Ruffin Residence Hall

The Board of Trustees named this building in 1922 to honor Thomas Ruffin, a UNC trustee from 1813 until his death in 1870, and Thomas Ruffin Jr., Class of 1844.¹

The elder Ruffin:

- Enslaved one hundred and thirty-five men, women, and children in Alamance and Rockingham Counties
- Invested in and profited from the domestic slave trade
- Used his authority as a jurist to normalize the violence inherent in slavery
- Fortified the institution of racial slavery against abolitionists and Black insurrectionists

Thomas Ruffin was born in 1787 to Sterling and Alice Ruffin, wealthy slave owners in Essex County, Virginia. He was educated at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University); practiced law in Orange County, North Carolina; served in the North Carolina state legislature; and in 1829, was appointed by that body to the state supreme court. Ruffin presided as chief justice from 1833 to 1852, and again from 1858 to 1859. His son, Thomas Ruffin Jr., was born in 1824, studied at the University of North Carolina, and made his living as an attorney. He served one term in the North Carolina House of Commons (1850-1851), fought for the Confederacy as a colonel in the North Carolina infantry, and from 1881 to 1883 sat as an associate justice on the state supreme court. The younger Ruffin, in the words of a twentieth-century biographer, had "a reputation as one of the state's best lawyers" but otherwise left no particular mark on jurisprudence.²

In 1860, the elder Ruffin enslaved one hundred Black men, women, and children on the Alamance County farm he called the Hermitage and another thirty-five on a smaller property in Rockingham County. He was known by his neighbors for his own cruelty and that of his white overseer. In 1824,

¹ Minutes, June 13, 1922, oversize volume 12, Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina Records, 1789-1932, #40001, University Archives, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Kemp P. Battle, History of the University of North Carolina, vol. 1 (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1907), 823.

Archibald DeBow Murphey, with whom Ruffin had studied law, complained of the overseer's "barbarous treatment" of the slaves at the Hermitage. He noted that they were "worked to death" and whipped mercilessly – and that one man, Will, had been "literally barbecued, peppered, and salted." Murphey encouraged his friend to discipline the overseer, lest the man's cruelty tarnish Ruffin's own "character" and reputation. The archives offer no record of Ruffin's reply, though correspondence from his wife and another neighbor suggest that he was aware of the overseer's behavior and chose not to intervene.3

Between 1821 and 1826, Ruffin also participated in the domestic slave trade. He was the silent partner in an arrangement with a man named Benjamin Chambers. Ruffin provided a substantial cash investment, but Chambers carried on the business of buying and selling slaves in his name only, presumably to shield Ruffin from rebuke by professional associates who disapproved of the trade in human flesh. One such figure was William Gaston, who served with Ruffin on the state supreme court. In 1832, he encouraged young men at the University of North Carolina to commit themselves to the "extirpation of the worst evil" that afflicted the South: racial slavery. "Disguise the truth as we may," Gaston declared, the institution "poisons morals at the fountain head."4

Ruffin likely earned a handsome profit from slave trading. During the 1820s, a boom in cotton production in the new states of Alabama and Mississippi created an insatiable demand for enslaved laborers, who were shackled together and driven southward in coffles from "exporting" states – North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Maryland. Traders conducted their business with extraordinary callousness. They routinely broke families apart in order to maximize profits on the youngest, strongest men and the women of prime childbearing age. Ruffin approved of that practice; indeed, he encouraged it. In Cannon v. Jenkins, a case argued before the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1830, he ruled that estate executors had an obligation to break up slave families if separate sales would bring higher prices. "Most commonly . . . articles sell best singly," Ruffin observed, "and therefore they ought, in general, to be so offered." An executor was "not to indulge his charities at the expense" of the sellers he represented.5

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4 Hadden, "Judging Slavery," 7-8; William Gaston, Address Delivered Before the Philanthropic and Dialectic Societies at Chapel Hill, June 20, 1832 (Raleigh: Jos. Gales and Son, 1832), 14.

