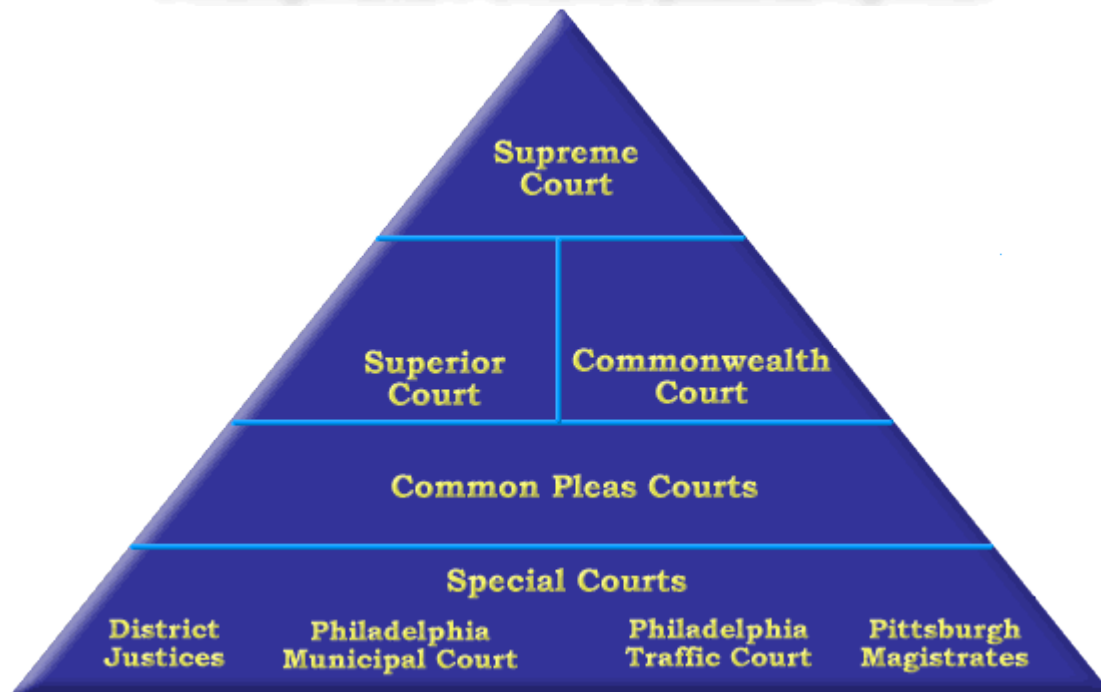


Pennsylvania's Unified Judicial System



A History of Pennsylvania's Courts

The court system in Pennsylvania changed with the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. By establishing the Courts of Sessions, Courts of Common Pleas and Orphans' Courts in each county, the constitution allowed Pennsylvania to see the beginning of a statewide framework for the development of its judicial system.

A new constitution in 1790 encouraged further development in the Commonwealth's judicial system by grouping counties into judicial districts and placing president judges at the heads of the districts' Common Pleas Courts. This was meant to ease the Supreme Court's rapidly increasing workload. Constitutional changes in 1838 and 1874 and a constitutional amendment in 1850 made changes in the jurisdiction, tenure, and election or appointment of members of the judiciary. In 1895 the General Assembly created the Superior Court to ease the work of the Supreme Court, giving each appellate court separate jurisdictions.

The Constitution of 1968 initiated the most sweeping changes in Pennsylvania's judiciary in nearly a century, creating the Commonwealth Court to reduce the workload of the Superior and Supreme courts by hearing cases brought against and by the Commonwealth; substantially altering the minor court system; and reorganizing the judiciary into the Unified Judicial System, consisting of the Supreme, Superior and Commonwealth courts; Common Pleas Courts; Philadelphia Municipal Court; Pittsburgh Magistrates Court; Philadelphia Traffic Court; and district justice courts, with provisions for any future courts the law might establish.

Both judicially and administratively, the Supreme Court is, by constitutional definition, Pennsylvania's highest court. In matters of law, it is the Commonwealth's court of last resort. In matters of administration, the Supreme Court is responsible for maintaining a single, integrated judicial system and thus has supervisory authority over all other state courts.

In 1980, the legislature approved a decrease in the Supreme Court's mandated jurisdiction by expanding that of the Superior Court. Consequently, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, like the United States Supreme Court, can now exercise discretion in accepting or rejecting most appeals, allowing it to devote greater attention to cases of far-reaching impact, as well as to its constitutional obligation to administer the entire judicial system.