constitution I(8), 100, 144–5, 171
 divergence between state and federal law,
 effect, 171–2
 failure of judicial appointees to live up to
 Republican presidents' expectations, 90,
 100, 101, 186
 striking a difficult balance, 20, 21, 24, 100, 172
 taxation powers, 144–5, 174–5
- states' rights/state sovereignty (Johnson J)
 failure to live up to Republican presidential
 expectations, 90
 jurisprudence
Adams v Story, 101
Ogden v Saunders, 101
Sturges v Crowninshield, 100–1
- states' rights/state sovereignty (Livingston J)
 balancing act, 191
 failure to live up to Republican presidential
 expectations, 90, 100, 101, 186
 jurisprudence
Adams v Story, 47, 100
Fisher v Harnden, 100
Sturges v Crowninshield, 100–1
- states' rights/state sovereignty (Marshall CJ),
 jurisprudence, *Sturges v Crowninshield*, 100–1
- states' rights/state sovereignty (Story J), 136,
 144–6
 failure to live up to Republican presidential
 expectations, 90, 186
 jurisprudence
Bell v Morrison, 136
Dartmouth College, 144
Harding v Wheaton, 123
McCulloch v Maryland, 144–5
Swift v Tyson, 152–3
- states' rights/state sovereignty (Thompson J)
 attitude as New York Supreme Court Justice,
 157, 171–5
 attitude towards Marshall CJ's federalist
 centralism, 158–9
 disposition to uphold state laws/sovereignty,
 21–2, 160–1, 180, 192
 failure to live up to Republican presidential
 expectations, 90, 186
 jurisprudence
Brown v Maryland, 173–4
Gibbons v Ogden, 172
Jeremiah Ferguson, 173
Livingston v Van Ingen, 172
Mason v Haile, 174
Ogden v Saunders, 173
Osborn v Bank of the US, 174–5
The Robert Fulton, 173
Ward v Arrendo, 173
Wheaton v Peters, 171–2
- 'states' rights mercantilism ... with a
 humanitarian overlay', 171–2
- states' rights/state sovereignty (Washington J),
 73–7
 jurisprudence
Corfield v Coryell, 76–7
US v Bright, 74–5
US v Lowry, 75
- statutory interpretation
 consistency of interpretation, importance,
 47–8, 169
 jurisprudence, *Mann*, 124
 legislators' intention, role, 161–2
 Spencer J and, 161–2
 Story J and, 124–5, 136, 147
 strict interpretation/precedent, 59, 162–4
 Thompson J and, 161, 347–8
 Washington J and, 59, 64

- Stockdale and Holland (2007), 53n5
- Stonier (1998), 18, 64–5
- Story J (1811–45), legal attitudes, xi, 147–9, 175n81, 176, 189
- account/evaluation of contribution, 125–33
 - admiralty law: *see* admiralty law, Story J; embargo laws, jurisprudence (Story J)
 - appeals from district courts, 122
 - bankruptcy/debt, 98, 101, 115, 144, 158n8
 - bills of exchange/promissory notes, 118, 147, 150
 - commercial law: *see* commercial law/trade promotion (Story J)
 - criminal law: *see* criminal law (Story J)
 - diversity jurisdiction, 21, 41, 152–3, 154, 192
 - federal law supremacy, 143–7: *see also* federal law, supremacy of (including in particular Story-related jurisprudence)
 - grand jury charge, 35n60
 - jury system, 132–3
 - key features, 3
 - marine insurance, 122, 130–2, 154
 - Native American rights, xi, 175n81, 176, 189
 - participation in appeal from case in which he had previously participated, 146
 - patents, 133
 - seamen
 - jurisdiction over crimes on board ship, 128–9
 - protection of, 129–30, 192–3
 - slavery/slave trading, 4n6, 121, 133–5
 - sources of law
 - emphasis on importance of, 132
