



# HISTORICAL SOCIETY *of the* NEW YORK COURTS

## The Origins and Development of American Legal History in New York City (1609 – 1865)

### **Lesson Plan #4:** New York's Courts and the People Behind Them

Background Reading: [\*“Duelly and Constantly Kept”: A History of the New York Supreme Court, 1691 – 1847 and Inventory of its Records, 1797 – 1847\*](#), Historical Society of the New York Courts (Albany: New York State Court of Appeals and New York State Archives and Records Administration, 1991) pgs. 6 – 22.

*Class Activity #1* (15 minutes):

Classroom Discussion based on reading of [\*“Duelly and Constantly Kept”\*](#):

1. What is the purpose of courts? Judges? The criminal justice system?
2. How has New York's courts system changed over its centuries of existence?
3. How might a historian wanting to learn more about New York's court system go about conducting research? What challenges do historians face in learning about New York legal history?

*Class Activity #2* (20 minutes):

Exploring New York's Judges: Students should get into pairs of two and be provided with computers. Using the HSNYC's [court timeline by Chief Judge](#), each pair should identify a judge whose life they wish to explore. Each pair should answer the following questions:

1. Who was the judge?
2. What time period did they live in? What were the legal issues they faced in their career?
3. Identify four major turning-points in the judges' life that helps us understand legal history during this time period.

*Class Activity #3* (10 minutes):

Each pair should now browse the HSNYC's lists of [New York Attorneys General](#). After identifying one important legal figure from nineteenth century New York, each pair should:

1. Describe who the figure is and what time period the figure lived in.
2. Identify one important legal episode from that figure's life and what it tells us about that time period.

*Class Activity #4* (5 minutes):

Group discussion as a whole class:

1. What special challenges does the courts system of New York City in particular face?
2. What questions might a historian ask regarding the history of the New York courts and legal system?

*Homework:* Using the “Inventory of Record Series” in [\*“Duelly Constantly Kept,”\*](#) each student should identify one archival source that he or she would use for a largescale historical research project and answer the following questions over 1 – 2 pages:



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1. What is the archival collection?
2. What type of information might a historian find in that collection?
3. What questions might a historian ask using this collection? How might this collection help a historian answer that question?