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### Avon N. Williams Jr.

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## **Avon N. Williams Jr.**

Considered one of Tennessee's most prominent advocates for African American civil and equal rights, Avon Nyanza Williams Jr. was born in 1921 to Avon and Carrie Belle Williams in Knoxville. He would earn an A.B. degree from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1940 and then began studying law at Boston University. He would receive his law degree in 1947 and then his master's degree in law a year later. Williams passed the state law board exams and was admitted into the Massachusetts and Tennessee Bar Associations in 1948. He would return to his Knoxville roots and practice law there from 1949 to 1953.

Williams' first cousin, Thurgood Marshall, a chief lawyer for the Legal Defense and Educational Fund of the NAACP, inspired Williams's active NAACP membership and created the opportunity to meet Z. Alexander Looby, a leading African American attorney in Nashville. Williams would join Looby's practice in 1953, and together they would fight and work closely for the Nashville-area Civil Rights Movement. In 1956, he married Joan Bontemps, the daughter of Fisk University librarian and author, Arna Bontemps. The couple had two children, Avon Williams III and Wendy Janette Williams.

Desegregation became a strong passion for Williams, and he served as co-counsel in the first Tennessee public school desegregation suit against Anderson County in 1950 (*McSwain v. Board of Anderson County, Tennessee*). He also assisted on the *Gray v. University of Tennessee* case in 1951, which granted four African American students to attend the University's graduate school. In 1955, he filed the lawsuit, *Kelly v. Board of Education*, which began school desegregation in Nashville. While such cases would be substantial victories for Williams, he considered the 1972 case, *Geier v. Blanton*, his crowning achievement. The result merged the University of Tennessee-Nashville with the historically black Tennessee State University. It

would be the first time in history that a court in a high education desegregation case ruled in favor of a black institution attaining management over a predominantly white institution. In honor of his great achievement, the former University of Tennessee-Nashville would later be named the Avon Williams Jr. Campus of Tennessee State University.

In addition to desegregation cases, Williams represented clients who were oftentimes mistreated, including cases regarding African American job terminations and wrongful murder convictions. Williams opposed the death penalty and actively challenged the racial bias within criminal proceedings. In 1962, Williams became involved in Democratic politics. He helped create the Davidson County Independent Political Council and later the Tennessee Voters Council, which he chaired.

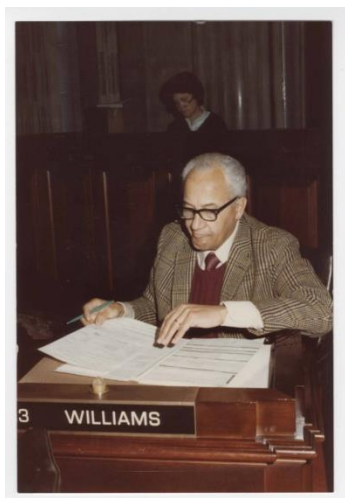
Williams was elected to the newly created 19th Senatorial District in 1968, and as a result, he became the first African American senator elected in the state of Tennessee. As a senator, Williams continued to fight for equal rights. He supported laws requiring public schools to teach African American history and utility district discrimination based on race. Williams would also serve as a member of the State Democratic Steering Committee for the re-election of President Lyndon Johnson. In 1972, he was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