Enumeration of the people enslaved on Thomas Ruffin's Rockingham County farm. The list begins in the lower left corner – where Ruffin is named as "owner" and R. Abbot, as "manager" – and continues in the right-hand column. 1860 Federal Census, Slave Schedule, Rockingham County, North Carolina.
Today, Ruffin is most often remembered for the equally inhumane judgment he rendered in *State v. Mann*, a case heard during his first year on North Carolina's high court. The case involved John Mann, a widowed sea captain living in Edenton, who had hired an enslaved woman named Lydia from her owner, Elizabeth Jones. Jones, a minor child, had inherited Lydia from her parents. She lived in the household of her brother-in-law, Josiah Small, who paid for her upkeep by hiring Lydia out as a laborer. Lydia defied Mann's authority over her, and in one instance attempted to run away. Mann picked up his gun and shot her in the back.

The Chowan County district attorney charged Mann with assault and battery, and a jury found him guilty. They based that judgment on well-established case law, which held that hirers such as Mann were liable to safeguard the property of another—in this case, Elizabeth Jones' slave, Lydia—which they held in their possession only temporarily.  

Ruffin reversed that verdict on appeal. A slave's obedience, he wrote, "is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body. There is nothing else that can operate to produce the effect." Maintaining that authority was, in Ruffin's mind, imperative to safeguarding public order and the economic interests of slave owners. On that account, he treated Mann as Elizabeth Jones' proxy and accorded him full rights of ownership, including the unfettered right to inflict grievous bodily harm. In what legal scholar Eric Muller has described as "the coldest and starkest defense of the physical violence inherent in slavery that ever appeared in an American judicial opinion," Ruffin declared: "the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect." 

Why did Ruffin depart from established case law in such dramatic fashion? Legal historian Sally Greene suggests that he did so to strengthen the defense of slavery, in part, against abolitionism in the North, which had been gaining support since 1820, when Congress admitted Missouri to the Union as the first slave state west of the Mississippi. Ruffin was also mindful of worsening fears of Black insurrection, particularly in the eastern North Carolina counties where whites were outnumbered by the people they held in bondage. In December 1829, at the very time Mann was writing his opinion, nervous slave owners in Lenoir County petitioned the legislature to establish a special police force to suppress the clandestine activities of runaways living in dense forests and swamplands.

In this context, overturning John Mann's conviction was a bold strategic move. As Sally Greene has noted, by eliding the distinction between slave owner and slave hirer, Ruffin created in an instant a vastly enlarged body of white men with "an unqualified right of discipline over slaves." He also attempted—with uneven success—to close the door on juries and judges who, like those in Chowan County, would exercise more nuanced understandings of

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the relationship between slave and enslaver, and most especially a sense of "moral right" that
drew a line between discipline and gross brutality.9

On these points, Ruffin remained resolute throughout his judicial career. Twenty years
after State v. Mann, a majority of justices on the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in another
case that "if a white man wantonly inflicts upon a slave, over whom he has no authority, a
severe blow or repeated blows, under unusual circumstances, and the slave, at the instant,
strikes and kills, without evincing, by the means used, great wickedness or cruelty, he is only
guilty of manslaughter." Ruffin was the lone dissenter. "It is very clear," he wrote, "that the
question turns on the difference in the condition of the free white men and negro slaves
(emphasis added). For, there is no doubt, if all the persons had been white men, that the
conduct of the deceased would have palliated the killing by the person assaulted, or by his
comrade, to manslaughter." But when the deceased was white and the killer was a slave, the
crime was unequivocally murder. Ruffin explained: "the rule for determining what is a
mitigating provocation cannot, in the nature of things, be the same between persons who are
in equali jure, as two freemen, and those who stand in the very great disparity of free whites
and black slaves."10

What, in the end, are we to make of Thomas Ruffin? Was he simply a man of his time, as
some have claimed, guided by principles that were commonplace and conventional? The
evidence suggests otherwise. As Sally Greene has argued, Ruffin "took an active part in
defining" the historical moment in which he lived. In State v. Mann, "he chose to elevate the
slave hirer . . . to the status of a master," and by doing so, "created an urgent situation" – a
rupture in the authority of white over Black – "for which his judicial response became the
commanding solution." For Ruffin, white dominion was totalizing, and the law gave no quarter
to the humanity of the enslaved.11

