1. 1789 to 1791: the Pennsylvania State House, now known as Independence Hall

Congress voted to "ordain and establish" federal courts "inferior" to the Supreme Court,[4] by passing the Judiciary Act which President Washington signed into law on September 24, 1789. The Act created thirteen district courts including the United States District Court for the District of Pennsylvania. There was one court for each of the eleven states, which by that time had ratified the Constitution, as well as a court for Maine, which was then part of Massachusetts and one for Kentucky which was then part of Virginia.

The Act authorized one district judge for each court. The Pennsylvania District Court was designated by the Act to be held alternatively at Philadelphia and "York Town," a hamlet approximately one-hundred miles west of Philadelphia in York County. It had served as the nation's temporary capital from September 1777 through late June 1778 when the Continental Congress met there during the British occupation of Philadelphia. The Court has no record of any judicial business ever having been conducted at that location.

Judge Francis Hopkinson, the first judge of the then named Pennsylvania District Court, opened the first session of the Court on November 10, 1789, in the Pennsylvania State House (later renamed Independence Hall). At this first proceeding of the Court, the Mayor and Recorder of Philadelphia, as well as members of Congress, attended along with a "number of respectable citizens." The commissions of Judge Hopkinson, the United States Attorney for the District of Pennsylvania William Lewis, and the Marshal for the District Clement Biddle were "proclaimed" and a number of "Gentlemen of the Bar" admitted.

[4] U.S. Const. art. III, § 1.