



Mrs. Wilhelmenia Dean

January 29, 1926 - January 27, 2025

On January 29, 1926, in Sumter County, South Carolina, a radiant light entered the world. Born to Thomas W. and Hallie Miller Atkinson, this light grew to be Mrs. Wilhelmenia Atkinson Dean, a woman whose life would shine brightly as a beacon of wisdom, courage, and love.

From her earliest days, Wilhelmenia's thirst for knowledge was insatiable, a spark that carried her to the hallowed halls of Allen University in Columbia, SC, where she earned her bachelor's degree in history. But her ambitions didn't stop there. With determination as her compass, she pursued a master's degree in history from Columbia University and another in Counselor Education from Georgia Southern University. A true lifelong learner, she continually sought wisdom, enriching herself and others through her participation in leadership programs and esteemed fellowships, such as the Ford Foundation Fellow and the General Electric Foundation Fellow.

Her passion for learning transformed seamlessly into a passion for teaching. Mrs. Dean's thirty-four year career in the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System was one of trailblazing and transformation. With courage and grace, she broke barriers, becoming one of the first African American educators to integrate the faculty in Chatham County Public School System. At Beach Senior High and Savannah High, she wasn't merely a social studies teacher or counselor; she was a mentor, a role model, and a champion for

civic engagement. Her students learned not only about U.S. History and American Government but also about their roles as citizens, often being guided by her to register to vote. In her role as guidance counselor, she assisted many students to pursue academic endeavors beyond high school. Her influence was felt in her leadership roles, whether serving as Department Chairperson, President of the Savannah Secondary Counselors Association, president of the Superintendent's Employee's Advisory Council, or Co-chairing the Superintendent's five-year Curriculum and Instructional Planning Committee. Her exceptional dedication earned her the title of "Teacher of the Year" at both Beach and Savannah High Schools.

Her influence extended well beyond the classroom. As a co-organizer of Savannah State University's Upward Bound program, Mrs. Dean inspired countless young minds to dream bigger and reach higher. Even after her retirement in 1986, her legacy lived on in the hearts of her students, whose enthusiastic cries of "Mrs. Dean! Mrs. Dean!" whenever they saw her in the community were a testament to her lasting impact.

Mrs. Dean exemplified a life of civic responsibility and community engagement. She served on the board of the United Way of the Coastal Empire and was an active board member of the Hodge Memorial Daycare Center where she was recognized for 50 years of service and the Parent room was renamed in her honor. She also worked with the NAACP, the Historic Savannah Foundation, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and Charter Archoussa of Alpha Mu Boule' and Alpha Lambda Boule'. She made history once more in 1996 when she became the first African American woman appointed as a Jury Commissioner in Chatham County. She was also the former president and honored as a Platinum member of the Savannah Chapter of The Links, Incorporated. Mrs. Dean was an active member of the First Congregational Church in Savannah where she served for many years on the Executive Council.

In her husband, the late Dr. Elmer J. Dean, Mrs. Dean found a partner who shared her values and her zest for life. Together, they graced the social scenes of Savannah by attending the functions of the Boule. They broke barriers as one of the First African American proprietors of a successful stable of standard breed horses—Trotters and Pacers.

Mrs. Dean will be remembered by those who loved her as a frank and honest woman whose light illuminated the lives of all who knew her. She leaves behind a loving family of two Goddaughters', a Godson, nieces, nephews, cousins, and dear friends who recently celebrated an early 99th birthday in her honor.

Though she was preceded in death by her husband, her three brothers—Thomas Jr., David, and Marion Atkinson—and her five sisters—Harriet Alston, Thomasina Johnson, Vermelle Keith, Hallie Singleton, and Sylvia Loney—her memory will continue to burn brightly in the hearts of those she inspired.

Mrs. Wilhelmenia Atkinson Dean's life was a testament to the transformative power of education, the strength of community, and the enduring legacy of love. Her story will live on, a beacon for generations to come.

