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# Trailblazers of the Mississippi Legal Frontier

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## Reuben V. Anderson Jackson, MS

When you meet Reuben Anderson, you meet a modest, private man who never likes to talk about himself or any of the firsts that he has accomplished. Reuben had a close relationship with his father, who in Reuben's opinion was a workaholic. His primary occupation was as a brick layer, but he also ran a "juke" joint as a side business. He always advised Reuben to be the first one to get to work in the mornings. At an early age Reuben knew from laying brick with his father that he wanted a job in the shade.

Reuben remembers that growing up in a segregated society in the 1950's and 1960's in Mississippi was unique and unusual. Everything was segregated across the state. He recalls seeing a swimming pool filled with kids swimming and asking his father why he could not go there. His father gave him an explanation which he accepted. Reuben reminisces, "But it is a strange thing about growing up in a segregated society. You accept things, drink from segregated water fountains, and think nothing about it until you get old enough to have to deal with those questions." Reuben is not embittered by the experience. In spite of segregation, he feels he had a beautiful childhood and was quite fortunate to be blessed with a great family and friends.

Reuben attended his early school years at the Jackson Laboratory School at then Jackson College which is now Jackson State University. He left there and followed his brothers to Holy Ghost Catholic School and later transferred to Jim Hill High School. During his early school years, he became friends with Jack Young, Jr. As a consequence, Reuben began to visit in the Young home and to know Jack Young, Sr., a civil rights attorney. It was at the Youngs' home that Reuben met civil rights leader Roy Wilkins and numerous freedom riders. This experience had a tremendous impact on his life. Jack Young, Sr., soon became Reuben's mentor and ignited his desire to become a civil rights attorney.

Setting his sights on becoming a civil rights attorney, Reuben attended and graduated from Tougaloo in 1964. He thoroughly enjoyed his years on campus there. Visitors to the campus included such noted civil rights activists as Martin Luther King, Ralph Bunch and Aaron Henry. According to Reuben, Tougaloo was the "bread basket of the civil rights era."

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**"the legal profession is the only profession that opens the whole world to you"**

## Reuben V. Anderson – Trailblazers of the Mississippi Legal Frontier

Reuben always wanted to attend Ole Miss law school, but when he first applied to it, his application was rejected. Rather than suing the school, with the help of Jack Young, Sr., Reuben attended law school at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for a year. During that year, Josh Morris became dean of the law school at Ole Miss and actively sought the enrollment of minority students. Reuben was admitted and even received a scholarship. When he began law school at Ole Miss, he was the only black law student in the second year class although there was one in the first year class. There were probably five black undergraduate students at that time.

Immediately after finishing law school, Reuben was hired by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and tried his first case for the NAACP the day after he graduated. Reuben's primary task was school desegregation cases, but he also was involved in representing a number of civil rights leaders and handling public accommodation cases.

If you ever noticed Reuben driving Buick cars for years, there is a good reason for his choice. Reuben had been drafted to go to Vietnam. At the suggestion of the Legal Defense Fund, Reuben moved to New York hoping its draft boards would grant him a deferment. His request was denied so he moved back to Mississippi to prepare for Vietnam. He applied to the draft board in Jackson for a deferment. Jimmy Fowler of Fowler Buick, who was the chairman of the draft board in Jackson, obtained a deferment for him so he could practice civil rights law in Mississippi. As Reuben says, "He did a huge favor in my life." For many years after that, Reuben drove Buicks.

Reuben recalls that during this era The Mississippi Bar discouraged blacks from joining so he and Fred Banks decided to storm the Bar convention and create a commotion. They drove to the convention on the Coast and entered the hotel lobby. As Reuben tells it, there stood the Bar President, Boyce Holleman, welcoming them with open arms. There was no crashing of the Bar convention.

In 1967-1969 the civil rights office in Jackson of which Reuben was a part was fully funded by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and was located on Farish Street, along with the offices of all of the black lawyers then practicing. As a conse-

quence, Judge Harold Cox, a federal court judge, referred to Reuben and his fellow civil rights attorneys as "Farish Street lawyers," a badge they wore with pride.

When civil rights cases began to wane in 1970, Reuben and his colleagues converted the firm to a private law firm by the name of Anderson, Banks, Nichols & Levantahl to handle more than just desegregation cases. They divided the legal work among themselves. Reuben primarily handled cases in circuit court including criminal cases, while others in the firm handled chancery matters and civil rights cases. This resulted in then Mayor Jackson, Russell Davis, appointing Reuben as a municipal court judge in 1976.

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Reuben steadily moved up the judicial ladder. Although Reuben had not been a Cliff Finch supporter, Governor Cliff Finch wanted to appoint a black attorney to fill a vacancy on the county court in Hinds County. In 1975 he summoned Reuben, Fred Banks and Jack Young, Jr., to his office and advised them of his intentions to appoint one of them to the post. He left it up to them to decide who among them should be appointed. Since Reuben had some outside business interests, the three of them mutually agreed he was the one, and Governor Finch made it official.

In 1981, Governor William Winter, whom Reuben did support, elevated him to the Hinds County Circuit Court bench, and, in 1985, Governor Bill Allain promoted him to the Mississippi Supreme Court, a position he did not want. In fact, Reuben requested that his friend and former law partner Fred Banks be appointed, but Bill Allain would not do so. Instead he appointed Fred to replace Reuben on the Circuit Court. After serving on the Supreme

Court for six years, Reuben left the bench to reenter private practice in Jackson with the law firm of Phelps Dunbar.

Reuben freely admits that his favorite job was being a trial judge. His fondest memory as a trial judge was in Yazoo County at a time when blacks were not used to seeing a black judge. In this video he describes the elderly blacks coming up to him with pride in their eyes when he came down from the bench.

Reuben takes pride in saying that, when he was on the bench, he called it as he saw it and he valued the lawyers' time. He adds that he had no agendas. Lee Davis Thames, a practicing attorney in Jackson who tried cases before Judge Anderson, confirms that he was known for his fairness on the bench and for his availability to lawyers when he was a trial judge, sometimes getting to the Courthouse at 7:00 a.m. Reuben still prefers to be the first one to the office in the morning, a trait instilled by his father.

Reuben Anderson has bridged all sorts of gaps – from a "Farish Street lawyer" to Mississippi Supreme Court Justice. In 1997, he served as President of The Mississippi Bar. He has become a sought after mediator, serves on boards of numerous well known companies, and has also served as President of the Mississippi Economic Council, using his personal acquaintances with over 50 CEO's across the country to help Mississippi.

Reuben believes that the legal profession is probably the only profession that opens the whole world to you. He notes that half of the United States presidents have been lawyers. He reminds young lawyers that communication skills are very important because lawyers are mouthpieces for their clients and people pay their lawyers to speak for them.

Reuben credits his success to his wife, the former Phyllis Wright. Reuben has three children, one of whom is a lawyer, and a grandson.

His elementary school classmate, long time friend, and law partner in two different law firms, Fred Banks, does a grand job of interviewing both Reuben and Lee Davis Thames. John Chapman, Henry Clay and Gail Lowery produced and directed this video. It was filmed in the offices of Phelps Dunbar and the Mississippi Supreme Court. It must be the magic of more than fifty years of friendship that glows throughout the entire video. ■