



Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.

March 23, 1931 - December 3, 2017

Ernest Adolphus Finney, Jr., was born in Smithfield, Virginia, on March 23, 1931. He departed this life on Sunday, December 3, 2017, in Columbia, South Carolina. He was the son of Ernest A. Finney, Sr. and Colleen (Godwin) Finney. His mother died, ten days after giving birth to him, from complications due to childbirth. But before she died, the young mother circled the family around her bed and made them promise to look out for her infant son and to be sure to raise him to “be somebody.” The family agreed and punctuated the moment with a final song that would forever be a critical part of a son’s living memory, “Let The Circle Be Unbroken.”

The senior Finney was a young educator and soon after the death of his wife he hit the road to make a proper life for his newborn son. Ernest A. Finney, Sr., had worked for the Pentagon during the World War II years and it was in this Washington D.C. area where the junior Finney would later recall how, as a boy, he had first noticed the spit-shined, well-dressed black men in Washington with pocket watches and tailored suits who seemed to earn the respect of all those around them. As a youngster he was impressed with them, never forgot their style, or the upright way they carried themselves. This father and son journey eventually took them both to South Carolina where the senior Finney became dean at Claflin College in Orangeburg, from which the junior Finney would eventually graduate in 1952 with a B.A. degree. In 1953, while attending law school at South Carolina State College he met another

Claflin student, Frances Davenport, of Newberry. In 1954 Finney graduated from South Carolina State University with a Juris Doctor degree. At the time there were only five African American lawyers in the state of South Carolina. On New Year's Eve, 1954, Ernest Finney popped the big sweet question to his college sweetheart and they were married six months later on August 20, 1955, on the Davenport farm in Newberry.

With a new bride and a growing family, the young twenty-six-year old lawyer found it difficult to earn a living from only legal work, so he taught in Horry County and also waited tables at the Ocean Forest Hotel in Myrtle Beach, where he attended his first convention of the segregated South Carolina Bar by serving as a waiter. The early 1960's, was a time when young lawyers personally committed to issues of justice and civil disobedience, were passionately needed by African-American communities in the south. An organization of ministers recruited the young lawyer away from Conway and invited him into the heart and soul of the most fiery issues of the day: Education. Access. Social Justice. In 1961 Finney moved his family to Sumter and opened the Ernest A. Finney, Jr. Law Office. Eventually, Finney teamed up with the only other young African-American lawyer in town, Reuben L. Gray, and together they started the Finney and Gray Law Office. The south was ablaze with change and Finney began to work with another South Carolina State law school graduate, Matthew J. Perry. Finney gained a reputation as an outstanding defense lawyer and civil rights advocate. Together they defended more than six thousand clients who had been arrested for taking part in freedom rides and demonstrations. One of Ernest Finney's most notable defenses was on behalf of nine students in Rock Hill in 1961. They were young progressive students who staged one of the first sit-ins in South Carolina. He lost almost every case that went to trial but won all but two on appeal to higher courts. Finney often remarked, "I have never known abject poverty, but I have known segregation in its worst form. I therefore believe the law is absolutely necessary to protect the rights of all

citizens.” The sterling reputation of the young lawyer from South Carolina quickly made its way to higher ground. The U.S. Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, invited him to leave the south and make his way to Washington, D.C. to work at the Justice Department during the height of the Civil Rights movement. But the young lawyer had his own quiet plans at the ready. He knew what was at stake. He politely declined Kennedy’s invitation and later reflected, “I had chosen where I wanted to take my stand. South Carolina.”

Finney’s climb to the top of his profession began with little fanfare and required a steady mixture of hard work and perseverance. In 1963, Ernest Finney, Jr. was appointed chairman of the South Carolina Advisory Commission on Civil Rights. In 1972 he was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives with the popular campaign slogan “Be Fair, Vote Finney!” He was one of the first African Americans elected to the General Assembly since the nineteenth century. He served in the State House from 1973 until 1976. Beginning in 1976 he was the first African American to serve as a circuit court judge in South Carolina. He was elected as associate justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court on April 3, 1985. He was elected chief justice on May 11, 1994, making him the first African American chief justice of South Carolina. In his five years as chief justice, he concentrated his efforts on increasing the number of state court judges and the pay they received. He recommended the creation of a special drug court to relieve family courts and circuit courts of the staggering number of cases they handled involving drugs. During his time on the Supreme Court Finney believed that making reforms in magistrate courts would improve the quality of justice they dispensed. He assumed office on December 17, 1994, and retired in March 2000. He spent a brief term as president of South Carolina State University in 2002.

