

Did You Know: Rembert Coney Dennis, Senator ~

Rembert Coney Dennis was son of Edward James Dennis and Ella Mae Coney, born on 27 August 1915 in Pinopolis. He was a graduate of Furman University (1936) and attended law school at Georgetown University (1936-1937) and the University of South Carolina, receiving a Bachelor of Laws degree from the latter institution in 1940. Dennis was admitted to the bar on 4 June 1940, and settled in Moncks Corner as an attorney, subsequently forming a longstanding and very successful partnership with his younger brother, R. Markley Dennis. In addition to their law firm, the brothers also developed Stony Landing Plantation, a farming and cattle raising enterprise in Berkeley County. The owner of extensive property, the elder Dennis resided at Stony Landing until 1971, at which time he moved with his family to the newly renovated Lewisfield Plantation on the Cooper River.

Upon his election to the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1938, Dennis became the third generation of the Dennis family to represent Berkeley County in the General Assembly. In 1942, Dennis sought and won election to the South Carolina Senate, following his father and grandfather before him. Conscious that his action opened him to criticism as a slacker, Dennis recalled for oral historian Dale Rosengarten — “I had a burning desire to fill the seat that my father had lost by assassination (1930), and my mother had lost because it was too early for women to be accepted for higher office . . . It was my feeling that I was going to be severely criticized for running for political office when I was of the age that I was expected to be in military service . . . I decided I would run and abide by the results and publicly stated that it was their [the public’s] decision and I would be a volunteer for service if I didn’t win. . . .”

Elected to the House, he represented Berkeley County in the Eighty-third (1939-1940) and Eighty-fourth (1941-1942) General Assemblies. He served on the House committees on fish, game, and forestry (1939-1942); judiciary (1939-1942); military affairs (1939-1942); police regulations (1939-1942); engrossed bills (1941-1942); and the State Hospital (1941-1942). He was first elected to the state Senate in 1942, and served Berkeley in that body beginning with the Eighty-fifth General Assembly (1942-1944) and continued through the Nine-sixth General Assembly (1965-1966); and with the advent of numbered districts, he represented District No. 14 (Berkeley, 1967-1968), 1972-1984; Berkeley-Charleston, 1969-1972) in the Ninety-seventy (1967-1968) through the One Hundred and Fifth (1983-1984) General Assemblies and District 37 (Berkeley) in the One Hundred and Sixth

General Assembly (1985-1986). Then, however, multiple injuries received in a serious automobile accident in December 1984 prevented him from attending the first session (8 January–26 June 1985) of the One Hundred and Sixth General Assembly. On 13 March 1984, he was chosen President *Pro Tempore* of the Senate for the remainder of the One Hundred and Fifth General Assembly and assumed the office on 20 March 1984. He was re-elected to that position for the One Hundred and Sixth General Assembly on 8 January 1985. While in the Senate, Dennis was a member of numerous committees: judiciary (1943-1948); police regulations (1943-1960, chairman, 1949-1960); public buildings (1943-1960, chairman, 1959-1960); enrolled acts (1943-1975, chairman, 1969-1975); military (1945-1952); medical affairs 1945-1975, chairman, 1961-1972); education 1945-1975, 1981-1985); fish, game, and forestry (1945-1985, chairman, 1961-1975); incorporations (1947-1960, chairman, 1959-1960); penitentiary (1947-1960); social security (1947-1960); banking and insurance (1947—1980); highways (1949-1975); rural electrification (1949-1975, chairman, 1959-1960); finance (1949-1985, chairman 1972-1985); natural resources (1951-1954); agriculture (1951-1960); commerce and manufactures (1951-1960); rules (1951-1985); aviation (1953-1960); penal and charitable institutions (1957-1960); atomic and nuclear energy (1958-1960); interstate cooperation (1958-1985, chairman, 1985); ethics (1971-1975); general (1976-1980); and transportation (1981-1985). As chairman of the finance committee, he also served on the South Carolina Budget and Control Board (1972-1985). Twice during his legislative career, he unsuccessfully sought election to the South Carolina Supreme Court (1956, 1966).

