

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry
Clerk of Superior Court
DeKalb County



Thomas F. Freeman
(June 27, 1919 – June 6, 2020)

“Prolific Lecturer and Debate Coach”

Thomas Franklin Freeman was born on June 27, 1919, in Richmond, Virginia to Louis and Louise (Willis) Freeman. He had seven brothers and three sisters. At the age of nine, Thomas preached his first sermon in church although he had a gripping fear of speaking in public, often bursting into tears. He worked hard to overcome his fears by forcing himself to keep talking and by enunciating each word, which allowed him to complete his speech or sermon. At the age of 15, Thomas graduated from Armstrong High School and later enrolled in Virginia University where he obtained a bachelor's degree in English. After graduation, he began teaching at Morehouse College, in Atlanta, Georgia where one of his more famous students attended - a young Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1948, Thomas completed a Bachelor of Divinity in Homiletics, the study of composing and preaching sermons, from Andover Newton Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. He later earned a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Chicago, Illinois.

Thomas accepted a Philosophy teaching position at the HBCU Texas Southern University (TSU) in 1949, with the intention of returning to the pulpit at Carmel Baptist Church in Richmond, VA. However, after the president of TSU observed Thomas leading a class debate in logic, he offered him a permanent position as Head of the Debate Department - a position he would hold for more than 80 years. Three months after his appointment, Thomas and the TSU Debate team dominated over the debate teams from colleges like Harvard and the University of Chicago.

In 1994, Thomas became the first African American faculty and guest professor at Rice University in Houston, where he taught Ethical Dimensions and Social and Ethical Problems. His reputation preceded him; his tenure was approved upon his arrival. While at Rice, he designed his courses that quickly grew in popularity. Thomas received numerous awards during his career as an educator.

In 2017, Dr. Freeman was the recipient of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's (CBCF) highest honor in Washington D.C., for his impact and influence as an outstanding scholar and educator.

Over his 70-year tenure, Freeman became a legend on the Third Ward campus, training students and celebrities alike in forensic speech, or the study of public speaking and debate. He worked with U.S. Reps. Mickey Leland and Barbara Jordan, Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis, and gospel singer Yolanda Adams.

In 2007, actor Denzel Washington sought out Freeman's expertise to coach the cast of the Golden Globe-nominated film “The Great Debaters” a story of the Wiley College debate team in the 1930s that won a national championship over the all-white Harvard University debate team.

Thomas Freeman was married to Clarice Estell Freeman for 66 years and together they had three children.

Thomas F. Freeman, died in Houston on June 6, 2020, at the age of 100.