The story told here did not figure in the adulation of Thomas Ruffin by UNC's trustees
when they named a campus building for him in 1922, or by the North Carolina Bar Association,
which in 1915 placed a bronze statue of him outside the chamber of the North Carolina
Supreme Court. Both bodies regarded Ruffin as a "great citizen" and source of "inspiration for
the future" – "a man resolved and steady to his trust, inflexible to ill and obstinately just." Ruffin
the brutal slave master, trader in human chattel, and author of the most notorious
defense of slaveowners' authority over the bodies of the enslaved was invisible in such
tributes.12

9 Greene, "State v. Mann Exhumed," 744, 748.
10 State v. Caesar, 31 N.C. 391 (1849).
11 Greene, "State v. Mann Exhumed," 751. On Ruffin as a man of his times, see David Lowenthal, "On
Lowenthal contends that "those who condemn past crimes seem unaware that slavery and other social inequities
were acceptable norms from classical times to the nineteenth century." That argument ignores the fact that moral
critiques of slavery were also commonplace in Ruffin's time, particularly among the four million Americans whose
bondage was defined by the color of their skin.
12 The Unveiling and Presentation to the State of the Statue of Thomas Ruffin, by the North Carolina Bar
That erasure – that silence – was the product of a focused effort to create a falsified, usable past for a neo-Confederate white South that by the early twentieth century had stripped Black men of the right to vote, institutionalized Jim Crow segregation, and dismantled much of the promise of Emancipation. White civic leaders, politicians, and scholars labored in the new century to characterize slavery as a benevolent institution, to glorify secession as a principled defense of the Constitution, and to make patriots of the men who went to war against the United States. At UNC, that project found expression in the classroom and in faculty scholarship, in the erection of a Confederate monument and in a scramble during the 1910s and 1920s to name campus buildings for slave owners, Confederate officers, Klansmen, and avowed white supremacists. The list includes:

- Battle Hall, 1912, named for Kemp P. Battle
- Pettigrew Hall, 1912, named for James Johnston Pettigrew
- Vance Hall, 1912, named for Zebulon B. Vance
- Swain Hall, 1914, named for David L. Swain
- Steele Building, 1920, named for Walter L. Steele
- Grimes Residence Hall, 1922, named for Bryan Grimes
- Mangum Residence Hall, 1922, named for Willie P. Mangum, Adolphus W. Mangum, and William Preston Mangum
- Manly Residence Hall, 1922, named for Charles Manly and Matthias Manly
- Manning Hall, 1922, named for John Manning
- Murphey Hall, 1922, named for Archibald DeBow Murphey
- Saunders Hall, 1922, named for William L. Saunders, renamed Carolina Hall in 2015
- Spencer Residence Hall, 1927, named for Cornelia Phillips Spencer
- Aycock Residence Hall, 1928, named for Charles B. Aycock
- Bingham Hall, 1928, named for Robert H. Bingham
- Graham Residence Hall, 1928, named for John W. Graham

Today, the presence of these names on the landscape is a testament to the success of the neo-Confederates' historical project and the ways that it continues to shape what, in public memory, is known and forgotten about slavery, the Confederacy, and the Jim Crow South.

Several North Carolina courts have acknowledged the history surveyed in this dossier and have renounced the memorialization of Thomas Ruffin and his racist legacy. In January 2020, at the request of Senior Resident Superior Court Judge Carl Fox and James Williams, first vice president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP, Orange County officials took down the Ruffin portrait that was on display in the Historic Courthouse in Hillsborough. Six months later, officials removed a statue of Ruffin from the state Court of Appeals Building in Raleigh. Then, at the end of the year, the state Supreme Court announced that it would substitute the state shield for the life-size portrait of Ruffin that had long towered above the seat of the chief justice. Cheri Beasley, the first Black woman to preside over the court, explained the decision. "It is important," she said, "that our courtroom spaces convey the highest ideals of justice and
that people who come before our Court feel comfortable knowing that they will be treated fairly. The Court’s decision to remove the Ruffin portrait is a tremendous reflection of the progress that has been made since the time Chief Justice Ruffin served on the Court." Beasley made that statement days after conceding defeat in her bid for re-election. She lost to Republican challenger and fellow supreme court justice Paul Newby.\(^\text{13}\)

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**UNC Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward**