



United States District Court

Eastern District of Tennessee

Howard H. Baker Jr. U.S. Courthouse

800 Market Street

Knoxville, TN 37902

Thomas A. Varlan
District Judge

(865) 545-4762
(865) 545-4532 (fax)

October 5, 2026

PRESS RELEASE

U.S. DISTRICT JUDGE THOMAS A. VARLAN TAKES SENIOR STATUS

The Honorable Thomas A. Varlan of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee has taken senior status effective on October 5, 2026.

Judge Varlan has served as an active Article III district judge for over 23 years. He was nominated by President George W. Bush and confirmed by the United States Senate by a vote of 97-0. He took the oath of office on April 5, 2003, becoming only the twenty-first judge to serve the Eastern District of Tennessee and the first person of Greek descent to hold a federal judgeship in this district. He served as Chief Judge of the district from 2012 to 2019. Judge Varlan will continue to render substantial service to the court as a senior judge.

Article III judges who meet certain age and service requirements set by federal statute are eligible to take senior status. Upon taking senior status, judges may choose to handle a reduced caseload. By taking senior status a judge creates a vacancy on the court, to be filled by the nomination and confirmation process for Article III judges.

Said Judge Varlan: "It has been my honor and privilege to have served our community and nation as a district court judge. I look forward to continuing to render substantial service to the court as a senior judge. I am grateful to President Bush for his nomination and the United States Senate for its unanimous confirmation in 2003."

During his service on the bench, Judge Varlan has presided over multiple criminal and civil trials and proceedings while consistently maintaining a high caseload of civil cases and criminal defendants. To date, he has handled more than 5,000 civil cases and over 3,000 criminal defendants.

As a second generation Greek-American, whose grandparents emigrated from Greece to the United States and became citizens of this country, Judge Varlan has also been privileged to preside over many naturalization ceremonies, himself welcoming countless new citizens. These ceremonies have taken place in the federal courthouse and such locations as Blount Mansion, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the K-25 History Center in Oak Ridge, Webb School of Knoxville, and even St. Mary's Hospital.

Some of the civil and criminal cases presided over by Judge Varlan over the years include:

- *The trial and conviction of Eric Boyd, charged in federal court as being accessory after the fact to a carjacking and with misprision of a felony in connection with the Channon Christian and Christopher Newsom murders, and varying upward from the guidelines to the statutory maximum penalties for the federal crimes (Boyd was later separately convicted in state court for the Newsom murder);

- *The trial and conviction of a defendant for multiple bank robbery, kidnapping, and gun charges in which defendant and his co-defendant would kidnap bank employees and their family members and force the employee to rob their bank as part of the plot while holding family members hostage in a case that received extensive publicity and was the subject of a Dateline NBC episode, "A Villainous Plan," that aired in May 2019;

- *A decision finding the Tennessee Valley Authority liable for the 2008 coal ash spill at the TVA plant in Roane County, the largest industrial spill in United States history and that drew national attention to the effects of coal ash on the environment, and the subsequent trial in which a federal jury ruled that TVA's contractor did not properly inform clean-up workers about the dangers of exposure to coal ash and had failed to provide them with necessary personal protective equipment;

- *Decisions in favor of Blount County and Anderson County High Schools, respectively, which had been sued by students contesting provisions of the schools' dress codes relating to the wearing of Confederate flag apparel;

- *A decision clearing the way for Lake City, Tennessee to change its name to Rocky Top, Tennessee;

- *A decision to impose an enhanced sentence on a Gatlinburg businessman convicted of a Ponzi scheme involving millions of dollars and more than 100 victims in both the United States and abroad;

- *Following a deadlocked jury trial, the entering of a judgment of acquittal in favor of a University of Tennessee engineering professor who had been accused of lying to NASA and trying to hide his ties to a Chinese university, in a case that garnered significant national attention;

*The trial and convictions of eight defendants in a multiple weeks jury trial finding the defendants guilty of various crimes related to distribution of methamphetamine, fentanyl, heroin, and other drugs, as well as firearms and money laundering conviction, with subsequent sentences ranging from 42 months to life imprisonment plus;

*The trial of a case involving a lengthy criminal prosecution of pain management clinic owners, managers, and providers, which trial spanned a four-month period and resulted in convictions and sentences ranging from 42 months to 400 months;

*Numerous trials and the imposition of significant sentences for multiple individual defendants convicted of enticement of minor and child pornography-related offenses.

From 2011 to 2013, Judge Varlan served on the Judicial Conference of the United States, the 26-member policymaking body for the federal judiciary, chaired by the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. In 2013, he was appointed by Chief Justice Roberts as a member of the Judicial Conference's Committee on Judicial Resources, on which he served from 2013 to 2019.

Judge Varlan has participated in many national and international conferences and training sessions as a judge, including lectures to law schools and universities in Poland and the training of judges and law enforcement officials in East Timor (Timor-Leste) and other national and international officials in Washington, D.C. He has also hosted judicial delegation visits to the Eastern District of Tennessee from Serbia and Uzbekistan.

Judge Varlan received a B.A. in Political Science and Economics from the University of Tennessee in 1978, graduating Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi, and his J.D. from Vanderbilt University School of Law in 1981, where he was Order of the Coif.

Judge Varlan and his wife Danni have four married children and seven grandchildren. Both Judge Varlan and Mrs. Varlan are active members of Saint George Greek Orthodox Church in Knoxville.

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Contact: Jennifer Newton
Jennifer_Newton@tned.uscourts.gov
865-329-4703