



# In Memoriam

## JAMES PLEMON COLEMAN

### 1914 - 1991

### Farmer, Statesman, Jurist

This special memorial edition of the Newsletter for the Mississippi Chapter of the Federal Bar Association is proudly and fittingly dedicated to the late Honorable Judge James Plemon Coleman, former Chief Judge of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. His contributions to the Federal Bench and Bar, and to his beloved state and nation, have been legion and are enduring.

Widely regarded as one of the foremost Mississippi scholars of his day, Judge Coleman possessed a profound sense of historical perspective which distinguished him from his other contemporaries. His profound love for the State of Mississippi and the heritage of its people was evident in his many years of public service to the citizens of this state. As a gifted writer and orator, a constitutional scholar, a leading authority on Mississippi history, a talented attorney, a skillful state legislator, Governor and a learned state and federal judge, he distinguished himself as perhaps no one else has.

James Plemon Coleman was born on January 19, 1914, in Ackerman, Mississippi. He was the son of Thomas Allen Coleman, a Choctaw County farmer. It was his Mississippi agrarian heritage that he was perhaps proudest of and which provided him a solid value system based on honesty, humility and hard work.

J. P. Coleman attended the University of Mississippi from 1930 to 1935, and thereafter studied law at George Washington University, where he obtained a law degree in 1939. His list of accomplishments thereafter are staggeringly impressive.

On May 2, 1937, he married Margaret Janet Dennis. The couple had one son, Thomas Allen Coleman, who presently resides in Ackerman, Mississippi, with his family and who has distinguished himself as a successful lawyer and a respected member of the State Bar Association.

After obtaining his law degree, he became District Attorney for the Fifth Judicial District, serving in that capacity from 1939 to 1946. From 1946 to 1950, he served as Circuit Judge for the Fifth Judicial District. In 1950, he was appointed to the Mississippi Supreme Court. From 1950 to

1956, he served as Attorney General for the State of Mississippi. At the national level, he became a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1940, and later, in 1944, served as a presidential elector for Mississippi. In 1952, he became a Democratic National Committeeman.

From 1949 to 1955, he was the publisher of the Plaindealer, a weekly newspaper in Choctaw County.

When he was inaugurated as Governor of the State on January 17, 1956, it was a time of great social upheaval for our state and nation. Many historians regard his administration, during this difficult transition period, as one of the most successful in Mississippi history. After his term as Governor, he was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives from Choctaw County, and served in that capacity from 1960 to 1965.

J. P. Coleman became Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in 1965. He served with distinction in that capacity, and ultimately as Chief Judge of that Court, until his early retirement from that position in 1982. After retirement from the Court, Judge Coleman reentered the private practice of law with his son, Thomas Allen Coleman, under the firm name of Coleman & Coleman, Attorneys. He was appointed as chairman of a special study committee for a new Mississippi State Constitution in 1986.

Judge Coleman will be sorely missed by all those friends and acquaintances who knew and loved him. In his passing, the members of the Federal Bench and Bar have lost a brilliant jurist, one of its finest intellectuals, and a valued and loyal friend.

J. P. Coleman has left all Mississippians with a successful blueprint for life and a monumental legacy we can all be proud of.

(Editor's Note: Taken from The New York Times OBITUARIES  
Sunday, September 29, 1991.)

**J. P. COLEMAN, 77 , EX-GOVERNOR IN MISSISSIPPI AND U.S.  
JUDGE, DIES.**

Jackson, Miss., Sept. 28 (AP) - J. P. Coleman, Governor of Mississippi during the infancy of the civil rights movement and later chief judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, died this morning at a nursing home in Ackerman, Miss., 90 miles northeast of Jackson. He was 77 years old.

He died from complications of a stroke suffered last December. A lifelong Democrat, Mr. Coleman was Governor from 1956 to 1960. It was during his administration that the state created the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission to counter attacks on racism in the Deep South.

Born on a farm near Ackerman, James Plemon Coleman went on to gain distinction as one of the few Mississippians to serve in all three branches of the state's government.

He began his public career when he was elected as local circuit judge in 1946. He was appointed to the newly created post of commissioner on the State Supreme Court in 1950 but resigned the same year to become State Attorney General.

Elected Governor in 1955, he was prohibited by state law from seeking a second consecutive term four years later. Instead, he ran for the State Legislature in 1960 and maintained his seat there for four years.

**'A Great Admirer'**

"Mississippi lost one of the most distinguished statesmen of my lifetime," said William Winter, who served as Governor from 1980 to 1984. "He's a man I have admired since I was a high school student, and I remain a great admirer of him."

The current Governor, Ray Mabus, said: "Governor Coleman was one of Mississippi's greatest public servants of the 20th century. He was both a visionary and a practical leader during a very difficult time in Mississippi's history."

Mr. Coleman is survived by his wife, Margaret; his son, Thomas, a lawyer in Ackerman, and five grandchildren.

Judge Coleman was a descendant of the first Coleman's of Mississippi. The lands in Winston Co., Miss., to which the Colemans first moved from South Carolina, were opened to white settlement by the 1830 treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek with the Choctaw Indians. William Charles was the first of the Colemans to come to Mississippi. On July 23, 1835, he purchased land from Baley C. Waters and Andrew C. Waters, in Choctaw, Winston Co. This land is owned by Judge Coleman. Those going to Miss. with William Charles were William Ragsdale, his first cousin and brother-in-law; Griffin Roe of Liberty arrived in 1844; Rebecca (Mrs. John W. Robinson) came in 1855; Isaiah Daniel, brother of William Charles and first cousin to the others, arrived in 1854. Four of these were children of Wylie Coleman and two were sons of Allen.

The county seat of Choctaw County was moved from Greensboro to LeGrange to Chester and finally to Ackerman. Ackerman was not laid out as a town until 1884, long after Charles was dead. Chester was named for Chester, South Carolina and is still in existence today.

Judge Coleman donated several books to our library and shared folders of family information. On his visits to our area he always came back to attend a meeting or just stop in for a chat. He was very interested in his family connections in South Carolina and enjoyed each visit, by writing long letters back describing all he had seen and visited and what he planned to do on his next visit. Our society will truly miss this fine gentleman.

We would like to thank Mrs. Mary Dickey Boulware for obtaining this clipping from Patricia B. Ligon for our members. Mr. Elmer Parker later obtained a copy also.