 - English authorities/English common law, 21, 45–6, 111, 112–13, 127, 135–6, 151–4, 191–2
 - state laws/precedent, 43–4
 - states' right: *see* states' rights/state sovereignty (Story J)
 - statutory interpretation, 136, 147
 - uniformity/consistency/dependence on precedent, 47, 138–43, 154–6
- Story J (1811–45), life and career
- admittance to the Bar (1801), 113
 - appointment to the Supreme Court (1811), 118
 - independence, 115–17
 - meticulous professionalism, 111, 114, 118
 - nationalism, 126
- characteristics, capacity to carry a huge workload, 142–3
- circuit riding, 26n14
- evaluation, 153–6
- Kent J, 155
 - scholars' assessment, 119–20
- Jefferson's hostility towards, 116, 117
- judicial experience and legal education, 8, 111–13, 204
- judicial record (circuit court), 121–5
- certificates of division of opinion, 134, 197
 - circuit riding demands, 122
 - inheritance of backlog, 122–3
 - specialisms, 122
 - Story's attachment to the circuit court, 121–2
- judicial record (Supreme Court)
- dissents (including *Cherokee Nation v Georgia*), xi, 127, 139, 153–4, 175, 176, 189
 - majority opinions, 199
 - reversals, 153–4, 197
 - tally of Marshall Court opinions, 137–8
- Kent J and, 155–6
- legal apprenticeship
- Putnam J, 113
 - Sewall J, 112–13
- letters to Jay PJ, 13, 48, 119, 123, 137, 138
- Livingston J and, 98, 108
- Marshall CJ's relationship with, 10, 12, 32, 114, 138, 139–42, 187
- opinions other than on admiralty law, 133
- political affiliations
- nationalism, 126, 145
 - Republican beliefs, 113, 114
 - support for strong federal state, 114–18, 143–7
 - tension between, 115–18
- practicality and efficiency, 122–5
- impatience with statutory drafting, 124–5
- religious beliefs, 134–5
- views on
- Blackstone's Commentaries*, 112–13
 - Coke on Littleton*, 112
 - fellow justices, 119, 137
- Washington, cooperation with, 138–43
- working methods
- certificate of division of opinion as means to secure definitive opinion, 136
 - drafting practice, 132n105
 - Juniore ad Labores*, 138
 - willingness to seek advice, 135–6
- Story J (writings)
- Abbott on Shipping*, 118
 - Autobiography*, 111, 113, 150
 - Chitty*, 118, 150
 - Commentaries on*, 155
 - Agency and Maritime Jurisprudence*, 150–1
 - Conflict of Laws*, 150–1
 - Equity Jurisprudence*, 150–1
 - Equity Pleadings*, 150–1
 - Promissory Notes*, 150–1
 - the Constitution of the United States*, 17, 26n14, 38, 119–20, 150–1
 - the Law of Nations*, 150–1
 - Constitutional Class Book*, 120

- Discourse on Past History, Present State & Future Prospects of Law*, 150–1
- Encyclopaedia Americana* essays, 120
- A Familiar Exposition of the Constitution*, 120
- Kent J's *Commentaries* compared, 155
- Selection of Pleadings in Civil Actions*, 114
- Story, WW (ed) (*Life and Letters*) (1851), 4, 12, 17, 51, 80, 110–56 *passim*, 192
- Story, WW (ed) (*Miscellaneous Writings of Joseph Story*) (1852), 17, 112n3, 113, 119, 133, 152
- Supreme Court justices: *see also* appeals, circuit court to Supreme Court; circuit courts; opinions; and *under individual justices*
- judicial experience and legal education, 44, 202–5
 - quality, 8, 10
 - salaries, 115
 - shared backgrounds, 44, 57, 108, 186
 - small workload/delivered opinions, 1, 3, 5, 11, 20, 49–50, 184
- Surrency (1981), 17n66, 97
- Surrency (1996), 99
- Surrency (2002), 33
