

NARRATOR: It united the states and established the three branches of our federal government.

For 200 years, the Constitution of the United States has been our nation's fundamental law and a framework for liberty. The Constitution and its first ten amendments -- the Bill of Rights -- are an enduring proclamation that a just government must abide by rules that enhance the rights of the individual.

LOFTY BECKER (LAW PROFESSOR): The place of the Bill of Rights and the Constitution in society is very much like the place of oil in an automobile engine. It's essential to keep the machine running.

As the nation's ultimate interpreter of the Constitution, the U.S. Supreme Court defines the rules of government and ensures that all public officials obey them. The nine justices in this high court hand down opinions that often profoundly influence American society. The Supreme Court is primarily a court of appeals, choosing cases that come from lower federal courts or the state supreme courts.

CHRIS BOLLIER (AUTHOR): Individuals bring cases. Those cases establish principles. Many Connecticut citizens have been at the forefront of that.

NARRATOR: In 1961 Estelle Griswold and Planned Parenthood challenge a state law prohibiting contraceptive use. The case leads to a new constitutional right.

1839, enslaved West African Cinque leads a successful rebellion, focusing attention on slavery in the years before the Civil War.

Affirmative action is attacked in 1990, forcing Richard Ramirez and his Hartford TV station to defend their broadcast license.

Central CT State College student activists in 1969 fight a ban by college president F. Don James prohibiting their meeting on campus.

When businessman Louis Zemel wants to visit Cuba in 1961, the State Department says "no." Can government regulate travel abroad?

In 1938 Russell Cantwell and his Jehovah Witness family defy a state law against soliciting, leading to a landmark religious freedom case.

Terror grips the state as the Mad Dog Killers run wild in the 1950s. But once they're caught, heavy-handed policework could set them free.

RALPH ELLIOT (ATTORNEY): All of these major cases in the Supreme Court are the ultimate result of individual people suing and being sued or being arrested and saying essentially I got a right here and I want that right vindicated.

TITLE

NARRATOR: Connecticut citizens whose cases have been heard by the Supreme Court have come from all walks of life -- from crusaders to criminals, from victims to visionaries.

This is the story of seven of those cases.