During his many years of public service Ernest A. Finney, Jr. served as a member of the Conference of Chief Justices, American Law Institute,

American Judges Association, South Carolina State Elections Commission 1968 – 72; American and National Bar Associations; Association of Trial Lawyers of America; Emmanuel United Methodist Church; Chairman, Board of Directors Buena Vista Development Corporation; Chairman, Board of Trustees: Claflin University; Member of Alpha Kappa Mu Honor Society; Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity; Mason; Shriner; NAACP; Chairman South Carolina Legislative Black Caucus 1973 – 75; Graduate National College of State Trial Judges; 1977; New York University School of Law Appellate Judges Seminar 1985.

Throughout his life and career, Ernest A. Finney, Jr. accepted speaking engagements at Sunday school classes in Moncks Corner, middle school gymnasiums in Manning, high school auditoriums from Conway to Spartanburg, United Methodist and Southern Baptist church picnics, and also attended grand galas with the governor and other heads of state.

His message was simple and he shared it everywhere he was invited to stand and deliver: You have been given a life – use it to better the world. You have been blessed with potential – use it to stand tall for truth and justice. You did not get here by yourself – turn and thank somebody on the road behind you for helping you get to where you have gotten. Ernest A. Finney, Jr. believed quite passionately in standing with and beside the people who saw him as a role model and mentor. He felt honored to be “the first” African-American of anything but he also felt personally dutiful about being responsible to the young African-American people of South Carolina. He wanted to be seen as an honorable and faithful man. It was a badge of honor for him to keep his word, bring people together, and stay in touch with all people from all walks of life. And his hands down, absolute favorite, Bible verse was: Micah 6:8 “This is what the Lord requires from you: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

The list of Ernest A. Finney’s Honorary Doctorate degrees is many: Honorary

Doctorate of Humanities Degree, Claflin University 1977; Honorary Doctorate of Laws Degree, The University of South Carolina Coastal Carolina College, 1991; Honorary Doctorate of Humanities Degree, Johnson C. Smith University; 1995; Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, College of Charleston, 1995; Honorary Doctorate of Laws, Morris College, 1996; Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters South Carolina State University, 2001; Honorary Doctorate of Laws Degree, The Citadel, 2003.

The loss of his mother, at such an early age in his life, made family the greatest gift and promise to Ernest A. Finney, Jr. Time with his family was something he never compromised. He and Frances Davenport Finney were married for 63 years. They had three children, all of Columbia, South Carolina: Ernest A. Finney III (Tammy Harper), Lynn Carol Nikky Finney (Tonia Poteat), Jerry Leo Finney (Elaine Gilliam). They have five grandchildren: Amanda Catherine Finney, Felicia Victoria Finney, Jerry Leo Finney, Jr., Colleen Teresa Finney, and Daniel Matthew Finney.

He leaves behind a stepmother, Geneva B. Finney (Orangeburg) and the entire Brown-Mays family: Tommy Brown, Moses and Lanni Brown, Justin and Jordan. Bruce Finney, Kimanthi Thompson, Husan Thompson, Nehandah Finney, and Garvey Finney. He also leaves behind Essex Finney, Marilyn White, Janice and Ron Toliver, Joann Phillips, Essex Finney, Essex E. Finney, Joy and Charles Day, Bernetta Finney-Vincent, Diane McDaniel Rhodes, Reuben McDaniel III, Claudia Turner, and Carol and Robert Gordon. He leaves behind a special love for Felicia Goins and also for his brother-in-law Heyward Davenport and his wife Barbara. And as a super grandfather there was always love for Rechard Harris and Ariel Finney. He leaves behind a host of former students, friends, clerks, colleagues, secretaries, and good buddies, people who smiled his way and outstretched their hand to help and celebrate his good long luminous life.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to The Ernest A. Finney, Jr. Fund established by a generous first gift by Ernest A. Finney, Jr. and Frances Davenport Finney twenty years ago to support scholarships for deserving Claflin students at the sacred place where they began their lives together. Please see the following:

Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney, Jr. Endowed Scholarship Fund at Claflin University <https://alumni.claflin.edu/chief-justice-ret.-ernest-a.-finney-jr.-memorial>.

