

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry

Clerk of Superior Court

DeKalb County



William "Bill" D. Pinkney III

(September 15, 1935 – August 31, 2023)

First Black Man to Sail Solo Around the World via the Five Southernmost Capes

William "Bill" D. Pinkney was born September 15, 1935, in the Bronzeville neighborhood, just a mile from Lake Michigan on the Southside of Chicago, Illinois. His parents divorced when he was a child and he was raised by his single mother and his maternal grandmother. In school, he wasn't the best student but he had a curious mind and loved to read. After reading the book *Call It Courage*, a story about a Polynesian boy named Mafatu who overcomes his deep-seated fear of the sea to prove his bravery, Bill began to dream of sailing the seas. In the summer, he would go down to the lake and watch the boats pass by.

In 1956, Bill joined the Navy, where he was stationed in Puerto Rico and served as a hospital corpsman. While there, he loaded small cargo boats and worked on island-built boats. Bill would often stay on board the boats while they traveled to St. Thomas and British Virgin Islands, just to enjoy the free ride there and back. After leaving the Navy in 1964, Bill had a long career working in various fields, including as an x-ray technician, a limbo dancer, a makeup artist for film and television, and a marketing manager for Revlon. Later, he became a public information officer for the City of Chicago. After his return, he took classes at Steve Colgate's Offshore Sailing School. He began sailing with a mentor and participated in the Chicago-Mackinaw Race every year. Bill bought his first sailboat, a Pearson Triton, and often sailed alone, because he couldn't afford a crew.

While Bill continued sailing as a hobby, his dream was to sail around the world and be an inspiration for his grandchildren. In 1985, at the age of 50, Bill began planning his adventure after being laid off from his job at the Department of Human Services. He fundraised throughout the late 1980s. He added an educational curriculum for school kids in Chicago and Boston, which caught the eye of some wealthy sponsors. With the added financial backing, Bill traveled to England to train with Robin Knox-Johnston, the first man to sail around the world without stopping. Robin encouraged Bill to learn from Teddy Seymour, the first black man to sail solo around the world in 1986-87, and to aspire for more. For Teddy's momentous accomplishment, he received only a plaque. Robin encouraged Bill to leave a larger mark on sailing.

On August 5, 1990, 55-year-old Bill Pinkney set sail on "Commitment" from Boston, headed south. He brought his video equipment to document his journey. After sailing just 600 miles, "Commitment" made her first stop in Bermuda to repair an oil leak from the auxiliary engine and an untuned radio. He resumed sailing, passing the British Virgin Islands and Brazil. Bill's most memorable leg of the trip came when after crossing the Atlantic Ocean, he arrived to Cape Town, South Africa. Nelson Mandela had been released from prison just two weeks before his arrival. Bill sailed past Robben Island, where Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years. In all, his scheduled stops included a difficult route around the southern capes of, Salvador, Brazil, Cape Town in South Africa, Hobart, Tasmania, and Punta del Este in Uruguay. At each stop, Bill would make satellite calls to Globe TV, his wife, and school children in Boston and Chicago that followed his journey. On his journey, Bill encountered two hurricanes, two total knockdowns of his boat, blown out sails, and a near miss with a large shipping vessel. On February 14, 1992, he successfully rounded Cape Horn and headed back toward Boston.

On June 9, 1992, Bill docked "Commitment" at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston, right behind the USS Constitution. Bill Pinkney finished his 22-month, 27,000 nautical mile journey, arriving at the Boston Harbor to cheers from supporters including officers from the Navy and the Coast Guard, the Navy band playing, a cannon salute, and almost 1000 cheering school students, waving "Welcome Home" flags. Bill became the first Black sailor to successfully circumnavigate the globe by way of Cape Horn, and only the fourth out of five Americans to successfully complete the dangerous journey.

In 2000, Bill became a trustee of the Mystic Seaport Museum and oversaw the building of a replica of the "Amistad" - the Spanish schooner whose crew was killed in a revolt by enslaved Africans in 1839. As captain of the replica, he developed the *Middle Passage Project*. He offered voyages to schoolteachers to and from Africa on a route tracing the Middle Passage by which enslaved Africans were taken from Senegal to the Americas. Bill noted the historic accomplishment that although his ancestors left this shore, on the bottom of slave ships, taken from the door of no return, he was returning to the shore of Senegal, as the master of his own sailing vessel.

Bill was inducted into the Sailing Hall of Fame in 2021 and wrote the children's book, *Sailing Commitment Around the World*, detailing his historic voyage, the same year. He was in high demand for public appearances and continued visiting schools to speak to children. His historic voyage film footage was made into a documentary called *The Incredible Voyage of Bill Pinkney*. The film won the George Foster Peabody Award for excellence in children's television programming and has aired on the Disney Channel, National Geographic, and PBS stations.

In August of 2023, Bill was in Atlanta, serving as a technical advisor for an upcoming research project. In an unfortunate accident, Bill suffered a fatal fall and died on August 31, 2023. He was 87 years old.

