



State of Tennessee  
Department of State  
**Tennessee State Library and Archives**  
403 Seventh Avenue North  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243-0312

**JOHN CATRON**  
**(1786-1865)**  
**PAPERS**  
**1833-[1833-1862]-1918**

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Archival Technical Services

Accession Numbers: 79; 97; 177

Location: S-8

## **INTRODUCTION**

The papers of John Catron (1786-1865), Supreme Court Judge, are composed of letters, a biographical sketch, his will, and the story of a murder case. Two of the letters written by Judge Catron to Andrew Jackson and one to Martin Van Buren are of political significance. The murder case was that of a Cherokee Indian who had killed a white man. There are twelve items in this collection. There are no restriction on the materials. Single photocopies of unpublished writings in the John Catron Papers may be made for purposes of scholarly research.

## **SCOPE AND CONTENT**

These twelve items of Judge John Catron are composed of letters, a biographic sketch, his will, and the story of a murder case span 1833 to 1918, but the bulk of the material dates 1833 to 1862. John Catron, a self-educated man, after serving under Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812 was elected state attorney by the Tennessee legislature. By 1824, he was a member of the Tennessee Court of Errors and Appeals, its highest court. He became Chief Justice of the Court and served until 1836 when he was retired in accordance with a provision of the new state constitution. Catron was active in politics and in 1836 directed the presidential campaign of Martin Van Buren in Tennessee. Andrew Jackson nominated Catron to the Supreme Court on March 3, 1837, Jackson's last full day as President. He held that office until his death. He was noted for his familiarity with laws involving titles to western land. He stood on the states' rights side but opposed secession. He was forced to leave Tennessee when he refused to support the Confederacy.

## **CONTAINER LIST**

1. Correspondence, 1833-1864 – 5 letters
2. Two sketches, Story of Murder Case – 4 items.
3. Will, June 2, 1862 – Recorded June 29, 1865

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

### John Catron

- 1786 Born in Pennsylvania of German parentage on his father's side. When very small he was removed to Wythe County, Virginia and later to Kentucky.
- 1812 Moved to Tennessee and settled near the Cumberland Mountains. Served with Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812.
- 1815 Admitted to the bar.
- 1818 Practiced law on what was then known as Mountains Circuits – Proficient in land law, then the chief source of litigation.
- 1818 Moved to Nashville and won distinction as Chancery lawyer.
- 1824 Elected Judge of Supreme Court of Errors and Appeals. Then the court of last resort.
- 1829 Delivered a scathing arraignment against dueling and disbarred a lawyer for fighting a duel.
- 1831 Office of Chief Justice created and Catron became Tennessee's first Chief Justice.
- 1836 Directed the campaign of Martin Van Buren in Tennessee.
- 1837 Catron appointed to one of the two newly created Associate Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court by Andrew Jackson as one of his last official acts before leaving office.
- 1857 Held Missouri Compromise unconstitutional in the Dred Scott case.
- 1861 Made an unsuccessful effort to hold Tennessee in the Union.
- 1861-65 Stayed with the Union, but was requested to leave Tennessee.
- 1865 Died May 30.