

John M. Robinson 1843

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John McCracken Robinson served on the Illinois Supreme Court for only a few months. The son of Jonathan and Jane (Jean) Black Robinson, John Robinson was born



near Georgetown, Kentucky on April 10, 1794.¹ After graduating with honors from Transylvania University in Lexington, he moved to Shawneetown, Illinois and then to Carmi, Illinois, where in 1818, he was admitted to the Illinois bar. “Well known as a thorough lawyer,” he won appointment as state’s attorney for the area, a position he held until 1827. His brother James F. Robinson would later serve as governor of

Kentucky.²

Active and interested in military affairs, John Robinson rose to the rank of major general in the Illinois militia “and was commonly known as General Robinson,” reported biographer Daniel Berry. “Physically, he was a man six feet, four inches in height. . . . In personal appearance he could scarcely be excelled.”³

In January 1829, Robinson married Mary B. D. Ratcliff, daughter of prominent Carmi resident James Ratcliff. The Robinsons became the parents of two children, James M. and Margaret Robinson, and resided in the town’s oldest house, a building that had earlier served as the first White County courthouse.⁴

Upon the death of U.S. Senator John McLean, Illinois legislators in 1830 elected Robinson to the position, and he routinely supported the programs of Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. Robinson chaired the Committee on Engrossed Bills and served on the Post Office and Post Roads committees.⁵

Completing McLean's unexpired term, Robinson won election to a full term in 1834. During that tenure, he followed a majority of state legislators' wishes in voting against President Jackson's proposal for an independent treasury, even though he personally favored the measure. "My political tenets lead me to believe," he explained, "that the representative is bound by the will of his constituents; and that so far as relates to a Senator in Congress, the Legislature is presumed to be the true exponent of that will."⁶

After his completing his term in the Senate, legislators elected Robinson on January 14, 1843 as an associate justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, succeeding John Dean Caton. While handling circuit duties in Ottawa, in the Ninth Judicial Circuit, Robinson died on April 27, 1843.⁷ His remains were returned to Carmi for interment in the Old Graveyard Cemetery.

Since he died before being able to serve on the Supreme Court, he did not participate in any arguments nor write any opinions. Opening the January 1844 Illinois Supreme Court term, Chief Justice William Wilson expressed regret that Robinson "was not permitted to take his seat among us," then memorialized his "mature judgment, sterling integrity, and strong sense of the obligations of a public trust. . . . While steadfast in his principles, he was courteous and liberal to his opponents, and true to his personal friends."⁸

The Crawford County, Illinois, seat of Robinson is named in honor of John M. Robinson.⁹

John M. Robinson Papers: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois.

¹ Daniel Berry, "Forgotten Statesmen of Illinois; Hon. John M. Robinson," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 7 (1914-1915), 77.

² John M. Palmer, ed., *The Bench and Bar of Illinois; Historical and Reminiscent* (Chicago: Lewis Pub. Co., 1899), 43.

³ Berry, 78.

⁴ Berry, 78.

⁵ Theodore Calvin Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818-1848* (1918, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 138; David Kenney and Robert E. Hartley, *An Uncertain Tradition; U.S. Senators from Illinois, 1818-2003* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 21.

⁶ Berry, 79.

⁷ 5 Ill. vi. Robinson's death date has been reported variantly as April 25, 1843; Berry, 78.

⁸ 5 Ill. vi-vii.

⁹ Edward Callary, *Place Names of Illinois*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 298.