

1-1-1989

The Bicentennial of the Judiciary Act of 1789

United States National Archives and Records Administration

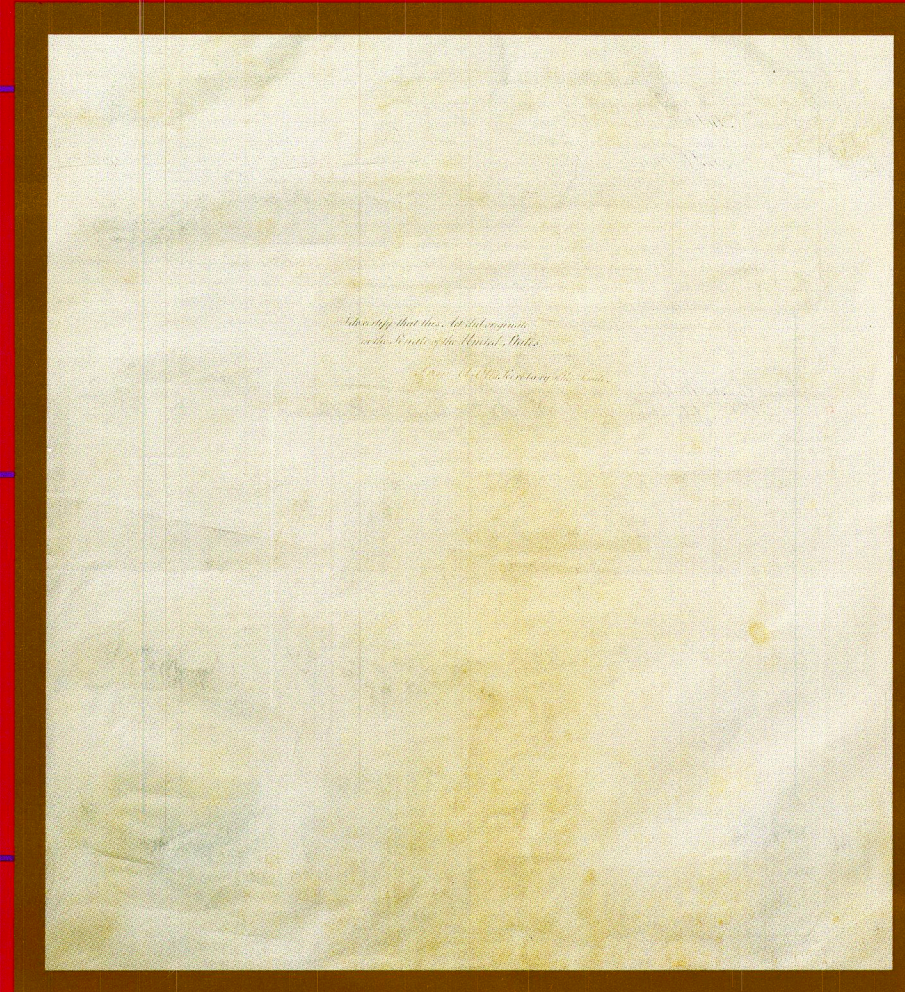
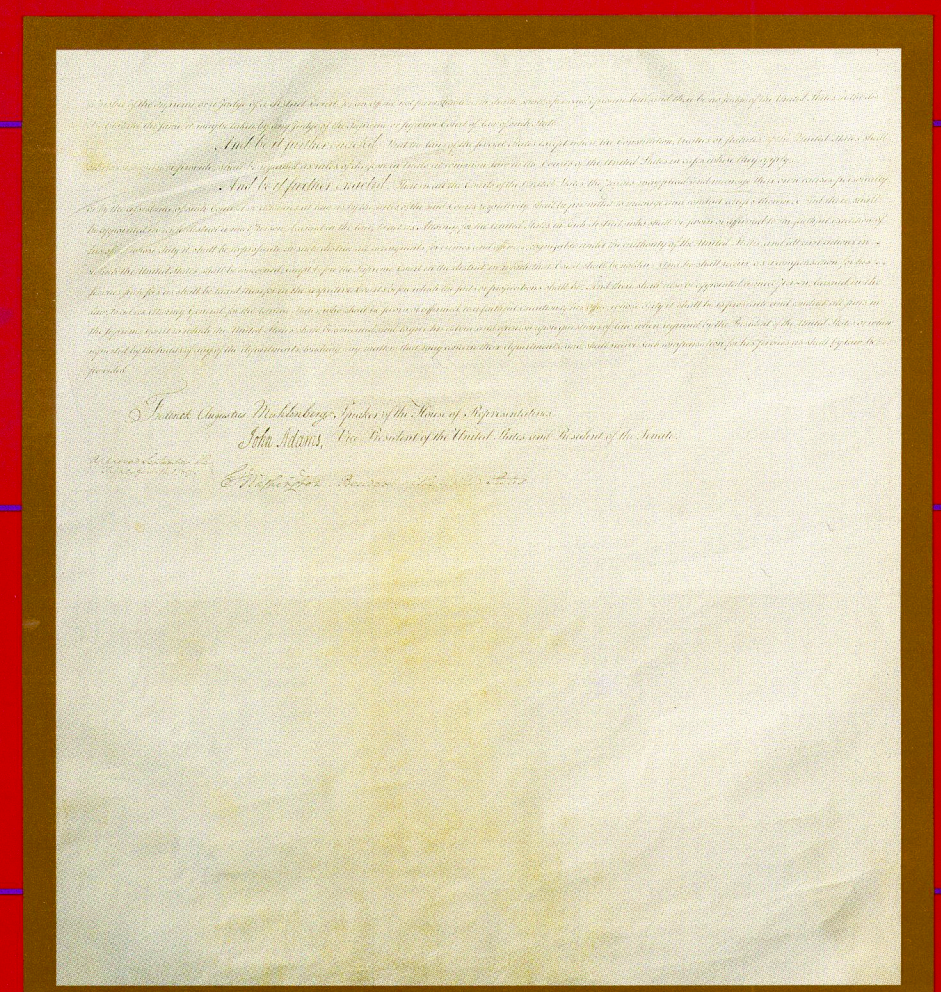
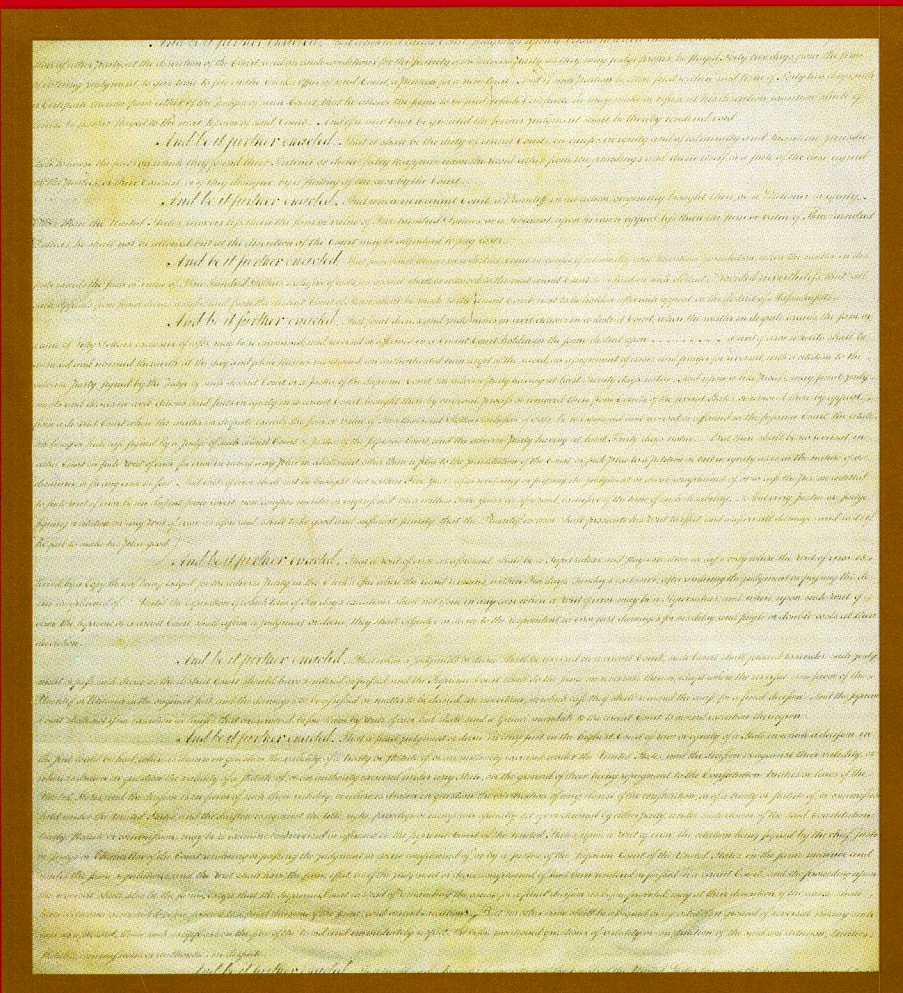
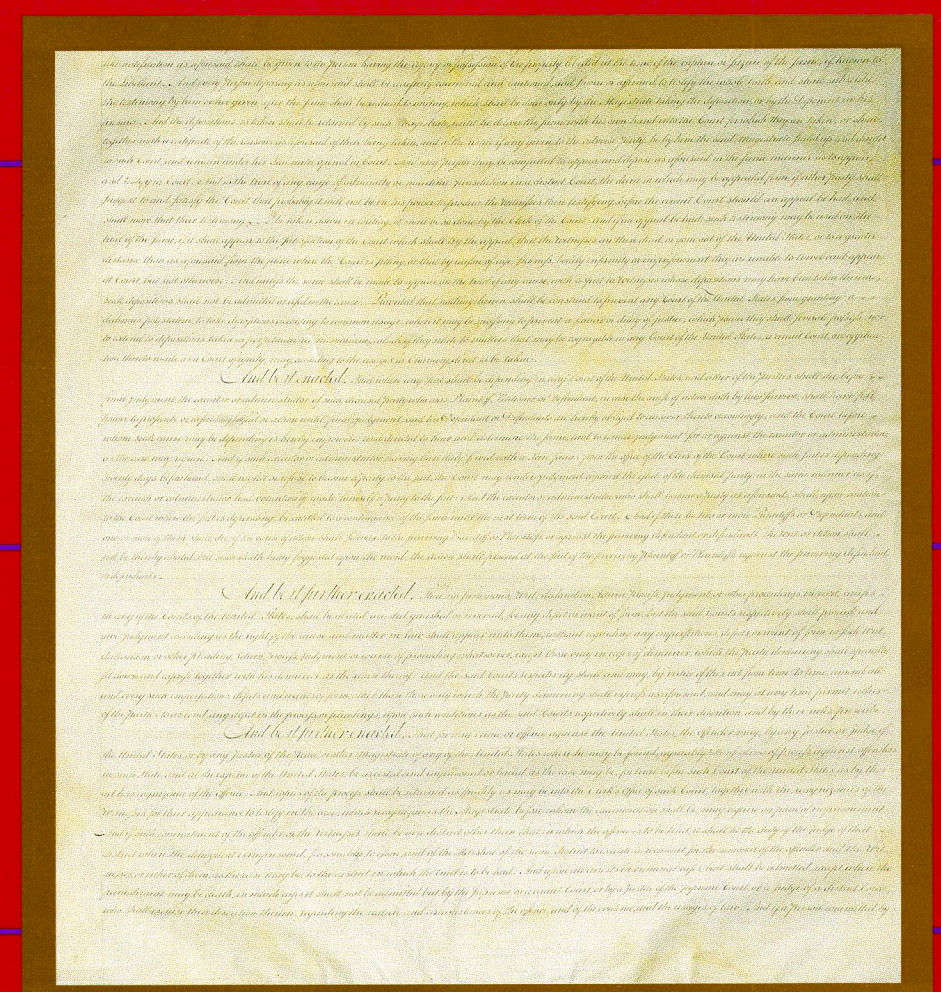
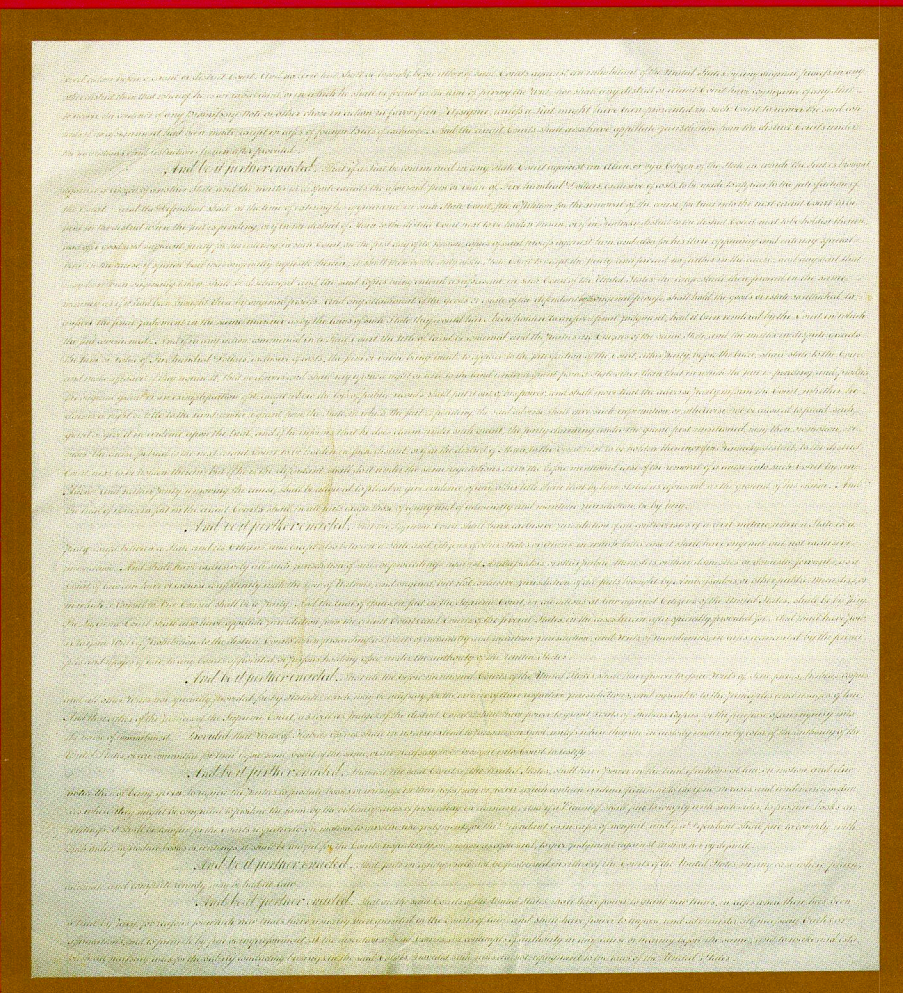
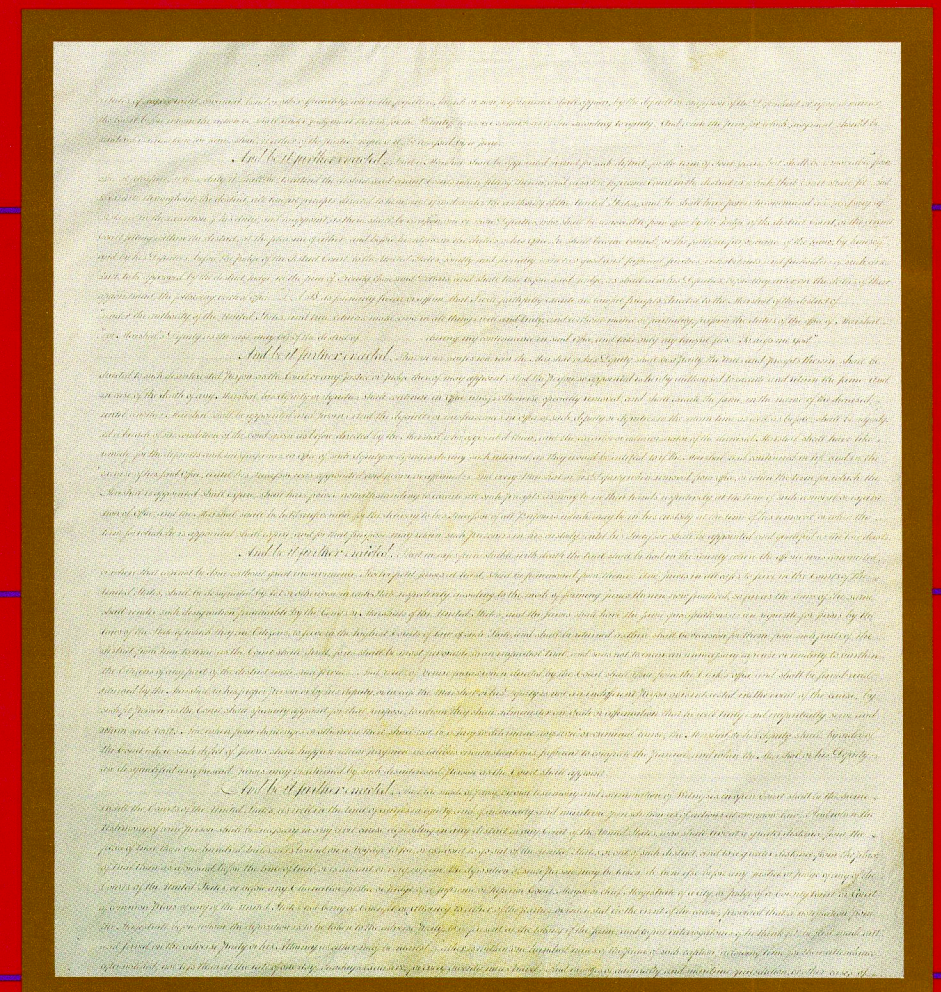
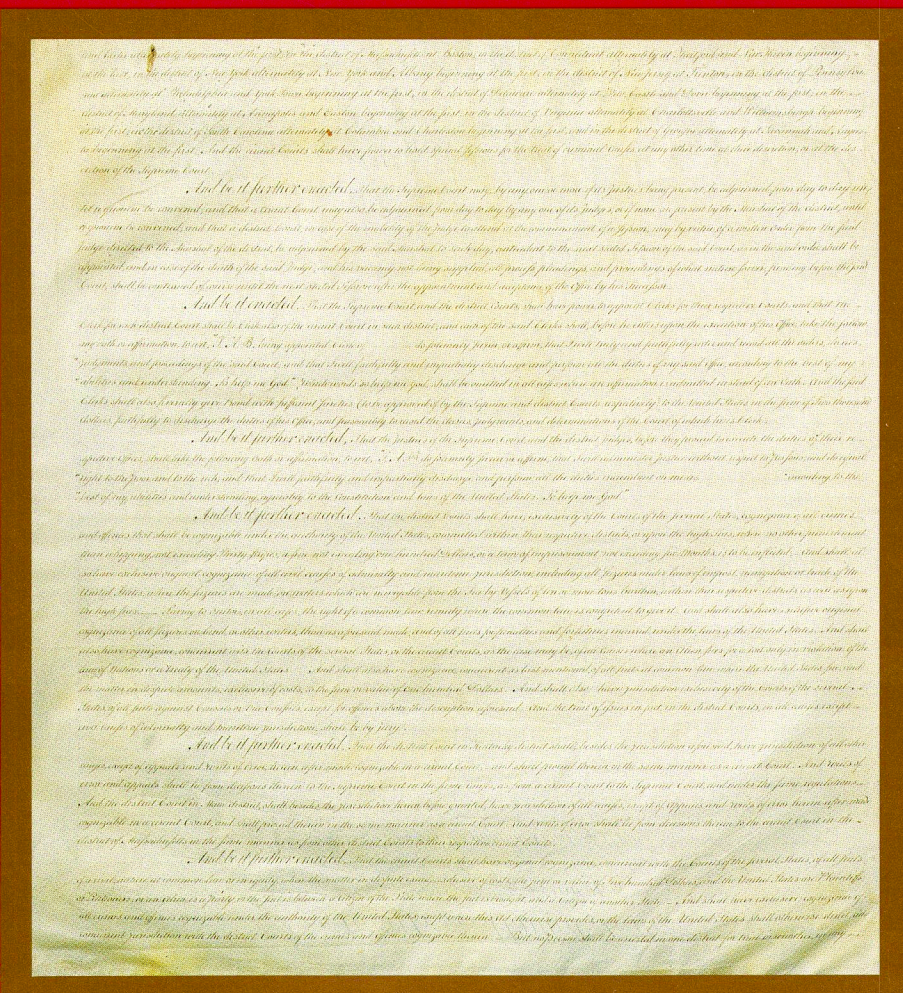
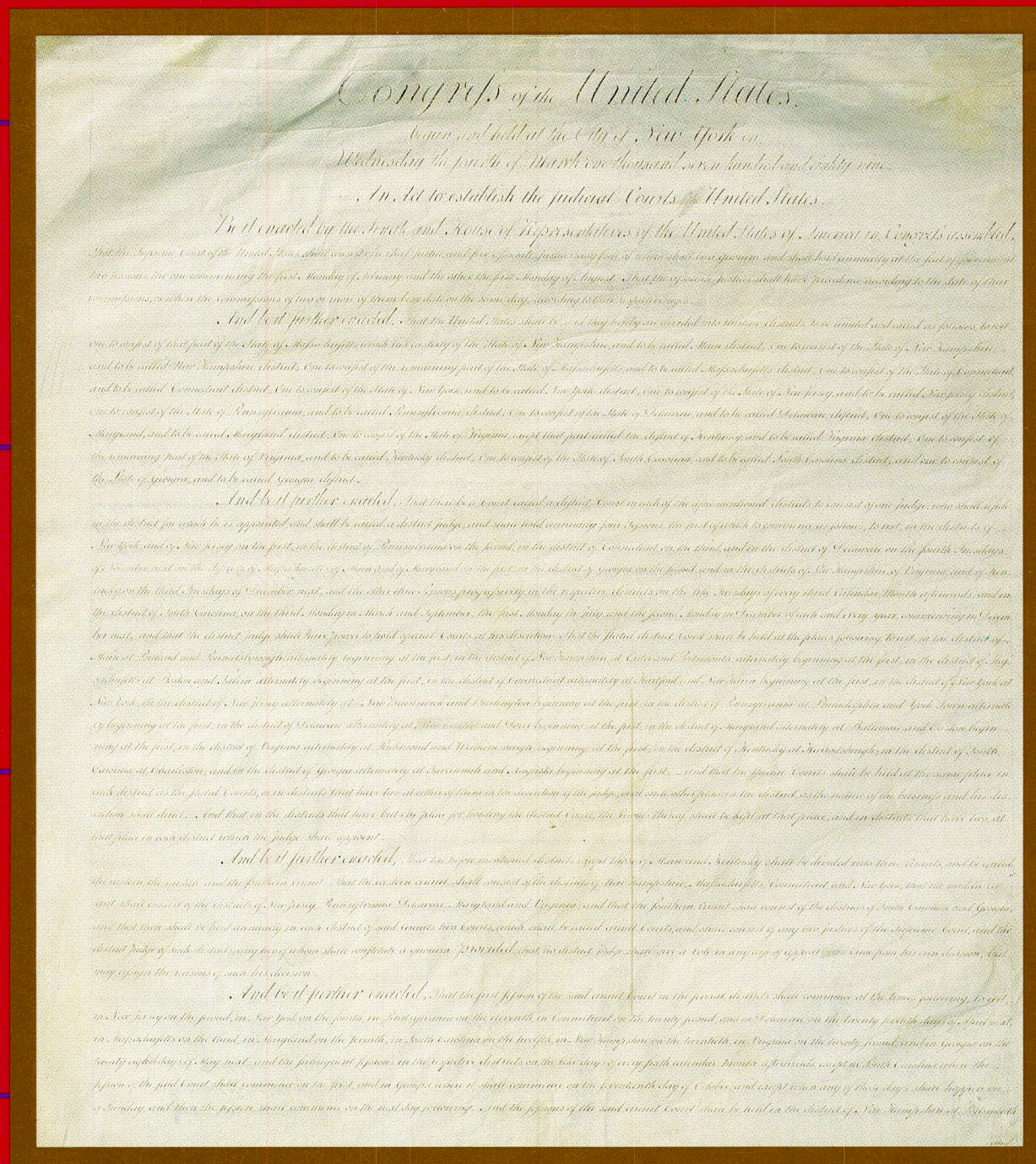
