Jefferson Becomes President

If YOU were there...

You are a Maryland voter from a frontier district—and you are tired! For days, you and your friends have been wrangling over the presidential election. Who shall it be—John Adams or Thomas Jefferson? Your vote depends on your personal judgment.

Which candidate would you choose for president?

The Election of 1800

In the presidential election of 1800, Federalists John Adams and Charles C. Pinckney ran against Democratic-Republicans Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. Each party believed that the American republic's survival depended upon the success of their candidates. With so much at stake, the election was hotly contested.

Unlike today, candidates did not travel around giving speeches. Instead, the candidates’ supporters made their arguments in letters and newspaper editorials. Adams’s supporters claimed that Jefferson was a pro-French radical. Put Jefferson in office, they warned, and the violence and chaos of the French Revolution would surely follow in the United States. Plus, Federalists argued, Jefferson’s interest in science and philosophy proved that he wanted to destroy organized religion.

Democratic-Republican newspapers responded that Adams wanted to crown himself king. What else, they asked, could be the purpose of the Alien and Sedition Acts? Republicans also hinted that Adams would use the newly created permanent army to limit Americans’ rights.
When the election results came in, Jefferson and Burr had won 73 electoral votes each to 65 for Adams and 64 for Pinckney. The Democratic-Republicans had won the election, but the tie between Jefferson and Burr caused a problem. Under the Constitution at that time, the two candidates with the most votes became president and vice president. The decision went to the House of Representatives, as called for in the Constitution.

The House, like the electoral college, also deadlocked. Days went by as vote after vote was called, each ending in ties. Exhausted lawmakers napped on the floor.

Jefferson finally won on the thirty-sixth vote. The election marked the first time that one party had replaced another in power in the United States. It is seen by some as the end of the early republic that began with the failure of the Articles of Confederation and creation of the Constitution. The election signaled that the new system of government would carry the nation through a peaceful transition of political power.

The problems with the voting system led Congress to propose the Twelfth Amendment. This amendment created a separate ballot for president and vice president.

**Reading Check** Analyzing Information

What was significant about Jefferson’s victory?
Jefferson's Policies

When Jefferson took office, he brought with him a style and political ideas different from those of Adams and Washington. Jefferson was less formal than his predecessors, and he wanted to limit the powers of government.

Jefferson Is Inaugurated

Americans looked forward with excitement to Jefferson's first speech as president. People from across the nation gathered in the new capital, Washington, D.C., to hear him. Curious travelers looked with pride at the partially completed Capitol building and at the executive mansion (not yet called the White House). The two buildings dominated the surrounding homes and forests.

Small businesses dotted the landscape. At one of these, a modest boardinghouse, the president-elect was putting the finishing touches on his speech. On the morning of March 4, 1801, he left the boardinghouse and walked to the Capitol. The leader of a republic, Jefferson believed, should not ride in fancy carriages.

Jefferson read his speech in a quiet voice. He wanted to make it clear that he supported the will of the majority. He also stressed the need for a limited government and the protection of civil liberties.

From these humble surroundings in which Jefferson delivered his speech, Washington eventually grew into a large and impressive city. Over the years, the Capitol and the executive mansion were joined by other state buildings and monuments. Jefferson, who had long dreamed of a new national capital that would be independent of the interests of any one state, was pleased to be a part of this process of building a federal city.

Jefferson in Office

President Jefferson faced the task of putting his republican ideas into practice. One of his first actions was to select the members of his cabinet. His choices included James Madison as secretary of state and Albert Gallatin as secretary of the treasury.

Jefferson would also benefit from the Democratic-Republican Party's newly won control of both houses of Congress. At Jefferson's urging, Congress allowed the hated Alien and Sedition Acts to expire. Jefferson
lowered military spending and reduced the size of the army. The navy was cut to seven active ships. Jefferson and Gallatin hoped that saving this money would allow the government to repay the national debt. Jefferson also asked Gallatin to find ways to get rid of domestic taxes, like the tax on whiskey. The Democratic-Republican–led Congress passed the laws needed to carry out these policies.

The entire national government in 1801 consisted only of several hundred people. Jefferson preferred to keep it that way. He believed that the primary functions of the federal government were to protect the nation from foreign threats, deliver the mail, and collect customs duties.

Jefferson did recognize that some of the Federalist policies—such as the creation of the Bank of the United States—should be kept. Although Jefferson had battled Hamilton over the Bank, as president he agreed to leave it in place.

**Marbury v. Madison**

Although Republicans controlled the presidency and Congress, Federalists dominated the federal judiciary. In an effort to continue their control over the judiciary, Federalist legislators passed the Judiciary Act of 1801 shortly before their terms of office ended. This act created 16 new federal judgeships that President Adams filled with Federalists before leaving office. The Republican press called these people midnight judges, arguing that Adams had packed the judiciary with Federalists the night before he left office.

Some of these appointments were made so late that the documents that authorized them had not been delivered by the time Adams left office. This led to controversy once Jefferson took office. William Marbury, named as a justice of the peace by President Adams, did not receive his documents before Adams left office. When Jefferson took office, Marbury demanded the documents. On Jefferson’s advice, however, the new secretary of state, James Madison, refused to deliver them. Jefferson argued that the appointment of the midnight judges was not valid.

**The Court's Ruling**

The Court ruled that the law Marbury based his claim on was unconstitutional.

**The Court's Reasoning**

The Judiciary Act of 1789 gave the Supreme Court the authority to hear a wide variety of cases, including those like Marbury’s. But the Supreme Court ruled that Congress did not have the power to make such a law. Why? Because the Constitution limits the types of cases the Supreme Court can hear. Thus, the law was in conflict with the Constitution and had to be struck down.

**Why It Matters**

Marbury v. Madison was important for several reasons. It confirmed the Supreme Court’s power to declare acts of Congress unconstitutional. By doing so, it established the Court as the final authority on the Constitution. This helped make the judicial branch of government equal to the other two branches. Chief Justice John Marshall and later federal judges would use this power of judicial review as a check on the legislative and executive branches.
Marbury brought suit, asking the Supreme Court to order Madison to deliver the papers. Marbury claimed that the Judiciary Act of 1789 gave the Court the power to do so.

John Marshall, a Federalist appointed by John Adams, was the chief justice of the Court. Marshall and President Jefferson disagreed about many political issues. When Marshall agreed to hear Marbury’s case, Jefferson protested, saying that the Federalists “have retired into the judiciary as a stronghold.” Marshall wrote the Court’s opinion in *Marbury v. Madison*, a case that helped establish the Supreme Court’s power to check the power of the other branches of government. The Constitution, Marshall noted, gave the Court authority to hear only certain types of cases. A request like Marbury’s was not one of them. The law that Marbury’s case depended upon was, therefore, unconstitutional.

In denying Marbury’s request in this way, the Court avoided a direct confrontation with Jefferson’s administration. But more important, it established the Court’s power of judicial review, the power to declare an act of Congress unconstitutional. Marshall and later federal judges would use this power to make the judiciary a much stronger part of the national government. Under Marshall’s leadership, the Court gained additional power by beginning to issue only one decision in a case. In British courts, each justice provided a separate decision. The system of one decision gave the courts more authority. In response to Marbury, Jefferson urged Congress to impeach Justice Samuel Chase. The Congress held the impeachment trial, but Chase was acquitted.

Why was *Marbury v. Madison* an important ruling?

**Summary and Preview** A peaceful transfer of power took place after the election of 1800. In the next section you will read about the Louisiana Purchase.