Celebration of Life service will be streamed live from 9:45am-12:45pm Saturday December 9, 2017.

Previous Events

Lying in Repose

DEC 7. 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM (ET)

South Carolina Supreme Court
1231 Gervais St.
Columbia, SC 29201

Public Viewing

DEC 7. 3:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

Palmer Memorial Chapel - Columbia
1200 Fontaine Place
Columbia, SC 29223
(803) 786-6300
palmermemorialchapel@gmail.com
<https://www.palmermemorialchapel.com>

Alpha Phi Alpha Omega Ceremony

DEC 8. 4:00 PM - 5:00 PM (ET)

Neal -Jones Auditorium
100 West College St.
Sumter, SC 29150

Visitation

DEC 8. 4:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

Neal -Jones Auditorium
100 West College St.
Sumter, SC 29150

Celebration of Life

DEC 9. 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM (ET)

James & Dorothy Z. Elmore Chapel
400 Magnolia Street
Orangeburg, SC 29115
(803) 535-5186

Tribute Wall



“ *Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.*

October 04, 2023 at 11:33 AM



“ *My heartfelt condolences to the Finney family. Mr Finney had a good heart he also did a good deed for me and my mom when we were both students at Claflin University. Thank for so much Chief Finney may you rest in peace.*



Essence Payne - December 18, 2017 at 12:21 PM



“ *To: Mrs. Frances Finney, Chip, Nikki, & Jerry*

My heartfelt and deepest condolences to you and your entire family. A good heart has stopped beating, a good soul ascended to heaven. God will give you the strength to endure.

Ecclesiastes 9:11 King James Version (KJV)

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

“We will continue Chief Ernest A. Finney’s race!”

Deepest sympathy,

Former Atlanta Mayoral Candidate 2017 Debra Hampton

Debra Hampton - December 10, 2017 at 08:16 AM

RC

“ Praying that your heart will be filled with the peace of God during this time..with Caring Sympathy and Prayers. The Mary McLeod Bethune & Colclough Family- Rose & Alfena Colclough & Madgalene C Numa

ROSE M COLCLOUGH - December 09, 2017 at 11:52 AM

CG

“ To Mrs. Finney and the entire Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr. family, we send our love and prayers to comfort you in the days ahead. We sincerely appreciate all of the love, friendship, and wisdom "Mr. Finney" shared with us and our three sons, and thank God for allowing our paths to meet.



With deepest sympathy,
Cheryl Dawn, Richie, and the "Garner Boys"

Cheryl Dawn Garner - December 09, 2017 at 10:54 AM

TH

“ Please accept my humble condolences on the demise of former Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.

Sincerely,

Georgia M. Johnson
Claflin University Alumni
Class of 1965

Thelma - December 08, 2017 at 08:00 PM

VK

“ *My condolences to the Finney family on the passing of Justice Finney. A candle is lit in his memory*
Virginia King

Virginia King - December 08, 2017 at 06:09 PM



“ *Enchanted Cottage was purchased for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



December 08, 2017 at 05:32 PM

VK

“ *My condolences on the death of your loved one Justice Finney..*
A candle is lit in his memory.
Virginia King



Virginia King - December 08, 2017 at 05:07 PM

PH

“ *Chief Justice Finney's life was a bright light to many of us; he inspired us parents and our children! His legacy will resonate for years to come, especially during this time of world darkness. My condolences to the Finney family! God's blessing to you always!*

Pauline Simmons Hill
Formerly of East College Street - next door to the Miott's
Now in Seattle, WA since 1976

Pauline Hill - December 08, 2017 at 03:35 PM

AB

“ My thoughts and prayers are with your family. My mother the late Clara L. Bartlett thought the world of him during her 50 years at the Richland County courthouse. Thank god for all his hard work in South Carolina.