Previous Events

Visitation

FEB 1. 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM (ET)

Palmer Memorial Chapel
304 South Main St.
Sumter, SC 29150
(803) 773-3381

Public Viewing

FEB 2. 1:00 PM - 1:30 PM (ET)

First Congregational Church
421 Habersham St
Savannah , GA 31401
<http://firstuccsavannah.org>

Savannah Chapter Links Incorporated Ceremony

FEB 2. 1:30 PM - 2:00 PM (ET)

First Congregational Church
421 Habersham St
Savannah , GA 31401
<http://firstuccsavannah.org>

A Celebration of Life

FEB 2. 2:00 PM - 3:30 PM (ET)

First Congregational Church
421 Habersham St
Savannah , GA 31401
<http://firstuccsavannah.org>

Tribute Wall

EV

“ Mrs. Dean taught me at Beach High. She was a great role model. I became an Educator because of her. Rest Well with the Master Teacher.
Elder Brenda Groover Veal

Elder Brenda Groover Veal - February 21, 2025 at 08:16 PM

AJ

“ I am so sadden to learn of the passing of Mrs. Dean. God blessed her with a long and successful life. All of the students whom she taught and or mentored at Beach High School loved her. Our graduating class recognized her at our 50th reunion as the only surviving advisor for our class. We worked on several community organizations together. I was always amazed that she remembered this and called it to my attention when I would run into her. She often asked me about other persons who served with us. She was a lady of grace and charm. Rest eternally in the arms of our loving God.

Alvernia Smith Jackson - February 03, 2025 at 12:21 PM

MS

“ My condolences and prayers to the family. Mrs. Dean was my 12th grade History Teacher, at A.E. Beach High School, Class of 69'. I had great respect and admiration for Mrs Dean, because she was a kind, caring, and excellent teacher...God Bless Her Soul and Spirit 🙏. Blessings,
Marie Scott



Marie Scott - February 02, 2025 at 09:10 AM

GH

“ *Sending our deepest sympathy and condolences and prayers to the family and relatives and friends.* ”



Gloria Harrison Brown and Tammy Harrison - February 01, 2025 at 11:07 PM



“ *Heavenly Heights Bouquet was purchased for the family of Mrs. Wilhelmenia Dean.* ”



February 01, 2025 at 01:07 PM

NB

“ *1 file added to the tribute wall* ”



Nickie Butler - February 01, 2025 at 01:07 PM

NB

“ I will remember my Great Aunt for many things: Her love of history, especially family history, her encouragement to obtain an education and maintain stewardship in the community. Her Christian faith was strong, we had many conversations about God and life that I will cherish forever. I appreciate her example of engagement and activity- she was always busy doing good things for others. She shared so many articles over the years (most of which I've kept) about her interests or a shared interest, always tailored to inspire action. I am grateful for our trip to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, her style, wit, frankness, laughter, charisma, charm, concern for me, my family and others, as well as her red pen. God speed Aunt Willie, peace be with you, may you rest in His eternal love. Mom (Yvonne) and I will always love you. Pleshette

Nickie Butler - February 01, 2025 at 12:59 PM

TB

“ Thank you Wilhelmina for you enduring kindness to me and my children. Having you as a neighbor was truly a bright spot in our lives. You will not be forgotten.

Love,

The Bucci Family



Tiffanie Bucci - January 31, 2025 at 02:11 PM

TA

“ Aunt Willie was a gem! Full of love, kindness and words of wisdom. She will be missed ❤️



Tiffany Abraham - January 30, 2025 at 05:41 PM

AF

“ My condolences and prayers to the family. She was a beautiful person and exceptional counselor. She was the catalyst behind me becoming an Electrical Engineer and obtaining a full scholarship to attend Tuskegee Institute. Her dedication as an educator was amazing.

Amy L Frierson - January 30, 2025 at 10:32 AM

JS

“ You will be remembered and missed.



Jacqueline Simmons-Bias - January 30, 2025 at 10:20 AM

CE

“ I remember a gracious and intelligent Mrs. Wilhelmina Dean as a new teacher at Savannah High School. She encouraged me to pursue a career as a social worker, but teaching reading and English were my choices. I can say unequivocally that due to her astute efforts my young cousin Kevin McGraw today bear the fruits of her labor as we spoke on his behalf. She was diminutive in size but a powerhouse of a regal lady. I learned how to encourage students to pursue success as we molded students at the High. Professional faculty members of her high caliber are not the norm today. She built a life of accolades, but she engendered in me skills that made a significant difference in the students under my tutelage. She is one of many stalwart professionals who left indelible marks in my humble life. Thank you and take your rest with Dr. Dean, a former Savannah State College now University colleague.

Clara Elmore-Bain - January 30, 2025 at 01:29 AM