



A Monument to Slavery Hangs Over N.C.'s Highest Court

By CDPL Staff

There is perhaps no clearer symbol of slavery's lingering influence on the death penalty than the portrait that looms over the North Carolina Supreme Court, whose seven justices must review every death sentence. The courtroom is filled with portraits of former chief justices, but the painting of North Carolina's third chief justice, Thomas Ruffin, is three times as large as the rest and occupies a place of honor directly behind the bench.

Ruffin served as chief justice from 1833 to 1852. He distinguished himself not only as a cruel slaver whose overseers burned enslaved people and rubbed salt and pepper into their wounds, but as the author of one of the nation's most extreme pro-slavery decisions.

In the 1829 case *State v. Mann*, Ruffin held that a slave owner could not be prosecuted for shooting an enslaved woman because "the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect." This precedent-setting decision had horrific consequences for enslaved people.

Statues of Ruffin have recently been removed from the N.C. Court of Appeals and other courthouses around the state, but his portrait remains in the Supreme Court. When court is in session, Ruffin's stern expression is aimed toward Cheri Beasley, North Carolina's first African American chief justice.

Read an [essay on Ruffin's legacy](#) by scholars Eric Muller and Sally Greene.