

Holland Land Office Museum

Quick Facts

Famous Batavians

JOHN HENRY MARTINDALE

John Henry Martindale was born in Sandy Hill, New York on March 20, 1815. He graduated West Point in 1835 and became a member of the United States Army. In 1836, he retired due to an inability to get into the Corps of Engineers. So, John moved to Batavia, where he practiced law. Due to his sense of justice and fair play, he was appointed District Attorney in 1842. During the next several years, he represented the Seneca Indians in several court cases. Two of these cases made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The first involved a Native American, John Blacksmith, suing a white settler for assault. The event occurred in 1847, but did not reach the US Supreme Court until January of 1857. The court found in favor of John Henry and his clients. His second US Supreme Court case actually started before the Blacksmith case but was settled in the Supreme Court later. It started in 1846 when Martindale tried to sue white settlers living on the Tonawanda Reservation based on the Law of 1821. This law stated that white settlers could not settle on 'Indian' Lands. The first time the courts ruled that he could not remove the white settlers. In 1849, he tried again and this time he was successful. The settlers appealed and in February of 1859, The US Supreme

Court ruled that the Law of 1821 was constitutional and that the white settlers had to move off the reservation. John Henry was well liked by the Seneca people. He acted as council to them in legal matters and represented their interests in Washington.

In August of 1861, John Henry rejoined the army. He attained the rank of Brigadier General during the Civil War. In the fall of 1861, he returned to Batavia to recover from typhoid fever. As the most famous (at that time) Union soldier from Batavia, he delivers a speech to 1,000s of Western New Yorkers. The main focus of his discussion was the need for volunteers to "replace the exhausted ranks" of Union Soldiers. In 1862 he was made the military governor of Washington DC, two years later he resigned due to poor health. He died on Dec. 13, 1881 in Nice, France. He went there to receive medical treatment. His body was returned to Batavia for burial. He is buried in the Batavia Cemetery.