Avery K. Bartlett - December 08, 2017 at 01:39 PM

TE

“ TAMMY EDWARDS lit a candle in memory of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.



TAMMY EDWARDS - December 08, 2017 at 11:14 AM

MS

“ Ms. Willie Stevenson lit a candle in memory of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.



Ms. Willie Stevenson - December 08, 2017 at 08:47 AM

MF

“ Mae Ruth Cooke And Family lit a candle in memory of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.



Mae Ruth Cooke and Family - December 08, 2017 at 08:05 AM

PP

“ Please accept our condolences on the passing of Retired Chief Justice Finney. It was indeed an honor to have known such a great man who will truly be missed. May God embrace you in comfort during this difficult time and may his soul rest in peace.

I have been truly blessed and honored to have known Justice Finney. It was July 1, 2003 that I had the distinct pleasure and honor of having him to administer the oath of office to me to serve as the first African American elected as County Auditor of Clarendon County as both of my parents held the bible. That is a moment that took place on the front steps of the courthouse in Manning that I will never forget. I firmly believe that God has accepted Justice Finney with open arms for all the good he has done and all the lives he has touched while he was here on this earth.

*With our deepest condolences,
Patricia Pringle, Clarendon County Auditor and
Chairwoman, Clarendon County Democratic Party,
Rev. J.H. Pringle and Family*

Patricia Pringle - December 07, 2017 at 07:23 PM

MB

“ How very quietly you tiptoed into our world, silently, only a moment you stayed. But what an imprint your footprints have left upon our hearts.

*Mary P. Brown
Berkeley County
Clerk of Court*

Mary P Brown - December 07, 2017 at 03:38 PM

CL

“ *Carl L. Solomon, Solomon Law Group, LLC purchased the Divine Light for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



Carl L. Solomon, Solomon Law Group, LLC - December 07, 2017 at 03:11 PM



“ *Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



December 07, 2017 at 11:24 AM



“ *Gracious Lavender Basket was purchased for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



December 07, 2017 at 11:10 AM

AJ

“ *Annie Mae Davis & James C Davis JR. purchased the Amazing Arboricola for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



Annie Mae Davis & James C Davis JR. - December 06, 2017 at 10:36 PM

JW

“ To Mrs. Frances Finney, Jerry Finney, Sr. & Family:

Thank you for sharing some unforgettable memories of your husband, father and family with me and my family. Chief Justice ret. Finney was a remarkable man. I am truly blessed to have known him.

May God keep you and your family during this time of bereavement and always.

Our deepest sympathies,

*Jacquee' Jones Williamson
Lisa Michelle Williamson*



Jacquee Jones Williamson - December 06, 2017 at 10:13 PM

MN

My heartfelt condolences to Mrs Finney and family. Justice Finney was my savior and protection team member as Hartsville"s first Black lawyer whom I learned so much from during my tenure practicing in Horry, Florence, Lee and Marion counties. Pennie Nicholson.

Mozilla "Pennie" Nicholson - December 10, 2017 at 04:36 AM

JF

“ *Jacquee' Jones Williamson & Family purchased the Enchanted Cottage for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



Jacquee' Jones Williamson & Family - December 06, 2017 at 09:54 PM

DS

“ *Dr.Lionel & Mrs Lionel Sapp lit a candle in memory of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.*



Dr.Lionel & Mrs Lionel Sapp - December 06, 2017 at 05:52 PM

BS

“ *Bishop Dr.Lionel Sapp lit a candle in memory of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.*



Bishop Dr.Lionel Sapp - December 06, 2017 at 05:51 PM

SS

“ *Sean L. Jones, SCSU'01 lit a candle in memory of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.*



Sean L. Jones, SCSU'01 - December 06, 2017 at 04:58 PM

SS

To the Finney Family,

*May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind ever be at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And the rain fall softly upon your fields,
And until we meet again,
May God hold in the palm of His hand.*

