

James Shields 1843-1845

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A military hero and the only United States Senator to represent three different states, James Shields was a native of Altmore, Ireland. Born on May 6, 1806 to Charles and Anne McDonnell Shields, James immigrated to Canada in 1823, then in 1826 settled in Kaskaskia, Illinois, where he taught school while studying law. “His knowledge of the French language,” wrote biographer William H. Condon, “his wit and genial disposition soon made him a general favorite.”¹



Admitted to the Illinois bar in 1832, Shields opened a law practice, for a time partnering with Belleville attorney Gustavus Koerner, and began participating in Democratic party politics. “In conversation he spoke rapidly and vivaciously,” recalled Koerner, “showing very little trace of the Irish brogue. He was not an orator, but a ready debater. . . . He really did not seek popularity, but yet had a sort of winning way about him that made him friends quite readily.”²

Voters elected Shields to the Illinois General Assembly in 1836 and he served only one term. In 1841, Governor Thomas Carlin appointed Shields the state Auditor, helping to restore the state’s finances following the Panic of 1837.³ Responding to anonymous newspaper accusations against his policies regarding the State Bank of

Illinois, Shields assumed that Whig Representative Abraham Lincoln authored the criticisms and challenged him to a duel. Because dueling was illegal in Illinois, the men traveled to a Missouri location across from Alton.⁴ “Did not wish to kill Shields,” Lincoln later wrote, “the very thought was agony.”⁵ At the duel site the two men settled their differences after their seconds intervened.

In 1843, Governor Ford appointed Shields to succeed James Semple on the Illinois Supreme Court. Shields also was responsible for the Second Judicial Circuit. In the St. Clair County Circuit Court, he ruled in *Jarrot v. Jarrot* that a slave could not sue his master for wages.⁶ He joined justices Samuel H. Treat and Jesse B. Thomas in dissent when the Supreme Court reversed the decision in 1844.⁷

During his two years on the Court, Shields “ranked high as a justice,” wrote biographer Condon; “he was industrious, painstaking, impartial and strictly honest.”⁸ In delivering the Court opinion in *Eells v. People*, Shields upheld the 1843 circuit court decision against Quincy physician Richard Eells for aiding a fugitive slave. “If a State can use precautionary measures against the introduction of paupers, convicts, or negro slaves,” Shields wrote, “it can undoubtedly punish those of its citizens who endeavor to introduce them.”⁹ Due to “the notoriety gained in this case,” wrote historian Theodore C. Pease, “Eells was elected president of the Illinois Antislavery Society in 1843 and nominated as the liberty party candidate for governor in 1846.”¹⁰

In 1845, soon after legislative election to a full term on the Court, Shields resigned to accept President James K. Polk’s appointment as Commissioner of the General Land Office in Washington, D.C. With the outbreak of the Mexican War, he resigned the Land Office position to become Brigadier General of Illinois Volunteers.

Sustaining serious wounds at Cerro Gordo and Chapultepec, he served throughout the war, leading New York and South Carolina troops at Churubusco.¹¹

Brevetted Major General and mustered out in 1848, Shields returned to the States a war hero. President Polk offered him the governorship of the new Oregon Territory, but he instead decided to challenge Sidney Breese for nomination to the U.S. Senate. The Democratic caucus chose Shields, and he easily defeated a weak Whig opponent. His election was voided, however, because he had not been a citizen for the required nine years. Shields waited a year for unquestioned eligibility, then again won the election.¹²

In the Senate, Shields joined fellow Democrat and close friend Stephen A. Douglas. An unenthusiastic supporter of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, extending slavery to the territories, Shields lost his 1854 reelection bid to anti-Nebraska candidate Lyman Trumbull. “The Anti Nebraska feeling is too deep,” Shields wrote to Springfield friend Charles H. Lanphier, “more than I thought it was.”¹³

Back in Illinois, ailing former Governor Thomas Ford asked Shields to arrange for publication of his *History of Illinois*. “Because of its caustic and outspoken criticism of public men,” wrote historian Robert P. Howard, “Shields or the publisher reportedly excised more than half of the manuscript, which is regrettable in view of Ford’s personal knowledge of the men and events he wrote about. . . . Even if he wrote with cynicism, his book has been recognized as a superior analysis of American politics and one of the most important volumes printed in Illinois before the Civil War.”¹⁴

Disappointed at the Senate loss, Shields left Illinois in search of opportunity in the Minnesota Territory. After statehood in 1858, he was elected to a one-year term in the U.S. Senate. Relocating to California in 1859, Shields married Mary Ann Carr, a native

of Longhall, Ireland. The couple settled in Mazatlan, Mexico, where he was part owner and manager of a mine. The couple became parents of five children, two of whom died in childhood.¹⁵

During the Civil War, Shields returned to Washington, D.C. to become a brigadier general, serving until March 1863. He then returned to San Francisco, but three years later moved to Carrollton, Missouri, where he won election to the Missouri legislature, then appointment as railroad commissioner. In 1879, he was elected to complete an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate.¹⁶

Shields died suddenly on June 1, 1879 in Ottumwa, Iowa, while on a lecture tour. “He was a warm-hearted Irishman,” wrote attorney Usher F. Linder, “and a brave and gallant soldier.”¹⁷ Following memorial services, he was buried at St. Mary’s Cemetery in Carrollton, Missouri. A bronze figure of General Shields stands in the U.S. Capitol Statuary Hall.

James Shields Papers: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois; Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

¹ William H. Condon, *Life of Major-General James Shields* (Chicago: Blakely Printing Co., 1900), 10, 26, 29. Shields’ birth date has also been reported as May 9, May 10, and May 12, 1806 and as 1810. His mother’s first name has been variably reported as Catherine Shields. Francis O’Shaughnessy, “General James Shields of Illinois,” *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 1915, 114.

² David Kenney and Robert E. Hartley, *An Uncertain Tradition; U.S. Senators from Illinois, 1818-2003* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 40.

³ O’Shaughnessy, 116-17.

⁴ Frederic B. Crossley, *Courts and Lawyers of Illinois* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1916), 222-23; Daniel W. Stowell, et al., eds., *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln*;

Legal Documents and Cases, 4 vols. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 4: 376.

⁵ Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants; Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 31.

⁶ N. Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois and of the Slavery Agitation in That State, 1719-1864* (1904, rpt. Ann Arbor MI: University Microfilms, 1968), 117.

⁷ *Jarrot v. Jarrot*, 7 Ill. (2 Gilman) 1 (1845).

⁸ Condon, 51.

⁹ *Eells v. People*, 5 Ill. (4 Scammon) 498 (1843).

¹⁰ Theodore Calvin Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818-1848* (1918, rpt. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 379.

¹¹ Crossley, 222-23; John M. Palmer, ed., *The Bench and Bar of Illinois; Historical and Reminiscent* (Chicago: Lewis Pub. Co., 1899), 45.

¹² Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 258-61; Robert P. Howard, *Illinois; A History of the Prairie State* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 232.

¹³ Johannsen, 461; Arthur Charles Cole, *The Era of the Civil War, 1848-1870* (1919, rpt. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 126-27.

¹⁴ Robert P. Howard, *Mostly Good and Competent Men; Illinois Governors, 1818-1988* (Springfield: Illinois Issues, 1988), 87-88.

¹⁵ Condon, 269-70; Kenney and Hartley, 41.

¹⁶ O'Shaughnessy, 120.

¹⁷ Usher F. Linder, *Reminiscences of the Early Bench and Bar of Illinois* (Chicago: Chicago Legal News Co., 1879), 66.