History of New Jersey Supreme Court

The Supreme Court held its first session under the 1947 constitution on Sept. 15, 1948. Under the previous constitution, ratified in 1844, the Court of Errors and Appeals was the highest court in the state. The name of the court was derived from its function of hearing appeals and correcting previous courts’ errors in judgment. The justices of that court also presided over the lower courts. Each court had its own rules and procedures, and the jurisdictions were ambiguous and often overlapped. Litigants often were required to have their disputes resolved in more than one court.

As New Jersey’s population grew and its primarily agrarian society became more industrialized, the legal system no longer met the needs of the citizens and businesses it served. The realization of the new constitution was the culmination of a 17-year battle that pitted the state and county bar associations, the majority of sitting judges and powerful Jersey City Mayor Frank Hague against Arthur T. Vanderbilt, the first chief justice under the 1947 constitution, and others who brought about the constitutional convention and the new document.

The 1947 constitution consolidated 17 courts into five, abolished overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions and revised an awkward appeals process. Judges were granted tenure after an initial term, and a retirement age of 70 was established. The 1947 constitution also gave the chief justice sole authority over the administration of the state’s courts and the Supreme Court oversight over the admission to the practice of law and attorney discipline. It laid out the appellate process, the prerequisites for becoming a judge and the position of administrative director of the courts.

Former Chief Justices

Eight chief justices have served under the 1947 constitution. First located in the Statehouse Annex, the Supreme Court moved to the Richard J. Hughes Justice Complex in Trenton in 1981.

- James R. Zazzali (10/26/06-6/17/07)
- Deborah T. Poritz (7/10/96-10/25/06)
- Robert N. Wilentz (8/10/79-6/30/96)
- Richard J. Hughes (12/18/73-8/09/79)
- Pierre P. Garven (9/1/73-10/19/73)
- Joseph Weintraub (8/20/57-8/31/73)
- Arthur T. Vanderbilt (9/15/48-6/16/57)

Richard J. Hughes
Justice Complex

The Justice Complex is named for Richard J. Hughes (1909-1992), the only person in the history of New Jersey to serve as both governor (1962-1970) and chief justice (1973-1980).

Completed in 1982, the complex houses the New Jersey Supreme Court, the Administrative Office of the Courts and the Office of the Public Defender in the north wing, and the New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety in the west wing.

The building is arranged in a V-shape, connected to a cube-shaped “jewel” via bridges on the fourth, fifth, seventh and eighth floors. The jewel is occupied by the fourth floor conference center, the fifth floor Appellate Division courtroom, the seventh floor Tax Court courtroom and the Supreme Court courtroom on the eighth floor.

The 10,800-square-foot Supreme Court courtroom features a 21-foot tall ceiling, sloping to 18 feet in the center, a 22.5-foot high skylight, polished walls fashioned from Vermont marble and etched glass created by glass artist Benoit Gilsoul. The bench, counsel’s tables and podium were crafted from African mahogany veneer.

The artwork in the Justice Complex includes three abstract works by Beverly Pepper and life-like sculptures created by J. Seward Johnson.
Chief Justice

Chief Justice Stuart Rabner was sworn in on June 29, 2007. A graduate of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and Harvard School of Law, he joined the U.S. Attorney’s Office, where he worked until he was named chief counsel to Gov. Jon Corzine in January 2006. He was named New Jersey attorney general in September 2006 and served in that position until his nomination to the court.

Associate Justices

Associate Justice Jaynee LaVecchia was sworn in on Feb. 1, 2000. A graduate of Douglass College and Rutgers School of Law, Justice LaVecchia worked in private practice and as a deputy attorney general early in her career. She was named director of the Division of Law within the Department of Law and Public Safety in 1984. From 1989 to 1994, she served as director and chief administrative law judge in the Office of Administrative Law. She also served as deputy chief counsel to Gov. Thomas H. Kean. She was named commissioner of the Department of Banking and Insurance in 1998, and served in that role until her appointment to the court.

Associate Justice Barry T. Albin was sworn in on Sept. 18, 2002. Justice Albin earned degrees from Rutgers College and Cornell Law School before serving as a deputy attorney general in the appellate section of the Division of Criminal Justice. He later served as an assistant prosecutor in Middlesex and Passaic counties before entering private practice.

Associate Justice Anne M. Patterson was sworn in on Sept. 1, 2011. A graduate of Dartmouth College and Cornell Law School, Justice Patterson worked in private practice and as a deputy attorney general earlier in her career. She reentered private practice before she was nominated to the court.

Associate Justice Faustino J. Fernandez-Vina was sworn in on Nov. 19, 2013. A graduate of Widener University and Rutgers University School of Law-Camden, Justice Fernandez-Vina was in private practice before he was appointed to the Superior Court bench on July 16, 2004. He first sat in the civil division of the Camden Vicinage, moved to the family division in 2006 and was named presiding judge of the civil division on Feb. 1, 2007. He was named assignment judge of the Camden Vicinage on Jan. 11, 2012.

Associate Justice Lee A. Solomon was sworn in on June 19, 2014. He received his bachelor’s degree from Muhlenberg College and his law degree from Widener University School of Law. He served as an elected official and as deputy U.S. Attorney before he was appointed to the bench in January 2006. He served in the Camden Vicinage for two years each in the family and criminal divisions. He left the bench to lead the Board of Public Utilities until 2011, when he was nominated to return to the bench in Camden. He was named assignment judge the following November. Justice Solomon previously served as Camden County prosecutor for five years and acting prosecutor for one year.

Associate Justice Walter F. Timpone was sworn in on May 2, 2016. Justice Timpone received a bachelor’s degree from St. Francis College in New York and a master’s degree in special education from New York University. He worked as a special education teacher before earning his law degree from Seton Hall University School of Law in 1979. Justice Timpone worked in private practice before joining the U.S. Attorney’s Office in 1984, where he served as chief of special prosecutions. Justice Timpone returned to private practice in 1995 and served as a commissioner on the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission from 2010 to 2016.

Associate Justice William J. Brennan Jr. is the only New Jersey Supreme Court associate justice to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court under the 1947 constitution. President Dwight D. Eisenhower named him to the court in 1956, and he served until retiring in 1990 at the age of 91.

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