

Marshall Court

Landmark Supreme Court Decisions

Fletcher v. Peck 1810

- Supreme Court ruled a state law unconstitutional for the first time
- Involved land grants from the Georgia state legislature to the Yazoo Land Company
- Later session of the state legislature tried to invalidate earlier land grants
- Land grants were obtained through bribery and fraud
- Decision: State could not repudiate grants because they were contracts and the Constitution forbade states to “impair the obligation of contracts”

Dartmouth College v. Woodward 1819

- Upheld the sanctity of contracts
- New Hampshire legislature tried to revise the college charter, trying to make it a public university as opposed to a private university
- President of the University wanted this, trustees did not
- Original charter was granted during the colonial period
- Decision: Contract could not be changed without the consent of both parties, even if one of the parties is the state government

McCulloch v. Maryland 1819

- Upheld the constitutionality of the 2nd Bank of the United States
- Several states tried to force branches of the Bank of the United States in their state out of business
- The state placed a \$15,000 tax on the Baltimore branch
- Three questions to be answered: 1. Did Congress have the power to charter a bank? 2. Was it constitutional for a state to tax a federal bank or agency of the federal government? 3. Who had sovereign or supreme power; the federal government or the state governments?
- Decision: Congress had implied powers under the Constitution. The power to tax involves the power to destroy so states cannot tax the bank. The federal government was created by the people, not by the states, so federal power is supreme.

Gibbons v. Ogden 1824

- Concerned the jurisdiction over control of interstate commerce
- New York awarded a steamboat company a monopoly on passenger service across the Hudson from New York to New Jersey
- States can only regulate commerce within their borders (intrastate)
- Allowed the country to further develop by reducing restraints created by states
- Decision: Only the federal government has control over interstate commerce

Johnson v. McIntosh 1823

- Who has jurisdiction over Indian tribes?
- Tribe sold land to white settlers
- Later, the tribe signed a treaty with the United States government ceding land to the feds, including some parcels already sold
- United States government then granted homestead rights on land already claimed

*Decision: Tribes have a basic right to their tribal lands that proceeds all American law and only the federal government has the power to take or buy land from the tribes, not individual citizens

Cherokee Nation v. Georgia 1832

- State of Georgia passed a law that would have abolished the tribal legislature and courts
- Cherokee Nation considered themselves a foreign nation so they took their case directly to the Supreme Court (Supreme Court mediates disputes between states and foreign nations)
- Marshall Court refused to hear the case
- Tribe was not a foreign nation
- Outcome: Tribe has special status within the nation, a trust relationship, therefore the federal government protects tribal welfare

Worcester v. Georgia 1832

- Most important of the tribal decisions
- Georgia said any United States citizen entering Cherokee territory had to have permission from the governor
- Two missionaries sued
- Tribes were sovereign entities with authority

*Decision: Only the federal government had ultimate authority over the tribes