- Sutherland (1967), 112, 150
- Tachau (1978), x–xi, xii
- Taney J (successor to Marshall CJ), 13
- Charles River Bridge*, 67
 - Story J and, 140
 - Thompson J and, 169, 174
- Thompson J (1823–43), legal attitudes, xii
- bills of exchange/promissory notes, 163–4, 166, 170, 181, 190
 - caveat emptor*, 163, 170, 181
 - certainty of the law, 164, 169, 170
 - commercial law/trade promotion: *see* commercial law/trade promotion (Thompson J)
 - conservatism/preservation of the *status quo*, 161, 168, 181, 191
 - contractual law, 163–4
 - cross-circuit consistency, 169
 - decision-taking in the absence of precedent, 166
 - jury system, 164–5, 168
 - key features, 3, 158–9, 180–1
 - marine insurance, 164
 - Native American rights (*Cherokee Nation*), 47, 175–7: *see also* Native American rights
 - New York 'hard law', 159–66
 - personal liability for public contract, 162–3
 - precedent, 160, 165–6, 169, 181, 188
 - procedural matters, 168–9
 - property rights/vested interests, 164, 166, 167–8
 - seamen, protection of, 167, 192–3
 - separation of powers, 161, 192
 - slavery/slave trade, 177–80
 - sources of law
 - circuit opinions, 47–8
 - English authorities, 46, 163, 165–6
 - state laws/precedent, 43
 - speedy resolution of disputes, 164
 - states' rights: *see* states' rights/state sovereignty (Thompson J)
 - statutory interpretation, 47–8, 161–3
- Thompson J (1823–43), life and career
- admiralty law, 46, 137
 - as Associate/Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court (1802–18), 159–66
 - dissents (including *Cherokee Nation v Georgia*), 12, 47, 158–9, 171–2, 173–4, 175–80, 182, 192
 - drafting practice, 175–6
 - judicial experience and legal education, 166, 167, 169–71, 181–2, 188, 204
 - as Justice of the Supreme Court (1823–43), 166–80
 - Kent J and, 160, 173, 204
 - legal appointments, 159–60
 - as Naval Secretary, 159–60
 - note-taking skills, 160
 - political aspirations, 157–8
 - record of decisions, 166–7
 - scholars' assessment of performance as judge, 158–9
 - Story J, Thompson's respect for, 169
 - Taney J and, 169, 174
- Thorp et al (1942), 116
- Todd J, life and career
- circuit riding, xii
 - judicial experience and legal education, 203–4
 - judicial record, 8, 10, 15, 16, 40, 46–7, 117, 137, 158, 172, 190
 - appeals/divisions of opinion., 197
 - majority opinions, 200
- Trading with the Enemy Act 1812: *see* embargo laws
- Treaty of Holston (1791), 176
- Treaty of Hopewell (1785), 176
- Trimble J, judicial experience and legal education, 204
- Tucker's *Blackstone*, 1, 20n78, 155: *see also* Blackstone's *Commentaries*
- Turner, Way and Maveety, 14
- uniformity/consistency, need for/aids to achieving
- appeals, 2
 - certificate of division of opinion, 3, 135, 189
 - criminal law: *see* criminal law
 - exchanges of experience and advice between justices on circuit, 37, 48, 49–50, 138–43
 - importance for the survival of the federal judicial system, 26, 37
 - judicial review and, 2
 - Judiciary Act 1789, 46

- law reports, 189
 Livingston J and, 47
 Marshall CJ and, 26, 46–7, 138–43, 154–5
 non-binding precedent, 46–8: *see also* precedent
 sources of law including English common law,
 20, 23, 37, 46, 49: *see also* sources of law
 Story J and, 47, 138–43, 154–6
Martin v Hunter's Lessee, 141
 Thompson J and, 47–8
