The Court Archive:
Lyman Trumbull

John A. Lupton
© Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission
June 2025

One of the more influential people in United States history was Lyman Trumbull. Trumbull was an Illinois lawyer, secretary of state, supreme court justice, and U.S. senator. His lifelong moral opposition to slavery helped end the institution in Illinois in the 1840s and throughout the nation in 1865.

Born in Connecticut in 1813, Trumbull moved to Illinois in 1836 and began practicing law with former governor John Reynolds. Politically, he aligned with the Democratic party and won election to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1840. When Stephen A. Douglas vacated the office of Illinois Secretary of State to join the state Supreme Court, Governor Thomas Carlin appointed Trumbull to the vacant office. He described his work as "trifling," consisting mainly of clerical duties, such as providing copies of statutes, affixing the state seal to official documents, and receiving election returns. He left office in 1843, returning to the practice of law.

In 1845, Trumbull argued one of the more important cases in Illinois to remove the last remnants of chattel slavery. In the case of *Jarrot v. Jarrot*, 7 Ill. 1 (1845), he represented Joseph Jarrot, a descendant of a French slave, who sued for his freedom. Although Illinois was technically a free state, a legal loophole allowed descendants of French slaves to remain in bondage. Trumbull argued that the Northwest Ordinance prohibited slavery and that Congress had the authority to overrule previous French and English laws. The Illinois Supreme Court agreed, ruling that descendants of French slaves prior to 1785 cannot be legally held in slavery.

With the adoption of the new Illinois constitution in 1848, Trumbull won election to the Illinois Supreme Court, representing the southern grand division comprising the lower third of the state. Trumbull was not entirely happy on the bench, especially when the slavery question became more prominent in the early 1850s. He resigned from the Court in 1853 to return to the practice of law.

The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 fractured the country's political system. Anti-slavery Democrats like Trumbull felt unwelcome in the Democratic party. He won election to the U.S. House as an "anti-Nebraska" candidate. Before taking his seat, however, Illinois's anti-

Nebraska legislators failed to unite over Abraham Lincoln's U.S. Senate candidacy, resulting in Trumbull's election to the Senate instead. When the Republican Party officially formed in 1856, Trumbull joined and campaigned for Lincoln in both his failed race in 1858 against Stephen Douglas and his successful presidential campaign in 1860.

During the Civil War, Senator Trumbull chaired the powerful Judiciary Committee and played a critical role in authoring significant legislation. He was instrumental in passing the Confiscation Acts, which pushed President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Trumbull also authored the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States.

After the war, Trumbull resisted pressure from party leadership and voted to acquit President Andrew Johnson during his impeachment trial. After his third term as Senator, he chose not to run for reelection and in 1873, he moved to Chicago, where he maintained a lucrative law practice. In one of his later legal cases, Trumbull and fellow Chicago attorney Clarence Darrow petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court for a writ of habeas corpus on behalf of Eugene V. Debs after Debs violated an injunction during the Pullman railway dispute. The Court rejected the petition.

In 1896, Trumbull became ill after traveling to Belleville for the funeral of his friend and Illinois Supreme Court colleague Gustave Koerner. He died two months later at the age of 82. William Jennings Bryan delivered his eulogy.

Trumbull's legal and political career spanned six decades and helped to end slavery statewide and nationally, establishing his importance not only to Illinois but to the United States.