The Court Archive:
James Shields and his Claims to Fame

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Throughout the first constitutional period (1818-1848), justices of the Illinois Supreme Court were chosen by the General Assembly, which often rewarded party allegiance over legal merit. Few figures illustrate this dynamic better than James Shields, an ambitious Irish immigrant whose brief tenure on the court was less notable for legal decisions than for the life he led beyond the bench. Though he left little legal legacy during his two years on the court, Shields remains one of the most colorful individuals ever to sit on Illinois's highest court, thanks to five remarkable claims to fame.

First, Shields remains one of only three foreign-born justices ever to serve on the Illinois Supreme Court. Born on May 12, 1806 in Altmore, Ireland, he immigrated to the United States in 1826. Settling in Kaskaskia, Illinois, he studied law, taught French, and was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1832. A loyal Democrat, Shields was elected to the state legislature in 1836 and was appointed Auditor of Public Accounts in 1841. Just two years later, Shields was appointed to the Illinois Supreme Court. His law partner, Gustave Koerner, who immigrated from Germany succeeded him on the court in 1845. The third foreign-born justice, William J. Fulton, was born in Ontario, Canada, and served on the court from 1942 to 1954.

Second, Shields famously challenged Abraham Lincoln to a duel. As State Auditor in 1842, Shields announced that the state would no longer accept state bank notes for tax payment. Lincoln, writing under the pseudonym "Rebecca," published a satirical letter in the local Whig newspaper that not only mocked the policy, but ridiculed Shields personally, calling him a "conceited dunce," a "fool," and "a liar." Incensed by these personal attacks, Shields challenged Lincoln to a duel. Lincoln reluctantly accepted and chose broadswords, believing his height advantage would allow him to disarm Shields without causing serious harm. Fortunately, friends intervened before the duel occurred.

Third, Shields is the only Union general to defeat Confederate General Stonewall Jackson in battle. A veteran of the Black Hawk and Mexican Wars, Shields was appointed brigadier general during the Civil War. At the Battle of Kernstown in 1862, though wounded and directing his troops from a stretcher, Shields's forces repelled Jackson, marking the Confederate general's only tactical defeat.

Fourth, Shields is the only person to serve as U.S. Senator from three different states. After returning from the Mexican War, Shields was elected Senator from Illinois in 1849. Defeated for re-election in 1855, he moved to Minnesota and was elected Senator again when the state entered the Union in 1858. Later in life, Shields settled in Missouri and in 1879 he was appointed to serve the final months of a Senate term, following the death of Sen. Lewis V. Bogy. Only one other person, Waitman T. Willey, served as Senator from two different states, Virginia and West Virginia during the Civil War.

Fifth, Shields is one of two individuals chosen to represent Illinois in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall. When he died in 1879, Shields was honored as a war hero and statesman whose career spanned five decades. In 1893, sculptor Leonard Volk created a bronze statue of Shields in his Civil War uniform, which was dedicated in Washington, D.C. Although Shields represents Illinois in the U.S. Capitol, there is no statue of him in Illinois today. Statues of him do exist, however, in Carrollton, Missouri, near his final home, and in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he once served as Senator.