

Thomas Reynolds

1822-1825

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Succeeding Joseph Philips as Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court in August 1822, Thomas Reynolds served in the position for three years. “Persons that knew him,” wrote John M. Scott, “all bear the same testimony, he was a very able and learned lawyer and made a good judge.”¹

Reynolds was born in Bracken County, Kentucky on March 12, 1796, the son of Nathaniel and Catherine Vernon Reynolds. Completing his education while still in his teens and admitted to the bar as a young man, in 1817, he moved with his family to the Illinois Territory. Licensed to practice



law in the Gallatin County Circuit Court, Reynolds entered politics as clerk of the Illinois House of Representatives from 1818 to 1822.²

Appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Reynolds also served as a Circuit Court judge. “This gentleman was a very talented lawyer of his day,” wrote John M. Palmer, “the peer of Benton, Marshall and others.”³ On September 2, 1823, Reynolds married Eliza Ann Young in Bracken County, Kentucky, and in 1824 became parents of one child, Ambrose Dudley Reynolds.⁴

During Reynolds short tenure on the bench, he heard at least thirty cases at the Illinois Supreme Court, writing opinions in at least eighteen of them. In *Gill v. Caldwell*,

Reynolds overturned a case in which a witness raised his hand, but did not use a bible, to be sworn in. The question before the Court was whether the law recognized that kind of oath. Reynolds noted that “oaths are to be administered to all persons according to their own opinions, and as it most affects their consciences.” By only uplifting his hand, the witness was correctly sworn in to testify.⁵

Thomas Reynolds emerged a leader in the movement to permit slavery in the state, helping to establish a pro-slavery newspaper in Kaskaskia. Both pro- and anti-slavery proponents distributed “fiery” handbills and pamphlets on the issue. “The State was almost covered with them,” wrote author and later Governor Thomas Ford. “They flew everywhere, and everywhere they scorched and scathed as they flew. This was a long, excited, angry, bitter and indignant contest,” with Reynolds joining three fellow justices in an unsuccessful call for a constitutional convention on the slavery issue.⁶

The legislature reorganized the judiciary in 1824, establishing circuit court judgeships to relieve the Supreme Court judges of that “onerous and even oppressive” responsibility of presiding in circuit court cases.⁷ The legislature did not re-elect Reynolds as a justice on the Court. In 1826, he won a seat in the Illinois House of Representatives. He became known as an outstanding orator, in both the courts and the legislature.

Moving to Missouri in 1829, the Reynolds family settled in Fayette, Howard County, where he practiced law. Elected as a Democrat to the Missouri House of Representatives in 1832, Reynolds was chosen as Speaker. Nominated by Governor Lillburn W. Boggs for the Second Judicial Circuit of Missouri in 1837, Reynolds served in that position for three years. At the 1840 state Democratic convention, according to a

Missouri historian, “he was nominated for governor almost by acclamation.” Reynolds won the general election to become the state’s seventh Governor.⁸

During his gubernatorial tenure, Reynolds advocated states’ rights, including the right of each state to decide the question of slavery, and he recommended life imprisonment for those who enticed slaves from service or aided in their escape. “In his warning against centralized government,” wrote historian Perry McCandless, Reynolds “seemed retrogressive in the midst of a changing economy.”⁹ He did have several significant accomplishments. With his support, the legislature formed fifteen new counties while improving voting requirements and abolishing the practice of debtor imprisonment.¹⁰

In the middle of his term, however, Reynolds began suffering from both physical and mental illnesses. Then, on February 9, 1844, “in a melancholic frame of mind, imagining his enemies were slandering him,” he committed suicide with a rifle in his Executive Mansion office. At the time, he was the state’s leading candidate for the United States Senate.¹¹

“Governor Reynolds’s death was a tragedy,” wrote a relative, Harriet Shoemaker. “He had no enemies, political or otherwise, for Thomas Reynolds was one of the most popular and beloved men in the state of Missouri.” Two years after his death, officials erected a granite shaft at his Woodlawn Cemetery grave in Jefferson City and named the county of Reynolds in his honor.¹²

¹ John M. Scott, *Supreme Court of Illinois, 1818, Its First Judges and Lawyers* (Bloomington, IL: John M. Scott, 1896), 134.

² William G. Livingstone, “The Thomas Reynolds Confusion,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 54 (1961), 423-25. Some historians have confused this Thomas Reynolds with the brother of Illinois Governor and Supreme Court Justice John Reynolds.

³ John M. Palmer, ed., *The Bench and Bar of Illinois; Historical and Reminiscent* (Chicago: Lewis Pub. Co., 1899), 1094.

⁴ “The Thomas Reynolds Confusion,” 424.

⁵ *Gill v. Caldwell*, 1 Ill. (Breese) 53 (1822).

⁶ Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois, From its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (1854, rpt. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1968), 32-33.

⁷ John Reynolds, *My Own Times; Embracing also the History of My Life* (1879; rpt. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1968), 160.

⁸ Floyd Calvin Shoemaker, *Missouri and Missourians, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Lewis Pub. Co., 1943), 422-23.

⁹ Perry McCandless, *History of Missouri, Vol. II, 1820-1860* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972), 124.

¹⁰ Robert Sobel and John Raimo, eds., *Biographical Directory of the Governors of the United States, 1789-1978*, 4 vols., (Westport, CT: Meckler Books, 1978), vol. 2.

¹¹ Palmer, 13-14.

¹² “The Thomas Reynolds Confusion,” 424-25.