

# John Adams Courthouse Visitors Film



*John Adams Courthouse (Pemberton Square)*

## Companion Guide

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*Great Hall, John Adams Courthouse*

## Overview of the Visitors Film

The John Adams Courthouse Visitors Film serves as a springboard for discussions about vital issues of justice. Dynamic documentary footage shows the modern appellate courts in action. Archival images and the words of John Adams highlight key segments of “Thoughts on Government” (1776) and the Massachusetts Constitution (1780). The film travels back in time to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court’s [SJC’s] origins, and continues through some of its most famous and infamous decisions. Interviews of former SJC Chief and Associate Justices ground us in the modern significance of historic decisions and ask audiences to consider their broader implications.

Key Topics in the film include: the establishment of an independent judiciary; principles of justice that guided John Adams in drafting the Mass Constitution; the SJC’s conclusion that slavery was incompatible with the newly ratified State Constitution; miscarriages of justice prevalent in the *Roberts v. City of Boston* and Sacco & Vanzetti cases; and the impact of the landmark *Goodridge v. Department of Health* (same-sex marriage) case. The film explores how the history of the Massachusetts SJC is tied to that of our nation.



*Oliver Wendell Holmes Courtroom, John Adams Courthouse*

## About the Companion Guide

The companion guide supports civics education in grades 5–12. The guide includes activities and information to help teachers prepare their students for viewing the film. The guide also offers prompt questions and strategies to encourage reflection following the film’s viewing. These suggested activities should be adapted for your curricular needs. Finally, the guide provides resources to deepen and extend history and civics education.

## Before Viewing the Film

This section includes information, as well as suggested in-class activities and research assignments to help students comprehend the content and key themes explored in the film.

### 1. Mission of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (SJC)

Below are the SJC’s mission statement, its seal, and the seal’s origins.

1. Share the Massachusetts SJC’s mission statement, seal, and its origins with the class.
2. Ask for volunteers to read both the statement and the English translation of the seal’s maxim. Discuss specific words that are new to students.
3. In pairs, students share both their thoughts about the meaning of what they read, and questions they have.
4. Ask the pairs to write brief notes about their thoughts and questions.
5. Prior to the lesson, attach 3 pieces of large/flip chart paper on a wall of your classroom, where they can stay for a post-film activity. Write one of the following headings on each piece of large paper:
  - a. “What We Know”
  - b. “What We Think We Know”
  - c. “What We Want to Know”
6. Provide color markers to students. Ask each pair to write comments and questions about the SJC on the paper, where they think they belong.
  - a. This step can be done all at once or a few pairs at a time, depending on the number of students in your class.
  - b. Let students know that if they discover any of their comments and questions have already been written by their peers, to draw a star next to them. There is no limit to the number of stars next to any one comment or question.
  - c. If they have doubts about a comment that has been written in columns #1 or #2 by another pair, instruct them to place a question mark next to it.
7. Ask students to read (silently) the comments and questions.
8. Save these large papers for a post-film activity.

**SJC's Mission Statement:** To promote the rule of law and foster public trust by leading an independent judiciary that assures every person equal access to the fair, timely and impartial resolution of disputes in courts managed with efficiency and professionalism.



The SJC's modern mission statement derives from the Court's historic seal of 1785, which contains a promise made in the Magna Carta -- *Nulli Vendemus Nulli Negabimus Justiciam*. An English translation of this Latin text is "We sell justice to no one; we deny justice to no one."

## 2. Vocabulary

Below is a list of words, phrases, and concepts included in the John Adams Courthouse Visitors Film that may be new to your students.

1. Select the words, phrases, and concepts that you think are particularly important for students to comprehend, and will enrich your curriculum.
2. Assign each student two or three key words, phrases, or concepts.
3. Homework or in-class assignment: Ask students to research assigned words, phrases, and/or concepts, and prepare a brief presentation based on what they discovered.
4. Students share what they've learned with the rest of the class.

