



Charles E. Williams
CHIEF JUDGE
TWELFTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA
2002 RINGLING BLVD.
SARASOTA, FLORIDA 34237
TELEPHONE: (941) 861-7942
FACSIMILE: (941) 861-7913
LFudge@jud12.flcourts.org

December 19, 2017

Hon. Betsey Benac
Chair
Board of County Commissioners
P.O. Box 1000
Bradenton, FL 34206-1000

Re: The renaming of the Manatee Courthouse Jury Assembly Room

Dear Commissioner Benac:

The judges, the public, and the entire legal community was saddened by the death of Retired Circuit Court Judge Gilbert A. Smith, Sr. who passed away in October of this year.

Judge Smith served the 12th Judicial Circuit for 20 years, from 1971-1991. He called Manatee County his home and lived here until he retired to South Carolina. Judge Smith was a World War II veteran, he presided over many high profile cases in Manatee County and served the public for the majority of his working life.

It is our desire to rename the Manatee County Jury Assembly Room to the Judge Gilbert A. Smith Sr., Jury Assembly Room in his honor. In order to accomplish this we are asking that the Manatee County Commission allow this renaming so that those who come to the courthouse for jury service, the highest calling for the public in our justice system, will know the legacy of Judge Smith and why it is important for these potential jurors and others who visit the courthouse to understand the importance of public service as personified by the late Judge Smith.

I have attached an editorial by Manatee County resident and opinion editor for the Herald Tribune, Tom Tryon, titled "*Smith's belief in equity transcended the court*" which I think nicely sums up the contributions made by Judge Smith to our judiciary and to our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles E. Williams".

Charles E. Williams
Chief Judge
12th Judicial Circuit

cc. Members of the Manatee County Commission
Ed Hunzeker, County Administrator
Angel Colonesso, Manatee County Clerk of Court and Comptroller
Judges of the 12th Judicial Circuit

Attached: Editorial HT 10/30/17

SARASOTA HERALD TRIBUNE

Posted Oct 30, 2017 at 7:08 PM Updated Oct 30, 2017 at 7:08 PM

Editorial: Smith's belief in equity transcended the court

Gilbert A. Smith Sr. was a "great equity judge."

That is how longtime attorney Dan Bailey summarily and accurately characterized Smith, who died last week at 94.

Plaintiffs and defendants, and their lawyers, the judicial system and the public can ask nothing more — nothing — of a judge than to be a great arbiter of equity.

But Smith did more than that. As a full-time judge from 1971 to 1991 in the 12th Judicial Circuit — which includes Sarasota and Manatee counties, as well as DeSoto County, where he was born in 1923 — Smith helped elevate the professionalism of the judiciary. He came to the bench with extensive knowledge in government and eminent domain law but quickly mastered civil and criminal affairs. He presided over both mundane and controversial cases — always, according to Bailey, with openness.

And, despite his position and command of authority, Smith was neither condescending nor authoritarian. "He had this knack of never letting himself, the judge, become more important than the people in the courtroom," said longtime friend and lawyer Lamar Matthews.

Two other legacy judges in the 12th Circuit who preceded Smith in passing — Robert Hensley and Lynn Silvertooth — possessed the same qualities, Matthews said, adding: "They had a way of letting it be known that they simply remained human beings."

But what human beings they were. Upon Smith's death, Chief Circuit Judge Charles Williams noted that the images of the trio belong on the equivalent of the Mount Rushmore of judges. Indeed they do.

Like his colleagues and his notable brother Chesterfield Smith, Gilbert Smith Sr. served in World War II, performing perilous duties. Smith overcame the Great Depression, fought in the Big War, returned to Florida for law school and then moved to Manatee County — where he built a career, helped his wife, Alpha, raise a family and provided countless hours of community service. He was a certifiable member of the Greatest Generation.

Although Smith was born and raised when segregation remained legal in the South, he became an advocate for diversifying the judiciary and providing legal counsel for folks who could not afford to hire lawyers. He was honored for those efforts, many of which were groundbreaking at the time.

"Gilbert was for the underdog," Bailey said.

In large part due to positive changes in society, government and the law, the judiciary in our region has diversified, but also because Smith and others laid a foundation for breaking the mold.

Just as notable about his life on and off the bench, Smith was known for his laugh — a loud, contagious, rat-a-tat-tat sound that would echo through the courthouse or hunting camp. He was the teller of funny stories who equally enjoyed listening to humorous stories told by others.

In short, he was a serious judge who didn't take himself too seriously.

Most important, he was a judge whose commitment to equity under the law transcends time. May he rest in peace and his belief in equity and justice transcend the ages.