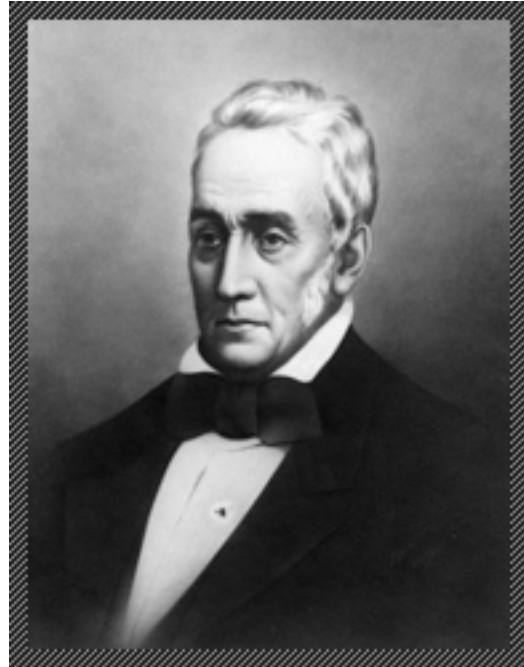


John Reynolds 1818-1825

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A public officeholder for most of his adult life, John Reynolds served in all three branches of Illinois state government. His parents, Robert and Margaret Moore Reynolds, had emigrated from Ireland to Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, where Reynolds was born on February 26, 1788. A few months later, the family moved to Tennessee, joining relatives in the Knoxville area. “We left Tennessee in February, 1800, with eight horses and two wagons,” Reynolds recalled, headed for Spanish territory along the Mississippi River. “Our company consisted of my parents, six children, I the oldest, three hired men, and a colored woman.”¹ They settled in a colony near Kaskaskia, Illinois, and then seven years later, relocated to a farm in the Goshen Settlement southwest of Edwardsville.²



Reynolds learned arithmetic fundamentals from a neighbor, then in 1806 and 1807 attended a seminary north of Belleville, “a good school,” he remembered, “taught by a competent teacher.” He studied land surveying, navigation, reading, spelling, and writing.³ At age twenty, Reynolds enrolled in a small private school near Knoxville, Tennessee to study law, but health problems forced his return to Illinois. He served as a scout against western Native Americans during the War of 1812. “Soldiers from the

adjacent States,” Reynolds remembered, “saw the country and never rested in peace until they located themselves and families in it.”⁴

Admitted to the bar at Kaskaskia, Reynolds opened a law office in the French village of Cahokia in 1814. Dealing primarily in land title litigation, he also speculated in land sales and operated two dry goods stores.⁵ A contemporary described Reynolds as six feet tall, stout, and “always gentlemanly in appearance and apparel, with modest but ungraceful manners.”⁶

Reynolds described the circumstances of his election as an associate justice of the first Illinois Supreme Court. “My friends urged me to visit, with them, the General Assembly in session at Kaskaskia, and I did so. When we reached the legislature, there was great excitement and turmoil in relation to the election of officers by the General Assembly. I had not been in Kaskaskia only a few days when it was urged on me to know if I would accept a judgeship, if I was elected. This broke in on me like a clap of thunder.”⁷

Reynolds later recalled his first term as “a strange and novel business.” His friends often failed to recognize the dignity of his office, reported historian Frederic B. Crossley, “and it is stated that the sheriff was in the habit of opening court by proclaiming without rising from the bench upon which he was sitting, ‘Boys, the Court is now open. John is on the bench.’”⁸

During his six-year judicial tenure, Reynolds, according to author and attorney John M. Scott, “was present at every session” of the Supreme Court.” Reynolds heard at least fifty cases on the bench. Ten opinions in Illinois Reports listed him as the justice delivering the opinion of the Court, but justices were not named as writing the opinion

until midway through his tenure. Reynolds also wrote dissenting opinions in at least two cases. In *Everett v. Morrison*, Reynolds dissented from the Court's reversal of judgment regarding David Everett's debt to William Morrison. While the majority of justices concluded that Everett was a collateral party to the actual debtor, Reynolds maintained Everett's liability: "I conclude that Everett was the person to whom the credit was given, and therefore liable."⁹

While performing his circuit duties, Justice Reynolds also presided at circuit court in St. Clair and neighboring counties. He ruled against anti-slavery Governor Edward Coles in a Madison County case involving the bonding of freed slaves. On appeal, however, the other Supreme Court justices ruled for Coles.¹⁰ Reynolds also wrote an opinion in a case that he had decided at the trial level. U.S. Senator and former territorial governor Ninian Edwards had sued the sheriff of St. Clair County. The sheriff had levied a tax on Edwards's property, but Edwards refused to pay because he claimed to be a resident of a different county. Reynolds ruled for the sheriff, but Edwards appealed to the Supreme Court. In Reynolds's opinion, affirming his circuit court decision, he wrote that the legislature "on the subject of laying a tax on certain property, makes no distinction between residents and non-residents." The statute guiding taxes, Reynolds continued, "shows that the lien is created on the property to be taxed, and not on the owner of the property."¹¹

In 1822, pro-slavery advocates called for a convention to consider a constitutional amendment allowing slaves in the state. "The convention question," Reynolds reported, "gave rise to two years of the most furious and boisterous excitement and contest that ever was visited on Illinois."¹² He joined Chief Justice Thomas Reynolds and fellow

Justice Browne in publicly supporting the pro-slavery faction. By about a two thousand majority, however, voters defeated the call for a constitutional convention in 1824.