Sean Jones & The Jones Family, McCrays Mill Community, Sumter, SC

Sean L. Jones, SCSU'01 - December 06, 2017 at 05:07 PM

JS

“ *To the Finney Family:
I only know Tammy through my work engagements with her, but I am extending my sympathy to the entire Finney family on the loss of Chief Justice Finney. I fully know the pain that you are feeling, yet you also know the peace of your loved one. Though no here in his regality, Chief Finney will be right there beside you when you least expect it...in the form of a gentle rain shower, a cool breeze, the sound of bird, or a butterfly sudden appearance. Heartfelt blessings of peace to all of you this season and the seasons to come. Jennifer Scales, Dorn Public Affairs Officer*



Jennifer Scales - December 06, 2017 at 01:56 PM

TS

“ *Teresa A. Brown, Lee County Clerk and Office staff purchased the Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



Teresa A. Brown, Lee County Clerk and Office staff -
December 06, 2017 at 01:21 PM

DW

“ *To: Solicitor Chip Finney and Family*

*Please know that you are in our thoughts and prayers during this difficult time.
Praying for your strength and comfort.*

*Delores Franklin Williams
Chief Magistrate, Williamsburg County*



Delores Franklin Williams - December 06, 2017 at 01:18 PM



“ *Lily and Rose Tribute Spray was purchased for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



December 06, 2017 at 01:16 PM



“ *The sadness of the passing of Chief Justice Finney is felt by many. May the thought of knowing that friends share in your sadness be of comfort to you.*

*God Bless,
Gwen Dorn Chiles
McCormick County
Clerk of Court and Staff*

Gwen Dorn Chiles - December 06, 2017 at 12:43 PM



“ *I extend my sincere condolences and deepest sympathy to the Finney family.*

L McElynn, Chief Magistrate, Beaufort County

LPMcElynn - December 06, 2017 at 12:32 PM



“ *Chief Justice Finney was a trailblazer without a doubt and during my interactions with him you could not find anyone more caring and compassionate than he was. We will truly miss him. My condolences to the entire Finney family. Alex Kinlaw Jr.*

Alex Kinlaw Jr - December 06, 2017 at 11:55 AM

MP

“ *God is a Great God. Love and Peace to the family of this Great Man*



Mrs.G. Phillips - December 06, 2017 at 11:52 AM

GH

“ *Gary and Brandy Horton purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



Gary and Brandy Horton - December 06, 2017 at 11:00 AM



“ *Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



December 06, 2017 at 10:11 AM

IR

“ *I worked at Shoneys for 32 years and being a single mom times was rough but when judge Finney came in he always had a encouraging speech for me I will truly miss him RIP job well done*



ivy robinson - December 06, 2017 at 10:06 AM



“ *Sapphire Skies Bouquet was purchased for the family of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr..*



December 06, 2017 at 10:02 AM



“ *~Sending my love and prayers to the Finney Family. May God Bless you all through this time of mourning and comfort you with his grace.~*



*Love,
Robin Olds~*

Robin Olds - December 06, 2017 at 09:20 AM



“ *My heart is deeply touched by the loss of a gentle giant man whose family was my next door neighbor in Runnymede for many years. I shall never forget all the mornings he would carpool me to school along with Chip and Nikki. He was like my father, so humbled with a significant presence of authority. When I caught the biggest bass (with Chip's help to reel to shore) in the lake of Runnymede, Judge was the first parent to respond to all of the wild and hilarious screams of the neighborhood children! On the day my father passed away, Dr. Wilson C. Deas, he and Mrs. Finney were the very first to come to my aid as I waited on the arrival of my mother and brothers. Such beautiful memories, I will always treasure!*

My dear family, I know that God is stretching his arms wide to comfort and support you in your time of sorrow! Trust that He will never leave you! Much love to you all!

Jamella Williams - December 06, 2017 at 06:22 AM

JW

“ *Jamella Williams lit a candle in memory of Chief Justice Ernest A. Finney Jr.*



Jamella Williams - December 06, 2017 at 05:51 AM

MM

“ *We are deeply saddened to hear of the passing of Judge Finney. We have fond memories of him growing up as a part of our church family. We hope the family will find solace in knowing others are prayerful for them.*



Dr. Jackie and Ms. Marsha McKenzie, Matthews, N.C. & The McKenzies, Sumter, S.C.

Marsha McKenzie - December 05, 2017 at 07:34 PM