

James H. Coleman, Jr.

In Memoriam

It is with deep sorrow that Porzio announces the passing of our dear friend and colleague, The Honorable James H. Coleman, Jr. on August 2, 2024. Justice Coleman was the first African American to serve on the Supreme Court of New Jersey, appointed by Governor Christine Todd Whitman in 1994. Justice Coleman served as an Associate Justice until his retirement in 2003.

During a lifelong quest for fairness and impartiality, Justice Coleman's contributions to the cause of racial and social justice are immeasurable. The son of a sharecropper born May 4, 1933, in segregated Lawrenceville, Virginia during the Great Depression and the height of racial segregation and white supremacy, Justice Coleman overcame great odds to graduate from James S. Russell High School, where he served as class salutatorian. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree, *cum laude*, from Virginia State University in 1956 and received his J.D. from Howard University School of Law in 1959. Justice Coleman was admitted to the bar in New Jersey in 1960 and in 1963, he was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Justice Coleman also held Honorary Doctor of Law degrees from Virginia State University (1995), Widener University (1995), and Essex County College (2000).

Justice Coleman served in the U.S. Army Reserve and was honorably discharged in February 1962. He was engaged in the private practice of law from July 1960 until February 1970, with offices in Elizabeth and Roselle. In 1960, Justice Coleman joined the former New Jersey Department of Labor and Industry as an Assistant to the Commissioner. During his service with the department, he was an assistant to the director of the Division of Workers' Compensation; consultant to the New Jersey Rehabilitation Commission; counsel for and manager of the New Jersey Subsequent Injury Fund; and referee of formal hearings in the Division of Workers' Compensation.

In 1964, Justice Coleman became the first African American to be appointed a judge in the New Jersey Division of Workers' Compensation and served there until 1973 when Governor William Cahill nominated him to serve as a Union County Court judge. Justice Coleman served in that capacity until 1978, when he became a Superior Court judge, where he served in both the Civil and Criminal Divisions. Justice Coleman served on a Special Three-Judge Resentencing Panel from 1979 until 1981.

In 1981, Justice Coleman was elevated by Chief Justice Robert N. Wilentz as the first African American to serve on the Appellate Division and was named a Presiding Judge of the Appellate Division in May 1987 where he served until November 1994.

Governor Christine Todd Whitman nominated Justice Coleman to serve as an Associate Justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court in 1994. His nomination was confirmed by the New Jersey State Senate on December 12, 1994, and Justice Coleman was sworn in by Chief Justice Wilentz on December 17, 1994, making him the first African American to be sworn in as a New

Jersey Supreme Court Justice. Governor Donald DiFrancesco nominated him to a tenured term in 2001, where he proudly served until his retirement in 2003.

Justice Coleman authored numerous opinions that helped to break down the barriers of segregation. In State of *New Jersey v. Gilmore*, he authored the Appellate Division opinion which struck down the indiscriminate exclusion of racial minorities from serving on juries. He also authored the Supreme Court decision which concluded that a special jury charge regarding the unreliability of cross-racial identification was required in cases that involved cross-racial eyewitness identification.

Following his expansive judicial career, in 2004, Justice Coleman joined Porzio, Bromberg & Newman P.C. in Morristown, New Jersey as Of Counsel. He focused his practice on advising attorneys and clients on appellate strategy and acted as a mediator or arbitrator for complex, private and public disputes. Porzio was proud to play a small role in Justice Coleman's continued legacy and pursuit of social justice in New Jersey and beyond.

“We join the Coleman family, the legal community, and all those who respect our system of justice in mourning the loss of Justice Coleman. He was a historic barrier-breaker, a towering intellect, and a fundamentally decent gentleman. We were blessed to have him spend the last 20 years of his career at Porzio, and we are grateful for the way he helped so many clients and mentored so many of our lawyers,” said Vito A. Gagliardi, Jr., Managing Principal of the firm.

Justice Coleman was the recipient of many honors, including:

- Renaming of the New Jersey Workers' Compensation American Inn of Court the Justice James H. Coleman, Jr., New Jersey Workers' Compensation American Inn of Court;
- Named a New Jersey State Bar Foundation 2003 Fellow;
- Named an American Bar Foundation Fellow; and
- Recipient of the New Jersey Law Journal (NJLJ) 2016 Lifetime Achievement Award.