### Key Words, Phrases, Concepts Included in the Film

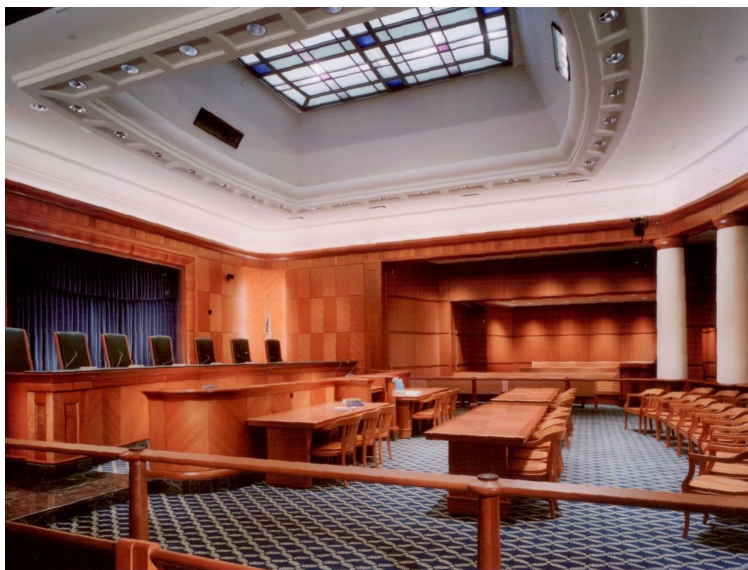
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ➤ Abolition/Abolish Slavery              | ➤ Fundamental Rights                                |
| ➤ Anarchists                             | ➤ "Government of Laws and Not of Men"               |
| ➤ Attorney                               | ➤ Immigrants (turn of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century) |
| ➤ Appeal                                 | ➤ Impartial   |
| ➤ Appellate Court                        | ➤ Individual Liberties                              |
| ➤ Caseload                               | ➤ Indicted  |
| ➤ Compliance with Law                    | ➤ Intermediate Appellate Court                      |
| ➤ Constitutional Democracy               | ➤ Independent Judiciary                             |
| ➤ Constitutional Rights                  | ➤ Lower Courts                                      |
| ➤ Court of Last Resort                   | ➤ Lady Justice (a recurring image in the film)      |
| ➤ Three Branches of Government           | ➤ Miscarriage of Justice                            |
| ➤ Defendant                              | ➤ Mob Rule  |
| ➤ Desegregation of Massachusetts Schools | ➤ Motion for a New Trial                            |
| ➤ Executed (Electric Chair)              | ➤ Paymaster   |
| ➤ Fear of Reprisals (judicial rulings)   | ➤ Prosecution                                       |
| ➤ First Degree Murder                    | ➤ Prominent   |



- Public Safety
- Public Trust in the Courts
- Render Decisions
- Resolution of Disputes
- Right to Free Speech
- Right to Privacy
- Rule of Law
- Same-Sex Marriage
- Slavery in Massachusetts
- Separate but Equal Doctrine
- Separation of Powers
- Timely Administration of Justice
- Trial Courts
- Tyranny of the Majority
- Unbiased
- Unconstitutional
- Verdict
- Will of the People
- Wrongful Conviction

### 3. Courts Mentioned in the Film

1. Homework Assignment: Ask students to research each court listed below. Instruct them to take notes on how each court functions and the different roles they play in the administration of justice.
  - Dedham Superior Court
  - Massachusetts Appeals Court
  - Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court
  - United States Supreme Court
2. Lead a class discussion based on what students discovered from their research. What types of cases are typically heard in a Superior Court as opposed to a District Court? What are the differences between a lower court and an appellate court? How do cases reach each court?



*Seven Justice Courtroom, John Adams Courthouse*

# After Viewing the Film

This section includes activities and prompt questions to extend student learning about the complex history of Massachusetts Courts, and how issues of justice in the past provide context for those we face today.

## 1. Reflection Activity #1

1. After viewing the film ask students to take a moment to write their thoughts and questions.
2. Lead students in a discussion about the film. What surprised them? What moved them? What made them rethink their assumptions? What questions did the film raise? What images from the film stood out?
3. If this is part of a longer curricular project, collect the written responses to the film to help you develop subsequent activities and/or lead in-depth discussions about topics of particular interest to your students.

