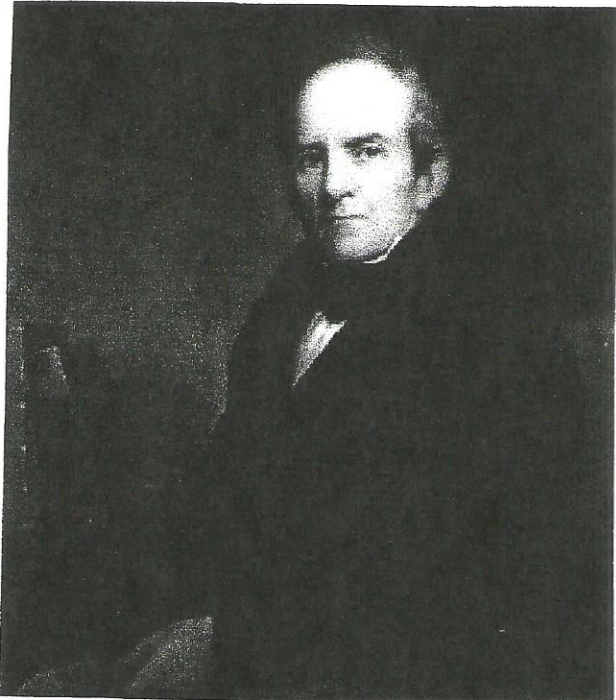


Smith Thompson

United States Supreme Court Justice



The Supreme Court of the United States established in 1789 is the highest federal court. As of August 2010 there have been 112 Justices.

The Honorable Smith Thompson was born in 1768 to Ezra and Rachel Smith Thompson in Amenia, New York although some sources claim it was Stanford, New York. His father was a wealthy land speculator and a New York State politician.

Thompson graduated from Princeton University, then known as the College of New Jersey, in 1788. He taught for a short period of time and then studied law under James Kent and Gilbert Livingston. In 1794 Thompson married Gilbert Livingston's daughter Sarah and succeeded Kent as Livingston's law partner. Smith and Sarah had four children.

In 1800 Smith Thompson was elected to the New York State Assembly and in 1801 attended the New York State Constitutional Convention.

In 1802 Smith Thompson was appointed to the New York State Supreme Court serving as Associate Justice from 1802 until 1814 and Chief Justice from 1814 until 1818.

Smith Thompson was appointed the 6th Secretary of the Navy by President Monroe in 1819. He campaigned for the Democratic-Republican nomination for president in 1823, but withdrew. He accepted appointment by President Monroe to the United States Supreme Court in 1823 and was assigned circuit duties in the

Second Circuit which consisted of New York, Connecticut and Vermont. In an unusual, but then quite common step, he ran for Governor of New York while still a Supreme Court Justice, but was unsuccessful in his 1828 attempt. He did not run for political office again.

His wife Sarah died in 1834 and in 1836 he married her cousin Eliza daughter of Henry Livingston. Eliza was much younger, less than half his age. Smith and Eliza had three children.

In 1839 a mutiny occurred aboard the ship *La Amistad* traveling along the coast of Cuba when Mende tribesmen abducted for the slave trade managed to gain control of their captors. Although slavery existed before the Declaration of Independence, the United States and Britain had prohibited international slave trade in 1808. The *Amistad* was not considered a slave ship because it was not involved in the abduction of the natives of Sierra Leone. It was a transport ship carrying slaves among ports in the Caribbean. The Tribesmen wanted to return to Africa, but sailed north instead. The vessel was captured off the coast of Long Island by the Navy Brig *USS Washington*.

Perhaps some of us may remember “*Amistad*”, the American historical drama film directed by Steven Spielberg based on the true story.

Smith Thompson presided over the noted Circuit Court trial of the *Amistad* case which eventually reached the United States Supreme Court. In 1841 Justice Smith Thompson joined the majority holding that the Africans had been unlawfully kidnapped, sold into slavery and escaped captivity. They were not property. They were freed. One historian described the case as the most important case involving slavery until the *Dred Scott* decision.

Smith Thompson died in 1843 in Poughkeepsie, New York and is buried in the Livingston plot at the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery.

In 1919 the *USS Smith Thompson*, a *Clemson-class* Destroyer, was named in his honor on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Smith Thomson becoming Secretary of the Navy.