 Washington J and, 46–7, 138–43, 154–5
 Urofsky and Finkelman (2011), 25, 39
- Van Hook (2015), 7n20, 39
 vested interests: *see* property rights/vested interests
- Wallace, AFC (1999), 29n29
 War of 1812, 2, 19, 74, 116–17, 153–4, 161, 193
 Warren (1911), xiin7, 1n1, 29n27, 98n48
 Warren (1926), 1n1, 29, 98
 Warren (1941), 121
 Washington J (1803–23), legal attitudes: *see also*
 seamen, protection of
 admiralty law, 59–60, 63, 74–5, 77–8, 190
 appointment to the Supreme Court, 56–7
 bankruptcy/debt, 59, 61, 64, 67, 80, 82, 158n8
 bills of exchange/promissory notes, 70–1, 84
 constitutional rights and freedoms, 76
 constitutionality of Supreme Court justices as
 circuit court judges, 187
 embargo laws, 77–8: *see also* embargo laws,
 jurisprudence (Washington J)
 jury system, 65–6, 83, 95
 key features, 3
 law reports, importance, 62
 marine insurance, 67, 71–2, 77, 80, 84
 patents, 46, 61–2, 67–8, 69, 80, 82
 precedent: *see* precedent (Washington J)
 property rights/vested interests, 66–70, 84
 preservation of titles as a priority, 69
 Washington J and, recognition of public
 interest obligation, 70
 seamen, protection of, 72–3, 192–3
 slavery/slave trade: *see* slavery/slave trade
 (Washington J)
 sources of law
 English authorities, 59–61, 64
 state laws/precedent, 43
 states' rights: *see* states' rights/state sovereignty
 (Washington J)
 statutory interpretation, 64
 uniformity/consistency/dependence on
 precedent, 46–7
- Washington J (1803–23), life and career
 characteristics
 conservatism/preservation of the *status quo*,
 57, 59–60, 69, 84
 lack of confidence/caution, 18, 51, 59, 62–6,
 76, 83, 93–4, 190
 plaintiff discourse, 98
 religious beliefs, 54–5
 willingness to seek advice, 79, 135–6,
 138–43
 circuit riding, 51–2
 death, 85
 family background and connections, 5257
 as Federalist, 51
 financial difficulties, 54
 Jefferson J and, 53
 judicial experience and legal education,
 80, 203
 education, 52
 study with Wilson J, 53
 Third Circuit experience (1803–29), 8,
 51–2, 80
 judicial record
 certificates of division of opinion, 79, 197
 evaluation, 83–5
 majority opinions, 80, 199
 a reluctant dissenter, 59, 80–1
 reversals, 63
 subject matter of opinions, 67, 77
 Supreme Court opinions, 17, 80, 199
 Marshall CJ and, 52–3
 Peters J on, 79
 specialisms (chancery and land disputes),
 53–4
 Story J, relationship with, 51, 59–60, 135–6,
 138–43
 writings
Life of George Washington, 52–3
Virginia Court of Appeals Reports, 53
 Washington (US President, 1789–97)
 appointment of justices, 24–5
 from different states/regional diversity,
 25, 49
 political role of Supreme Court and, 25
 Watts (1987), 24
 Wayne J, life and career, judicial experience and
 legal education, 204–5
 Weisenburger (1937), 19, 120
 Wexler (2006), 6, 36
 Wheelan (2005), 26
 Wheeler (1973), 26
 White (1988/2010), 1n1, 16n61, 87, 157–8, 189,
 201, 234
 White (2012), 120–1
 Wilson J, life and career
 appointment as associate justice, 25
 on circuit riding, 5–6, 36
 debt and early death, 25n10
 enforcement of payment to British subjects, 38
 grand jury charge, 34–5
 Washington J and, 53
 Winsor (ed), 123n56
 Wood (2007), 25, 106, 186
 writ of error, 2, 93, 122, 124, 143, 201
- Zobel (1989), 118, 122, 132

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