## 2. Prompt Questions for Discussion

- What qualities, traits, and experiences do you think a justice of the court should have?
- Justices in the film spoke about the importance of a constitutional democracy. Do you think a constitutional democracy protects our rights? If so, how? If not, how does it fall short?
- Did the Declaration of Rights in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 initially apply to everyone? If not, who was left out? Since the State's Constitution was ratified, how has the SJC sought to expand fundamental rights to all?
- Justices in the film emphasized the critical nature of an independent judiciary. John Adams believed that judges should be appointed for life, to ensure their independence from outside influence. Presently, judges in Massachusetts are appointed by the Governor (after a lengthy selection process) and must retire by age 70. In other states, judges must run for election, as politicians do. Are you in favor of appointing justices or having them run for election? What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of either method?
- Based on the film, which Massachusetts court decisions advanced the cause of equal justice? How? Were there court decisions explored in the film that you thought were unjust? Why?
- How have decisions rendered by the Massachusetts SJC affected the nation?
- What major challenges do the State's courts face today?

### 3. Reflection Activity #2

1. Direct students' attention to the three large pieces of paper they wrote their comments and question on prior to viewing the film.
2. Ask students to partner with the same person they worked with prior to seeing the film. Students can refer to their initial notes and discuss if and how their perceptions have changed.
3. Provide markers to the students. Ask them to revise and add to the comments and questions they wrote before watching the film. As with the pre-film activity, if a student writes a comment or question that other students agree with, they can add a star next to it instead of adding it.
  - a. **"What We Know"** – If students have discovered new information, they can add comments to this sheet. Conversely, if they now think something they wrote is inaccurate, they can cross it out. If they wrote something they're no longer sure about, they can cross it off this sheet and add it to the "What We *Think* We Know List."
  - b. **"What We *Think* We Know"** – If they wrote something on this sheet they now believe is true they can cross it off this sheet and add it to "What We Know List." If they now believe something they wrote isn't true they can cross it off.
  - c. **"What We Want to Know"** – If a question they wrote on this sheet was answered (in the film, through research, or in discussion), they can cross it off and add a comment to the "What We Know" sheet. Encourage students to add questions they hadn't thought of before, but are now curious about.
4. Once students are done writing, divide students into three groups, and have each group stand in front of one of the sheets. Starting with "What We Know" sheet, ask students to take turns reading each comment until all comments have been heard. Repeat this for both the "What we *Think* We Know" and "What We Want to Know" sheets.
5. (optional activity) Assign, or have students select, questions from the "What We Want to Know" sheet to research and report back to the class.





## Additional Resources

This section offers online resources to further explore the film's content, and to serve as a springboard for subsequent history and civics projects.

1. [History of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court](#)
2. [Current Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Justices](#)



*Justices of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court 2021*

### 3. Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Justices Interviewed in the Film

[Chief Justice Margaret H. Marshall](#)

[Chief Justice Roderick L. Ireland](#)

[Chief Justice Ralph D. Gants](#)

[Justice Robert J. Cordy](#)

[Justice Geraldine S. Hines](#)

#### 4. Massachusetts and U.S. Court Cases Related to the Film

### Salem Witch Trials



[Salem Witch Trials – Overview](#)  
[Salem Witch Hysteria and Context](#)

### Freedom Lawsuits



***Brom and Bett v. Ashley (1781)***

[National Women's History Museum](#)  
[Long Road to Justice](#)

***Quock Walker v. Jennison (1781)***

[Long Road to Justice](#)  
[PBS](#)  
[BlackPast](#)

## Desegregation Lawsuits



### ***Robert v. City of Boston* (1849)**

[Long Road to Justice](#)

[UMASS Boston Archives and Public History](#)

### ***Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)**

[Oyez Court Cases](#)

[Britannica—Plessy v. Ferguson](#)

[Topics in Black History](#)

### ***Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)**

[Topics in Black History](#)

[Annenberg Classroom](#)



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Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (2021)



## Murder Trials



### ***Rex v. Preston (1770)***

[Revolution250](#)