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AND JUSTICE FOR ALL!



In 1789 President George Washington signed the first judiciary act, which established the national court system. Those who had drafted the U.S. Constitution two years earlier had been mindful of the tyranny of British justice in colonial America. The legal fate of the colonists had rested largely in the hands of a colonial governor, who was a loyal agent of the Crown. To guard against this kind of autocratic power, the framers provided for an independent judicial branch, separate from the executive branch.

But the U.S. Constitution said little about the composition of the judicial branch, allowing Congress to design its specific features. The judiciary act recommended by the Committee on the Judiciary and approved by the First Congress and President Washington made those specific arrangements. The first federal court system had thirteen district courts, for minor trials; three circuit courts, for major trials; and the Supreme Court, the nation's highest court. This system has evolved into the federal judiciary that serves Americans today.

Federal courts now have jurisdiction—the power to decide cases—when the U.S. Constitution or federal laws are involved, or when the government is a party to a case. Federal courts also have jurisdiction in other circumstances, such as cases involving citizens of different states.

This poster exhibit features ten federal court cases, drawn from over 200 years of United States history, which represent major areas of federal court jurisdiction at the trial and appeals court level. The authority of federal courts to grant immigrants United States citizenship is also represented.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in cooperation with federal courts, assures that historically significant federal court records are kept forever as part of the National Archives of the United States. Original court documents, some of which are shown on these posters in facsimile form, are preserved and made available for research at the eleven regional archives throughout the United States and at NARA facilities in the Washington, D.C., area.

"An Act to establish the Judicial Courts of the United States," September 24, 1789.
8 pages, approx. 30 x 27 inches.
National Archives, General Records of the U. S. Government

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