



NC Commission on Racial & Ethnic Disparities  
in the Criminal Justice System

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## **NC Commission focused on Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice System Calls for Removal of Chief Justice Ruffin Portrait and Statue**

The North Carolina Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (NC CRED) is calling on the North Carolina Supreme Court to remove the life-sized portrait of former Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin inside its courtroom as well as the statue of him outside the entrance to NC Court of Appeals. Thomas Ruffin served as Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court from 1833 to 1852.

“The portrait of Chief Justice Ruffin, larger than all the other former Justice’s portraits, hangs prominently above the seat of the current Chief Justice,” says NC CRED’s board chair, James Williams, a retired Public Defender and well-known civil rights advocate. “Chief Justice Ruffin owned, trafficked, beat, and legally sanctioned brutality towards enslaved people. Our Chief Justice today is an African American woman. Surely it’s time to take down this tribute to our violent and racist past.”

In a letter prepared in collaboration with UNC School of Law Professor Eric L. Muller, the Commission asserts that Justice Ruffin was “a man who trafficked in enslaved African Americans for profit, beat them with his own hands, tore apart their families, and reshaped the law to allow limitless violence to their bodies.” Ruffin’s opinion for the Supreme Court in the case of *North Carolina v. Mann* in 1829 - during which he argued that even when a slave on loan to another man had “uncontrolled authority over [her] body..” and “the power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect” - is considered one of the “most brutal in the entire law of American slavery.”

The full letter is pasted below.

NC CRED is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization consisting of nearly 30 criminal justice leaders and stakeholders who share a commitment to building a more equitable, effective, and humane criminal justice system throughout the state.

The commission believes that Thomas Ruffin’s record on slavery and lifetime of callousness and brutality toward enslaved African Americans is a blight on our state’s legal history and, therefore, his life-sized portrait and statue should be promptly removed from the places of reverence they now occupy.



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The North Carolina Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (NC CRED) calls upon the North Carolina Supreme Court to remove the life-sized portrait of Thomas Ruffin that dominates its courtroom and the life-sized statue of him that guards the entrance to the North Carolina Court of Appeals. Ruffin was a man who trafficked in enslaved African Americans for profit, beat them with his own hands, tore apart their families, and reshaped the law to allow limitless violence to their bodies. Yet his likeness has been the visual focal point for every visitor to our state’s highest courts for over a century. The time has come to remove him from this position of special veneration.

Ruffin, born into a slave-owning Virginia family in 1787, was not predestined to a path of racial brutality. He left the South to attend Princeton at the age of sixteen, at a moment when New Jersey was enacting a law to end slavery. The experience moved him to write home “greatly lamenting” the “uncommon hard fate” of enslaved people and despairing of “any means by which it may be ameliorated.”<sup>1</sup> The young Ruffin was asking himself questions about the morality of slavery that were not uncommon in his generation. Some of his contemporaries, like Ruffin’s eventual Supreme Court colleague William Gaston, carried those doubts forward in their lives and acted on them, to the benefit of the enslaved.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sterling Ruffin to Thomas Ruffin (June 1804), in 1 THE PAPERS OF THOMAS RUFFIN 54 (J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton ed., 1918). The son’s letter to his father does not survive; the quoted words are the senior Ruffin’s summary of what his son wrote him.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara A. Jackson, Called to Duty: Justice William A. Gaston, 94 NC L Rev 2051 (2016).

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Thomas Ruffin left his doubts behind. He received ten slaves as a wedding gift in 1809<sup>3</sup> and then continued to acquire more. Plantation life for these men and women was shockingly abusive, and Ruffin knew it. In 1824, for example, a friend alerted him to the "evil and barbarous Treatment of [his] Negroes" by overseers on his plantation, including the "barbecu[ing], pepper[ing]and salt[ing]" of one named Will.<sup>4</sup> Ruffin himself took the rod to an enslaved woman named Bridget for giving him a look he found insolent.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, many men in Ruffin's circles owned slaves, and ruthless discipline was not unique to Ruffin's plantation. But Ruffin also did something his peers did not: he launched a slave-trading partnership with an associate named Chambers that bought human beings in the border states and sold them at a profit in the deep south. By the 1820s, slave trading was hardly the most reputable of businesses, and Ruffin knew it. A colleague Ruffin invited to join the partnership in 1822 turned him down flat, saying that the "feelings of his mind in some measure revolt[ed]" against "the trafic [sic]" in human beings.<sup>6</sup> The disrepute of the enterprise did not