Justice Coleman was the inaugural recipient of the Governor Kean Award for Commitment to People in Poverty, and the 2014 recipient of the Justice Thurgood Marshall Award of Excellence. He was also a recipient of the New Jersey State Bar Association Medal of Honor.

Justice Coleman's portrait hangs proudly in a permanent display at the New Jersey Supreme Court, an honor bestowed upon him in 2016, 13 years after his retirement.

In 2020, Justice Coleman authored “*A Plowboy's Judicial Coronation and the Intersection of Law and Religion: An Autobiography*.” The book chronicles his remarkable career while revealing the story behind his personal quest to endure extreme poverty, an abusive home environment, Jim Crow segregation and pervasive racism within and beyond the courtroom. In addition to detailing the events leading up to his dismantling of discriminatory policies, Justice Coleman's autobiography offers a vivid portrayal of how a poor farm boy profoundly altered the legal landscape of America's most densely populated state.

During his 39-year judicial career, Justice Coleman wrote over 2,000 opinions, of which approximately 400 have been published. In “*A Plowboy's Judicial Coronation*,” Justice Coleman wrote:

> *“During my . . . judicial career, I wrote a number of cutting-edge opinions that decided whether an individual's rights should be protected under the New Jersey or the Federal Constitution. We adopted a cutting-edge principle known as New Jersey Federalism under which the Federal Constitution sets a floor below which an individual's rights cannot fall and our State Constitution as a ceiling for individual rights.”*

Based on opinions authored by Justice Coleman, the media has concluded that "despite his historic roles, he has no agenda but to dispense justice evenly . . . That he has been a justice for all seasons . . . heavy on substance, light on flash."

In addition to his autobiography, Justice Coleman also published several Law Review Articles. He lectured at all three New Jersey Law Schools, the New Jersey Judicial College; ALI/ABA on Products Liability; Black Congress on Health and Law; and various trial lawyer associations. He served as a member or chairperson of a host of Supreme Court Committees dealing with the New Jersey Judicial College, sentencing disparity, medical malpractice, concerns of minorities in the judiciary, probation services, court reporting services and legal services. Justice Coleman served on the Board of Trustees for Legal Services of New Jersey, including as Chairman. He also served on the Boards of Trustees for St. Paul's College and for the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. He was a member of the New Jersey, American, Union County, and National Bar Associations.

Married to Sophia Coleman since 1962, Justice Coleman is also survived by his two children, Kairon Mullins (Dr. John Mullins, Jr.) and James III, and four grandchildren, Amber, James IV, Sierra (Perry Meyers), and John III.

Recognitions

*No aspect of this or any advertisement has been approved by the Supreme Court of New Jersey. For ranking methodologies, please see **here**.*

- *The Best Lawyers in America*® - Appellate Practice (2011-2024); Arbitration and Mediation (2011-2024)
- "Lawyer of the Year," Newark Area - Arbitration (2015); Arbitration and Appellate Practice (2023)
- *New Jersey Law Journal* - Lifetime Achievement Award (2016)
- Justice Thurgood Marshall Award of Excellence (2013)
- New Jersey State Bar Association Medal of Honor (2003)

Memberships

- James H. Coleman, Jr. New Jersey Workers' Compensation American Inn of Court, 2003–2024
- CPR Institute for Dispute Resolution
- New Jersey State Bar Foundation, Fellow, 2003–2024
- American Bar Foundation, Fellow, 1995–2024
- American Law Institute, 1985–2024
- Garden State Bar Association, 1980–2024
- Judicial Council of the National Bar Association, 1973–2024
- American Bar Association, 1971–2024
- American Judicature Society, 1965–2024

- New Jersey State Bar Association, 1962–2024
- Union County Bar Association, 1962–2024
- National Bar Association, 1960–2024

