



Tennessee Court System Structural Milestones

Tennessee joins the Union on June 1, 1796. The first constitution does not include a judicial branch, but allows the legislature to create courts. The three-person Superior Court is both a trial and appellate court.



Andrew Jackson is appointed and confirmed to the Superior Court. Jackson would serve on the Court until 1804.

The Constitution of 1835 establishes the Judiciary as a coequal branch of government, consisting of a three-person Supreme Court and a system of lower courts. The Supreme Court has one member from each Grand Division. Separate circuit and chancery courts are established. Today, Tennessee is only one of five states to have chancery courts.

Tennessee voters ratify an amendment requiring the popular election of all Supreme Court and lower court judges. This ended the practice of the General Assembly electing justices to the Supreme Court.

The Court of Civil Appeals, the predecessor of the present-day Court of Appeals, is created.

Justice Grafton Green is elected to the Tennessee Supreme Court. He would serve until 1946, becoming the Court's longest serving member to this day. He is also the longest serving chief justice, holding that role from 1923 to 1947.

Voters approve the new 1870 constitution. Under the terms of the constitution, the Supreme Court is enlarged to five justices, popularly elected to eight-year terms, with a limit of two from any of the state's grand divisions.

The legislature abolishes the Superior Court, creating a new Supreme Court of Error and Appeals, which will act strictly as an appellate court. The legislature also splits the state up into five judicial circuits and creates a system of circuit courts to hear "all matters and causes at common law and in equity."

The General Assembly creates a statewide juvenile court system.

The General Sessions Court of Davidson County, the first general sessions court in the state, is created by the General Assembly and vested with the powers previously given to the county's justice of the peace. Many more general sessions courts would be established in the coming years.

The five-member Court of Civil Appeals, is abolished, and a new nine-person Court of Appeals is created. The new Court of Appeals consists of three judges from each of the state's three grand divisions.

Tennessee Judicial Conference, an organization composed of all of the state's judges on courts of record, is established.

Before judicial elections, the General Assembly modifies voting for the Supreme Court. As a result, partisan elections will decide who sits on the Supreme Court for the next 20 years.

The Court of Criminal Appeals is created to hear criminal cases on appeal from the trial court level.

Judge Adolpho A. Birch Jr.'s long and distinguished judicial career begins when he is appointed to the Davidson County General Sessions Court, becoming the first African American General Sessions judge in the state. He would later serve on the 20th Judicial District Criminal Court, Court of Criminal Appeals, and Supreme Court. He is the only judge to serve at all court levels.



Judge Martha Craig Daughtrey becomes the first woman judge on a court of record in the state when she is appointed to the Court of Criminal Appeals. In 1990, she becomes the first woman on the Supreme Court.



The Supreme Court adopts Rule 31 governing the utilization of alternative dispute resolution in the state.

The Supreme Court adopts formal rules setting standards for court interpreter and the first seven are certified.

The state's first problem-solving court is launched in Davidson County by Judge Seth Norman. Over the next few decades, over 100 drug, Veterans, Safe Baby, human trafficking and other specialized courts and dockets will be launched.

The Supreme Court declares that expanding justice to those who cannot afford attorneys when faced with civil legal issues is its number one strategic priority. The Access to Justice Initiative is launched.

Voters approve Amendment 2 to the state constitution, establishing retention elections for appellate judges.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of court proceedings are held virtually, including appellate oral arguments. All educational events are also moved online.

A statewide public defender system is established for indigent clients. The Supreme Court had urged legislators to create the system for a number of years.

1796 1798 1809 1835 1853 1870 1907 1910 1911 1925 1937 1953 1967 1969 1974 1974 1984 1989 1995 1996 2002 2008 2014 2020