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<sup>3</sup> Sally Hadden, "Judging Slavery: Thomas Ruffin and *State v. Mann*," in LOCAL MATTERS: RACE, CRIME, AND JUSTICE IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH 5 (Christopher Waldrep & Donald C. Nieman eds., Univ. of Georgia Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Letter from A.D. Murphey to Thomas Ruffin (June 3, 1824), in Thomas Ruffin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, UNC Chapel Hill.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Thomas Ruffin to Archibald D. Murphey, (Oct. 29, 1831), in Thomas Ruffin Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Quinton Anderson to Thomas Ruffin (Jan. 15, 1822), in Thomas Ruffin Papers.

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stop Ruffin from participating; it simply led him to conceal his role. He drafted the partnership agreement to require Chambers to carry on the business in his name alone.<sup>7</sup>

Ruffin was a devoted husband and father, but the family ties of the African Americans he owned and traded meant nothing to him. When it made financial sense, he sold husbands away from wives and children away from parents. Offered \$150 for an older enslaved man named Noah who had been with him for years, Ruffin asked Noah whether he wanted to be sold. He did not; he was “extremely anxious to spend the remnant of his pilgrimage here on earth in the society of his beloved better half.” Ruffin sold him off anyway.<sup>8</sup> And the ledgers of his slave-trading business show sales of many parentless children, like “Little Charles,” a boy of ten, and his “two sisters younger,” on whom Ruffin turned a profit of \$325 in 1825.

Ruffin inflicted his most grievous injury on enslaved African Americans in his 1829 opinion for the Supreme Court in the case of *North Carolina v. Mann*, unquestionably one of the most brutal in the entire law of American slavery. A jury in Edenton took the extraordinary step of convicting John Mann of the crime of assault for shooting an enslaved woman named Lydia in the back as she ran from his discipline.<sup>9</sup> Mann was not Lydia’s owner; he had merely rented her for a time. This important fact would have allowed the Supreme Court to leave his conviction in

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<sup>7</sup> Articles of Agreement between Benjamin Chambers and Thomas Ruffin (Oct. 26, 1821), in Thomas Ruffin Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Thomas Ruffin to Anne Ruffin (Jan. 3, 1852), Letter from Sally Ruffin to Thomas Ruffin (Jan. 11, 1858), Letter from Sally Ruffin to Thomas Ruffin (Jan. 17, 1852), all in Thomas Ruffin Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Sally Greene, “*State v. Mann* Exhumed,” 87 N.C. L. Rev. 701 (2009).

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place. But Judge Ruffin exonerated Mann. Even as a renter of Lydia, Mann had an “uncontrolled authority over [her] body” that extended all the way to shooting her. Slavery depended on the total submission of the slave to the master, Ruffin argued, and “the power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect.”<sup>10</sup>

The law did not compel this outcome or this way of expressing it. This is what Thomas Ruffin chose. He claimed to find the *Mann* case lamentable, a matter he would have preferred to avoid. A lifetime of callousness and brutality toward African American slaves suggests otherwise.

Thomas Ruffin’s record on slavery and the rights of African Americans is a blight on our state’s legal history. Even in the context of his own time his views and actions were regressive and malign. For these reasons, NC CRED respectfully requests the removal of Thomas Ruffin’s life-sized portrait and statue from the places of reverence they now occupy.

Respectfully,

James E. Williams, Jr.  
Board Chair  
North Carolina Commission on Social and Ethnic Disparities

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<sup>10</sup> North Carolina v. Mann, 13 N.C. 263, 266 (1829).