

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Cecil J. Williams  
(November 26, 1937 - )

### Civil Rights Photographer, Author, Inventor and Historian



**Cecil J. Williams** was born on November 26, 1937, in Orangeburg, South Carolina. His parents, Ethel and Cecil L. Williams, were of mixed heritage - white, black and native-American. His mother was an educator who taught elementary through college. His father was a tailor that catered to wealthy white clients at high-end department stores. Young Cecil helped his father deliver clothes to stores and collect payments from customers.

When he was nine years old, Cecil received a Kodak Baby Brownie camera from his older brother. His brother relinquished the camera when he became more interested in playing the saxophone. Cecil learned to use the camera and learned how to process film negatives in a makeshift darkroom he created in a spare bedroom in their home.

Cecil started his historic photography career by photographing the men and women he saw dressed in their Sunday best after church. Soon after, people began paying Cecil to take their photograph. At age 11, Cecil photographed his first wedding. Around the age of 12, Cecil was asked to photograph the local black churches to document the style and culture of the black church. He later began freelancing, photographing local events, and offering his images to local papers willing to do business with a young black boy.

Cecil's photos caught the eyes of civil rights organizers who wanted Cecil's photos to help document the collective efforts of the civil rights movement. At the age of 14, he was one of 25 photographers freelancing for Jet Magazine. His photos documented pivotal events in South Carolina's civil rights history, including the historic Briggs v. Elliott, one of the cases that formed the basis of the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education, which ended legal segregation in public schools. Cecil captured a remarkable photo of the Attorney Thurgood Marshall arriving in Charleston prepared to argue the case.

In 1956, 19-year-old Cecil stopped at a gas station in South Carolina and quietly made photographic history. At the height of segregation, signs reading "White Only" were everywhere — cruel symbols of a divided America. But that day, Cecil became the subject of his own camera. With his friend Rendall Harper snapping the shot, Cecil took a sip from the "Whites Only" water fountain, in bold defiance to amoral Jim Crow laws.

On July 4, 1960, Cecil attended the Roosevelt Hotel in hopes of capturing photos of then Senator John F. Kennedy. As luck would have it, Cecil arrived late and security asked him to leave. Before he could be removed, the future president saw 23-year-old Cecil and invited him to sit in the front row, alongside Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, top journalists at the time. The other photographers had to stand at the back of the room. Kennedy gave Cecil the business card of his private address in Hyannis Port, Mass., and the two became close associates. Cecil traveled with Kennedy from South Carolina to Atlanta during his campaign for president.

In 1960, Cecil graduated with a degree in art from Claflin University. Although he showed an exceptional talent for drawing, design and architecture, he was barred from attending Clemson University to continue his studies in architecture due to his race. However, on January 28, 1963, Harvey Gantt, a young black man from Charleston, would be the first black student to integrate Clemson and Cecil was there to document the event. Cecil was also present to document the Orangeburg Massacre, on the campus of South Carolina State College in 1968, when law enforcement officers opened fire on students protesting segregation at a local bowling alley. Three students were killed and 28 were wounded. Cecil also attended the Charleston Hospital Workers Strike and his photo of Mrs. Coretta Scott King speaking at the event, was used for the May 22, 1969, cover of Jet Magazine.

Over the next 20 years, Cecil worked as the official photographer for the South Carolina branch of the NAACP, the South Carolina State University, Claflin University, and National Conference of Black Mayors, Inc. He received numerous awards and recognitions, to include the 1994 Freedom Fighter Award by the Orangeburg branch of the NAACP and the Presidential Citation from Henry N. Tisdale, president of Claflin University. The South Carolina African American Heritage Commission honored him with the 2006 "Preserving Our Place in History" Award and the "DeCosta Jr. Trailblazer Award" in 2016.

In 2019, Cecil opened the self-funded Cecil Williams South Carolina Civil Rights Museum in Orangeburg, SC. The museum contains more than 1000 photographs, 300 artifacts, an 800-name recognition wall, and a gift shop. The museum is currently located in a building that Cecil designed as his home back in 1986. In June 2024, there was a groundbreaking ceremony for a new 11,000 sq. ft. museum in Orangeburg's Railroad Corner, across from two HBCUs, SC State University and Claflin University. In September 2025, Cecil appeared during New York Fashion Week wearing his iconic water fountain photo on a hoodie from the Actively Black brand. He currently lives with his wife Barbara, his college sweetheart, in Orangeburg, SC. You can watch *The World of Cecil* documentary at <https://www.sctv.org/watch/theworldofcecil>