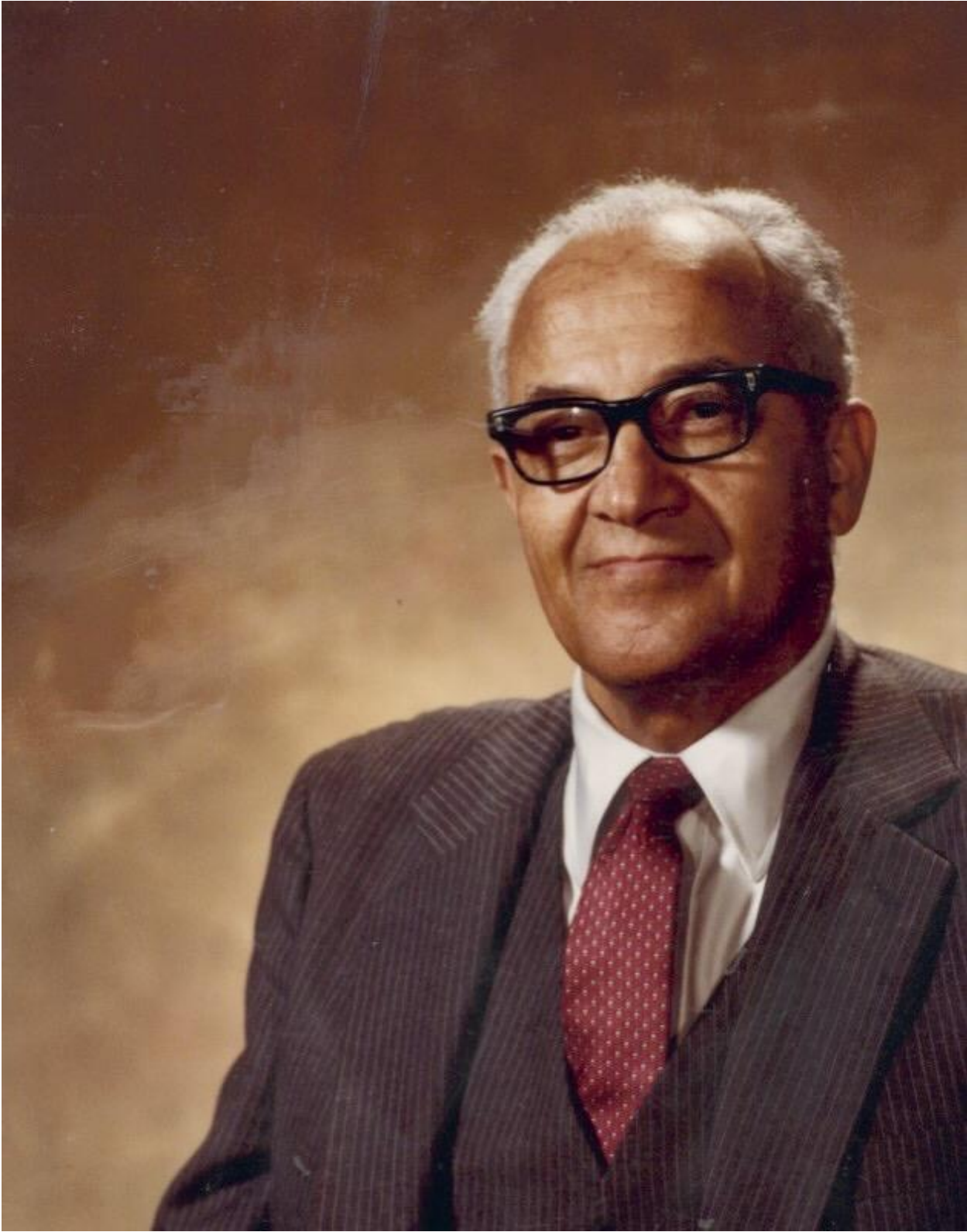
Williams continued to demonstrate strong communal support by serving on the boards of many community and civic organizations, including Davidson County Citizens for TVA and the Davidson County Anti-Tuberculosis Association. He served as a trustee of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church and as special counsel for the Jackson-Memphis, Tennessee and West Tennessee Conferences of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Beginning in 1962, Williams was counsel for the Community Federal Savings and Loan Association of Nashville,

and in 1978 he became counsel for the Citizens Realty and Development Company and its successor, Citizens Bank Building Limited Partnership.

Education remained a core initiative for Williams as well. As a senator, he advocated funding for Meharry Medical College, Tennessee State University, and grade school guidance counselors. From 1966 to 1975, he was a lecturer on dental jurisprudence at Meharry's School of Dentistry, and in 1976, he became a professor at the school. In 1989, Fisk University awarded him a Doctor of Laws degree for his achievements on behalf of African Americans.

In the late 1980s, Williams began to weaken by the progressive effects of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) or also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Although re-elected to Senate in 1988, this would be his final term due to the physical complications of ALS. At the age of 72, Avon Williams, Jr. died on August 29, 1994, and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery in Nashville. In his wake, Williams will be remembered for his civil rights legacy and dedication to the African American community.





## Further Reading

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