“Thus, after one of the most bitter, prolonged, and memorable contests which ever convulsed the politics of this State,” wrote Thomas Ford in his *History of Illinois*, the question of making Illinois a slave State was put to rest.”¹³

With reorganization of the judiciary in 1824, Reynolds was not retained on the Supreme Court; “a sore disappointment,” John Palmer reported.¹⁴ A Democrat, Reynolds then served two terms in the Illinois House of Representatives and in 1830 narrowly won election as the state’s fourth governor, defeating Lieutenant Governor William Kinney. “A man of remarkably good sense and shrewdness,” Ford wrote of Reynolds, who exhibited “mirthfulness and pleasantry when mingling with the people.”¹⁵

In 1831, Governor Reynolds signed a treaty with Native Americans in Illinois that moved the Sauk west of the Mississippi. A year later he called for men to take up arms against contingents of Sauk and Fox who returned to northwest Illinois and frightened the white settlers. Reynolds commanded the state militia during the Black Hawk War, a conflict that was characterized, wrote historian Paul E. Stroble, “by lack of military discipline, serious misjudgments on both sides concerning each’s intentions, white hatred of Indians, and the natives’ sad defeat.”¹⁶ That defeat of Chief Black Hawk’s tribes effectively ended Native American occupation in Illinois.¹⁷

Two years later, Black Hawk War participant John A. Wakefield of Vandalia published a documentary and contemporary account of the conflict to dispel what he considered unjust criticisms of Reynolds and the federal government. In the preface to his *History of the War Between the United States and the Sac and Fox Nations of Indians*,

Wakefield hoped that “after the perusal of these letters and depositions, none will have the hardihood to say, that Governor Reynolds did wrong in the course he pursued to subdue those Indians.”¹⁸

In 1834, two weeks before the expiration of his gubernatorial term, Reynolds resigned to accept election to the U.S. House of Representatives, filling the vacancy caused by the death of Charles Slade. Reynolds served until 1837. His wife of seventeen years, Catherine Manegle, daughter of French-Canadian Indian trader Julien Dubuque, had died in 1834. Two years later, Reynolds married Sarah Wilson, a stately younger woman. He had no children by either spouse.¹⁹

Residing in a large home in Belleville, Reynolds and several associates built the first railroad in the Mississippi Valley, a six-mile track leading from his coal mine in the Mississippi bluff to the river bank across from St. Louis. “The members of the company, and I one of them, lay out on the premises of the road day and night while the work was progressing; and I assert that it was the greatest work or enterprise ever performed in Illinois under the circumstances. But it well-nigh broke us all.” The partners sold the railroad enterprise at a huge loss the following year.²⁰

Reynolds again won election as U.S. Representative, serving from 1839 to 1843. Three years later, he was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives from St. Clair County, but was defeated in 1848 for the state Senate. Elected a state representative again in 1852, he served as Speaker of the House, then in 1858 ran an unsuccessful race for state superintendent of schools.²¹

Reynolds remained a Democrat but despised Stephen A. Douglas after Douglas broke with President James Buchanan over Kansas. In the 1858 U.S. Senate race,

Reynolds supported Republican Abraham Lincoln and made a few speeches for him in southern Illinois. After Lincoln lost the election, Reynolds sent Lincoln a letter of consolation, writing that “I would much rather be defeated in principle and honesty; than succeed by fraud and corruption.”²²

For some years Reynolds edited a daily newspaper, *The Eagle*, published in Belleville. He was strongly opposed to Lincoln’s policies as president. Reynolds died of pneumonia at his Belleville home on May 18, 1865, and was buried in the city’s Walnut Hill Cemetery.²³

John Reynolds Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois.

¹ *Illinois Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Somerset Pub., 1993), 296; John Reynolds, *My Own Times; Embracing also the History of My Life* (1879, rpt. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1968), 13-14.

² Reynolds, 64; John M. Palmer, ed., *Bench and Bar of Illinois; Historical and Reminiscent* (Chicago: Lewis Pub. Co., 1899), 1094.

³ Reynolds, 93; Jessie McHarry, “John Reynolds,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 6 (1913), 31-32.

⁴ James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 155-56.

⁵ John M. Scott, *Supreme Court of Illinois, 1818; Its First Judges and Lawyers* (Bloomington, IL: John M. Scott, 1896), 119-20.

⁶ Quoted in McHarry, 29.

⁷ Reynolds, 135.

⁸ Frederic B. Crossley, *Courts and Lawyers of Illinois* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1916), 163.

⁹ *Everett v. Morrison*, 1 Ill. (Breese) 79 (1823).

¹⁰ Robert P. Howard, *Mostly Good and Competent Men; Illinois Governors, 1818-1988* (Springfield: Illinois Issues, 1988), 50; *Coles v. County of Madison*, 1 Ill. (Breese) 154 (1826).

¹¹ *Edwards v. Beaird*, 1 Ill. (Breese) 70 (1823).

¹² Reynolds, 153.

¹³ Thomas Ford, *History of Illinois, From its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (1854, rpt. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1968), 33.

¹⁴ Palmer, 18.

¹⁵ Ford, 69; D. W. Lusk, *Eighty Years of Illinois: Politics and Politicians* (Springfield, IL: H. W. Rokker, 1889), 6; Newton Bateman and Paul Selby, eds., *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois* (Chicago: Munsell, 1900), 449.

¹⁵ Ford, 69.

¹⁶ Paul E. Stroble Jr., *High on the Okaw's Western Bank: Vandalia, Illinois, 1819-39* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 98.

¹⁷ Theodore Calvin Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818-1848* (1919, rpt, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 172.

¹⁸ Quoted in Stroble, 121.

¹⁹ Howard, 52.

²⁰ Reynolds, 321-22.

²¹ *Illinois Biographical Dictionary*, p. 296.

²² John Reynolds to Abraham Lincoln, 28 December 1858, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²³ Howard, 53.