



# Marbury v. Madison Case Brief Summary

Summary of Marbury v. Madison  
5 U.S. 137, 1 Cranch 137, 2 L. Ed. 60 (1803).

## Facts

On his last day in office, President John Adams named forty-two justices of the peace and sixteen new circuit court justices for the District of Columbia under the Organic Act.

The Organic Act was an attempt by the Federalists to take control of the federal judiciary before Thomas Jefferson took office.

The commissions were signed by President Adams and sealed by acting Secretary of State John Marshall (who later became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and author of this opinion), but they were not delivered before the expiration of Adams's term as president.

Thomas Jefferson refused to honor the commissions, claiming that they were invalid because they had not been delivered by the end of Adams's term.

William Marbury (The Plaintiff) was an intended recipient of an appointment as justice of the peace. Marbury applied directly to the Supreme Court of the United States for a writ of mandamus to compel Jefferson's Secretary of State, James Madison (Defendant), to deliver the commissions.

The Judiciary Act of 1789 had granted the Supreme Court original jurisdiction to issue writs of mandamus" to any courts appointed, or persons holding office, under the authority of the United States."

## Issues

- Does Marbury have a right to the commission?
- Does the law grant Marbury a remedy?
- Does the Supreme Court have the authority to review acts of Congress and determine whether they are unconstitutional and thus void?
- Can Congress expand the scope of the Supreme Court's original jurisdiction beyond what is specified in Article III of the Constitution?
- Does the Supreme Court have original jurisdiction to issue writs of mandamus?

## Holding and Rule

(Opinion written by Chief Justice John Marshall)

- Yes. Marbury has a right to the commission.

- The order granting the commission takes effect when the Executive's constitutional power of appointment has been exercised, and the power has been exercised when the last act required from the person possessing the power has been performed.
- The grant of the commission to Marbury became effective when signed by President Adams.
- Yes. The law grants Marbury a remedy.
- The very essence of civil liberty certainly consists in the right of every individual to claim the protection of the laws whenever he receives an injury.
- One of the first duties of government is to afford that protection.
- Where a specific duty is assigned by law, and individual rights depend upon the performance of that duty, the individual who considers himself injured has a right to resort to the law for a remedy.
- The President, by signing the commission, appointed Marbury a justice of the peace in the District of Columbia.
- The seal of the United States, affixed thereto by the Secretary of State, is conclusive testimony of the verity of the signature, and of the completion of the appointment.
- Having this legal right to the office, he has a consequent right to the commission, a refusal to deliver which is a plain violation of that right for which the laws of the country afford him a remedy.
- Yes. The Supreme Court has the authority to review acts of Congress and determine whether they are unconstitutional and thus void.
- It is emphatically the duty of the Judicial Department to say what the law is.
- Those who apply the rule to particular cases must, of necessity, expound and interpret the rule.
- If two laws conflict with each other, the Court must decide on the operation of each.
- If courts are to regard the Constitution, and the Constitution is superior to any ordinary act of the legislature, the Constitution, and not such ordinary act, must govern the case to which they both apply.

## Holding and Rule Continued

- No. Congress cannot expand the scope of the Supreme Court's original jurisdiction beyond that specified in Article III of the Constitution.
  - The Constitution states that "the Supreme Court shall have original jurisdiction in all cases affecting ambassadors, other public ministers and consuls, and those in which a state shall be a party.
  - In all other cases, the Supreme Court shall have appellate jurisdiction.
  - If it had been intended to leave it in the discretion of the Legislature to apportion the judicial power between the Supreme and inferior courts according to the will of that body, this section is mere surplusage and is entirely without meaning.
  - If Congress remains at liberty to give this court appellate jurisdiction where the Constitution has declared their jurisdiction shall be original, and original jurisdiction where the Constitution has declared it shall be appellate, the distribution of jurisdiction made in the Constitution, is form without substance.
- No. The Supreme Court does not have original jurisdiction to issue writs of mandamus.
  - To enable this court then to issue a mandamus, it must be shown to be an exercise of appellate jurisdiction, or to be necessary to enable them to exercise appellate jurisdiction.
  - It is the essential criterion of appellate jurisdiction that it revises and corrects the proceedings in a cause already instituted, and does not create that case.
  - Although, therefore, a mandamus may be directed to courts, yet to issue such a writ to an officer for the delivery of a paper is, in effect, the same as to sustain an original action for that paper, and is therefore a matter of original jurisdiction.

## Disposition

- Application for writ of mandamus denied.
- Marbury doesn't get the commission.
- But the Supreme Court of the United States does get the power of judicial review.
- See Ex Parte McCordle for a constitutional law case brief holding that that the Constitution gives Congress the express power to make exceptions to the Supreme Court's appellate jurisdiction.