News

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- Porzio, Bromberg & Newman Mourns the Passing of The Honorable James H. Coleman, Jr., the first African American to serve on the Supreme Court of New Jersey, 8/04/2024
- 27 Porzio Attorneys Recognized in *The Best Lawyers in America®*; *Best Lawyers: Ones to Watch®*, 8/17/2023
- 24 Porzio Attorneys Recognized in The Best Lawyers ® in America, 2023 Edition, 8/18/2022
- Congratulations To The 23 Porzio Attorneys Recognized In Best Lawyers® In America, 2022, 8/19/2021
- Congratulations To The 23 Porzio Attorneys Recognized In Best Lawyers In America, 2020, 8/15/2019
- The Honorable James H. Coleman, Jr. to be Included in Rutgers Oral History Archives, 5/12/2017
- Porzio's Education Team Participated in the New Jersey School Boards Association Workshop 2016, 10/26/2016
- The Honorable James H. Coleman, Jr.'s Portrait to be Displayed in the New Jersey Supreme Court, 4/27/2016
- The Honorable James H. Coleman, Jr. Honored with New Jersey Law Journal's Lifetime Achievement Award, 4/26/2016
- Porzio Litigation Team Helps Erase $9 Million Dollar Damages Verdict, 3/09/2016
- Justice Coleman Honored with Library Renaming, 12/23/2015
- The Honorable Justice James H. Coleman, Jr. is Nominated to the New Jersey Hall of Fame, 5/05/2015

Speaking Engagements

- Panelist, “Winning Advocacy Techniques at Mediation," ABA Section of Litigation, Young Advocates Committee, June 1, 2017.
- "Why I Became A Secular Minister For Justice," New Jersey Association for Justice Meadowlands Seminar 2016, East Rutherford, NJ, November 18, 2016.
- Presenter, "Supreme Court Review", Porzio Employment Law Forum, Morristown, NJ, October 6, 2009
- "Pioneering in and Perfecting a New and Modern Judiciary," 60th Anniversary of the New Jersey Supreme Court, Trenton, NJ, September 8, 2008
- Lecturer, American Academy of Judicial Education
- Lecturer, American Law Institute/American Bar Association on Products Liability

James H. Coleman, Jr. Cont.

- Lecturer, Black Congress on Health and Law
- Lecturer, Foster Parents Association
- Lecturer, International Association of Industrial Accidents, Boards and Commissions
- Lecturer, National Bar Association
- Lecturer, New Jersey Judicial College
- Lecturer, Rutgers and Seton Hall School of Law Moot-Courts
- Lecturer, Rutgers University School of Law—Newark and Camden
- Lecturer, Seton Hall University School of Law
- Lecturer, Various Trial Lawyer Associations

Community Involvement

- Chair, New Jersey Supreme Court Historical Society Advisory Board
- Member, New Jersey Task Force on Judicial Independence
- Member, Board of Trustees of University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey
- Judicial Advisory Panel, Co-Chair
- Board of Trustees of St. Paul's College
- Board of Trustees New Jersey Symphony
- Legal Services of New Jersey, Chairman, Board of Trustees
- Death Penalty Study Commission
- Member, Board of Advisors to President of University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey
- New Jersey Judicial College, Committee on Judicial Seminars
- New Jersey Supreme Court, Appellate Division Management Committee
- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Criminal Practice
- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Legal Ethics
- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Medical Malpractice
- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Minorities in the Judiciary, Chairman
- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Probation
- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee to Review the ABA and the N.J. Code of Judicial Conduct

James H. Coleman, Jr. Cont.

- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Sentence Disparity, Chairman
- CPR Panel of Distinguished Neutrals, Member
- New Jersey Supreme Court Committee to Study Court Reporting Services
- Union County Legal Services, Incorporator and Board of Directors

Bar Admissions

- New Jersey, 1960

Court Admissions

- United States District Court, District of New Jersey, 1960
- United States Supreme Court, 1963

Education

- *Howard University School of Law*
  J.D., 1959
- *Virginia State University*
  B.A., 1956
  cum laude
- *Virginia State University*
  Honorary Doctor of Laws, 1995
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Prior Relevant Experience

- New Jersey Supreme Court, Associate Justice, 1994–2003
- New Jersey Superior Court, Appellate Division, Presiding Judge, 1987–1994
- Justice Pro Tempore New Jersey Supreme Court, 134 N.J. 569 (1993); 121 N.J. (1991); 115 N.J. 491 (1989)
- New Jersey Superior Court, Appellate Division, Judge, 1981–1987
- New Jersey Superior Court, Law Division, Judge, 1978–1980
- Special Three-Judge Resentencing Panel, 1979–1981
- Union County Court, Judge, 1973–1978
- New Jersey Workers' Compensation Court, Judge, 1964–1973
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