



The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Grace Towns Hamilton

(February 10, 1907 – June 17, 1992)

“First African-American Woman Elected to the Georgia General Assembly”
“First Woman Appointed to Hold a Post in the National Urban League”

Grace Towns Hamilton was born on February 10, 1907, in Atlanta, GA to George Alexander Towns Sr., a professor of English and pedagogy at Atlanta University, and Nellie McNair Towns, an educator, community activist and the first black woman to serve on the board of Atlanta's YWCA. Grace was educated from grade school to college on the Atlanta University campus. There she received an undergraduate degree in 1927. She left Atlanta to attend The Ohio State University where she received a master's degree in psychology in 1929. After graduation, she returned to Atlanta and took a position as an assistant professor at Clark College (now Clark-Atlanta University) where she taught psychology. There she met and married Henry Cooke Hamilton and had one daughter, Eleanor, in 1931. They soon moved to Memphis, TN and returned to Atlanta in 1941.



Grace was appointed executive director of the Atlanta Urban League (AUL) in 1943, becoming the first woman to hold such a post in the National Urban League organization. In 1946, Grace, along with AUL housing secretary Robert A. Thompson, organized a voter registration drive that registered 24,137 new black voters in Atlanta. She was also instrumental in the construction of the Hughes Spalding Pavilion at Grady Memorial Hospital in 1952. In 1954, she assumed the role as Assistant Director of Program Planning for the Southern Regional Council and became active in NAACP and other organizations.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, combined with a reapportionment of Georgia's General Assembly and 10 U.S. Congressional districts, as well as increased efforts with black voter registration, resulted in eleven African-Americans being elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1965 and 1966.



In 1965, Grace Towns Hamilton became the first black woman in the Deep South to be elected to a state legislature. Since the first election was a special election, she was forced to run again in 1966. She did, and won again. Over the years, her district bore three different numbers over the span of her service due to redistricting; she was originally elected to District 137 but in 1969, that area became District 112. In 1973, it was changed to District 31.

That same year, Grace was a principal architect of the 1973 Atlanta City Charter, which replaced a century-old predecessor and brought African-Americans onto the Atlanta City Council for the first time, proportionate to the black population. Andrew Young - former Mayor of Atlanta, former U.S. Congressman from Georgia, and Civil Rights icon - credits Grace with making his election possible as the first African-American to represent Atlanta's Fifth District in Congress. Her work leading a congressional reapportionment battle, placed most of Atlanta blacks in the Fifth Congressional district.



Re-elect
GRACE T. HAMILTON
Representative District 31
PUNCH 42 PAGE 3
VOTE — AUGUST 14, 1984

Grace served in the Georgia Legislature for 19 years, until 1984, when she lost her bid for reelection to Mable Thomas, a woman one-third her age. Grace was 77 years old.

Undeterred, Grace remained committed to working for the greater good of the Atlanta community and continued to enjoy recognition and awards. She served as advisor to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission from January 1985 to January 1987. Her resignation coincided with her husband's death on January 2, 1987.

Grace Towns Hamilton, the woman known as the “most effective female legislator in Georgia,” died on June 17, 1992, and was buried at South-View Cemetery in Atlanta. She was 85 years old.