[Massachusetts Historical Society](#)

[UMKC Law—Trials](#)



### ***Sacco & Vanzetti (1921)***

[Mass.Gov Info](#)

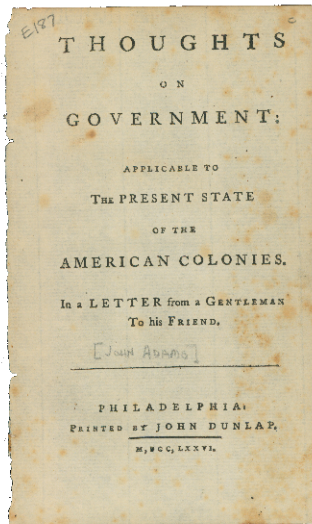
[TIME Magazine](#)

[UCLA—Arthur Ashe Legacy](#)

[Digital History](#)

## Legal Documents Referred to in the Film

### Three Independent Branches



Cover page of *Thoughts on Government*.

In *Thoughts on Government*, Adams asserted that a good government is a government of laws, and considered how the "divine science of politics" could achieve such a government. Adams's proposed solution: three separate, independent, and balanced branches:

- An executive (governor) who would have "a negative upon the legislative"; that is, veto power;
- A bicameral (two house) legislature, as a unicameral (one house) legislature is "liable to all the vices, follies, and frailties of an individual"; and
- An independent judicial branch.

Adams's most original contribution was his proposal for an independent judiciary. Supreme executives had headed other governments, and the British Parliament had long consisted of two chambers.<sup>1</sup> Judges, however, were subject to the will of kings and parliaments.

In Adams's compelling words:

The dignity and stability of government in all its branches, the morals of the people, and every blessing of society depend so much upon an upright and skillful administration of justice, that the judicial power ought to be distinct from both the legislative and executive, and independent upon both, that so it may be a check upon both, as both should be checks upon that. The judges, therefore, should be always men of learning and experience in the laws, of exemplary morals, great patience, calmness, coolness, and attention. Their minds should not be distracted with jarring interests; they should not be dependent upon any man, or body of men. To these ends, they should hold estates for life in their offices; or, in other words, their commissions should be during good behavior, and their salaries ascertained and established by law.

*Thoughts on Government* provided a blueprint for numerous state constitutions, including those of Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, and Virginia.

<sup>1</sup> The Province Charter, which governed the colony of Massachusetts from 1691 to 1774, provided for a Royal Governor and a bicameral assembly, known as the Great and General Court. The House of Representatives was elected; the Provincial Council was elected by members of the House, subject to the Royal Governor's veto.

### Quartering Act (1765)

[Boston Tea Party Ship](#)

### "Thoughts on Government" by John Adams (1776)

[Massachusetts Historical Society](#)

### Massachusetts Constitution & Declaration of Rights (1780)

[National Humanities Institute](#)

[Mass.Gov](#)

### United States Constitution (1789)

[Constitution Center](#)

[National Archives](#)

### Bill of Rights (1791)

[Constitution Facts](#)

[National Archives](#)

### Emancipation Proclamation (1863)

[National Archives Foundation](#)

[National Archives](#)



## Key Figures in the Film



[John Adams \(1735-1826\)](#)

[George Grenville \(1712-1770\)](#)

[Captain Thomas Preston \(1722-1798\)](#)

[Chief Justice William Cushing \(1732-1810\)](#)

[Justice Edmund Trowbridge \(1709-1793\)](#)

[Justice Samuel Sewall \(1652-1730\)](#)

[Chief Justice William Stoughton \(1631-1701\)](#)

[Justice Ruth Ida Abrams \(1930-2019\)](#)

[Sarah Roberts \(born circa 1842 – death date unknown\)](#)

[Robert Morris, Sr. \(1823-1882\)](#)

[Charles Sumner \(1811-1874\)](#)

[Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw \(1781-1861\)](#)

[Nicola Sacco \(1891-1927\) & Bartolomeo Vanzetti \(1888-1927\)](#)



*Thorndike Library, John Adams Courthouse*