One of the more influential legislators of his time, Rembert Dennis served on a number of state boards, commissions, and committees. These positions include the following: member of the commission on interstate cooperation (1955-1985), Communist Activities Committee (1959-1964), Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (1961-1981), school committee (1964-1966), State House Committee (chairman 1969-1985), Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission (1971-1985, chairman, 1973-1974), reorganization commission (1972-1985), and the Social Services Advisory Commission (1976-1977); *ex officio* trustee of the Medical University of South Carolina (1961-1972); and *ex officio* member of the Wildlife and Marine Resources Commission (1972-1985), tobacco industry price surveillance commission (1973), education television commission (1973-1974), and judicial council (1973-1985). A Democrat, Dennis served as vice-president of the Washington Young Democratic Club of South Carolina (1938), corresponding

secretary of the South Carolina Young Democrats (ca. 1939), delegate to the national Democratic convention (1944, 1948, 1952, 1956, 1960), and state Democratic executive committeeman (1944-1985). Active in other areas as well, Dennis held memberships in Sigma Alpha Epsilon social fraternity, Blue Key national honorary service fraternity, Scottish Rite Masons, Omar Temple of Shriners, Lions Club, Woodmen of the World, American Bar Association, American Trial Lawyers Association, South Carolina Bar Association, and Berkeley County Bar Association (president). In addition, he taught Bible Class and chaired the board of deacons and church building committee for Moncks Corner Baptist Church; also served as a trustee for Furman University and Baptist College. Dennis was keenly interested in the outdoors; was a director of the National Wild Turkey Federation (1974) and enthusiastically supported and participated in the sports of fishing and hunting . . . especially wild turkey and deer.

Throughout his career, Dennis was a recipient of many awards and honors. He was awarded an honorary doctor of humane letters degree from the Medical University of South Carolina (1973) and honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of South Carolina (1973), Clemson University (1981), and the Citadel (1981). He was named to Who's Who Among College Students in America in 1936, and was honored with the following commendations: Outstanding Aid to the Handicapped Award, given by the state and national commissions for vocational rehabilitation (1963); South Carolina Rehabilitation Association Legislative Award (1965) and Certificate of Citation (1974); Conservation Legislator of the Year, given by the South Carolina Wildlife Federation (1965, 1974); Charles H. Flory Conservation Award (1971); Distinguished Service Award to Conservation Districts (1973); Tourism Award, given by South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism (1974); United States President's Commission on Employment of the Handicapped Citation (1974); Veterans of Foreign Wars Legislative Award (1978); South Carolina American Legion Recognition and Appreciation Award (1979); National Guard Association of South Carolina Award (1980); Senator of the Year given by the Association for Retarded Citizens of South Carolina (1980); National Association of Governmental Employees List of Ten Outstanding Legislators in the United States (1980); South Carolina Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Legislator of the Year Service Award (1982); Friend of Education Award, given by the South Carolina Conference of American Association of University Professors (1984-1985); and Distinguished Friend of State Employees, given by the South Carolina State Employees Association (1985). In addition, his portrait was

commissioned and hung in the Senate chamber in 1975, along with a state office building named in his honor in 1981.

In recalling his ambition, Dennis commented that during the early 1950s — “I wanted to be governor, and then United States Senator. I thought I was a good candidate then for anything, maybe President. But as I served, I learned. The more I learned, the more I found out the less I knew.... I thought, when I got to be Chairman of the Finance Committee, with my years of seniority, I was getting along about as good as the governor, but I had a desire to get into the national picture. I gave it up quickly when I got so busy as Senator, and Chairman of the Finance Committee.”

The Senator suffered a heart attack in 1976, ill health forcing him to retire in 1988. Rembert Coney Dennis passed away in 1992, and is buried in St. John’s Baptist Church Cemetery, Pinopolis, South Carolina.

“He walked with and was one of the giants in the South Carolina Senate, and when he left the Senate, it was truly the end of that era.” Thus, Isadore Lourie characterized the passing of Rembert Coney Dennis (1915-1992).



“He was one of the most influential legislators of his time.”

Edited by Keith Gourdin

Resources:

- Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate 1776-1985. Vol. 1, by Bailey, Morgan, and Taylor*
- South Carolina Political Collections University Libraries University of South Carolina Rembert Coney Dennis (1915-1992) Papers, 1938-1992.*