



# **John McKinley and the Antebellum Supreme Court: Circuit Riding in the Old Southwest**

*Steven P. Brown*

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*John McKinley and the Antebellum Supreme Court* presents a portrait of US Supreme Court justice John McKinley (1780–1852) and provides a penetrating analysis of McKinley's time and place, the exigencies of his circuit work, and the contributions he made to both American legal history and Alabama.

Steven P. Brown rescues from obscurity John McKinley, one of the three Alabama justices, along with John Archibald Campbell and Hugo Black, who have served on the US Supreme Court. A native Kentuckian who moved in 1819 to northern Alabama as a land speculator and lawyer, McKinley was elected to the state legislature three times and became first a senator and then a representative in the US Congress before being elevated to the Supreme Court in 1837. He spent his first five years on the court presiding over the newly created Ninth Circuit, which covered Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. His was not only the newest circuit, encompassing a region that, because of its recent settlement, included a huge number of legal claims related to property, but it was also the largest, the furthest from Washington, DC, and by far the most difficult to traverse.

While this is a thorough biography of McKinley's life, it also details early Alabama state politics and provides one of the most exhaustive accounts available of the internal workings of the antebellum Supreme Court and the very real challenges that accompanied the now-abandoned practice of circuit riding. In providing the first indepth assessment of the life and Supreme Court career of Justice John McKinley, Brown has given us a compelling portrait of a man active in the leading financial, legal, and political circles of his day.

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