

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
MIDDLE DISTRICT OF ALABAMA

DEDICATION OF
THE JUDGE W. HAROLD ALBRITTON, III
CONFERENCE ROOM AND LIBRARY

The Judge W. Harold Albritton, III
Conference Room and Library
United States Courthouse Complex
Montgomery, Alabama
Thursday, May 16, 2024
10:30 a.m.

CHIEF JUDGE MARKS: Well, good morning. And welcome everyone. It's wonderful to see such a distinguished group of people for this very, very happy event, not just for Judge Albritton and his people, but for the court as well. We're all gathered here today obviously to honor and celebrate Judge Harold Albritton. Judge Albritton has served on this court exactly 33 years as of May 14th, the day upon which he received his commission in 1991.

Before today, this lovely room where we are all located was simply known as the third floor conference room. But as you can see, this room is far too special to have such a bland technical name. In fact, much of the work of the court is conducted right here in this room. This is the site of most of the judges' meetings, where we do the work of the court. It is in this room where our magistrate judges interviewed for their job positions. It's also the location where the court hosts distinguished guests. It is a board room, a dining room, a ceremonial room, and now it will bear a name that is befitting a room that does it all because Judge Albritton has done it all.

He has not only presided over cases as a United States District Judge, he served as Chief Judge of the Court from 1988 until 2004, during which time he did things like assemble a committee to preserve the history of the Middle District culminating in the Court's Oral History Project that

continues today. He established the Albritton Lecture Series at the University of Alabama School of Law, which has hosted two chief justices and nine associated justices of the United States Supreme Court and chief justices from three foreign countries as lecturers at the law school.

In 2011, the Alabama Bar created the William Harold Albritton Pro Bono Leadership Award, recognizing his establishment of the Volunteer Lawyers Program. And this award is presented to lawyers committed to the provision of pro bono legal services, and Judge Albritton was, fittingly, the first recipient of that award. Judge Albritton was also appointed by then Chief Justice William Rehnquist to serve as a member of the Judicial Conference of the United State's Court Administration and Case Management Committee. And, of course, Judge Albritton served as Chief Judge during the construction of our magnificent courthouse.

As Winston Churchill said, We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us. Judge Albritton was instrumental in shaping our courthouse, which continues to shape those of us who enter its doors every day. Quite simply, Judge Albritton's contributions to the Middle District cannot be overstated.

The court receives many visitors, and I cannot tell you how many times people have commented on the majesty of this building. From students to law clerks to judges to

lawyers, the universal reaction is that we have the most beautiful courthouse in the country. That is due in large part to Judge Albritton's hard work and leadership. But of course, Judge Albritton did not act alone in the enormous task of overseeing the design and construction of this courthouse. Our own Judge Myron Thompson was the Chief Judge at this court during the period of congressional approval of the building of the court, the land acquisition, and the funding stages of the project, which, as you can imagine, were no small feats.

This building was designed by architect Lee Sims. And Reggie Hamner served as the court project coordinator. And Reggie Hamner's work on this project was so pivotal that it earned him a namesake. The large eagle who sits above the entrance to the courthouse is lovingly known as and referred to as Reggie in honor of Reggie Hamner, who is here with us today. Please join me in welcoming Reggie Hamner to the lectern for some comments.

(Applause)

MR. HAMNER: Thank you, Judge Marks.

She took just about half of all the things I was going to say, so I may do a little ad libbing and tell some of those stories that only these walls and a few people know about. But when I learned first of the dedication of this room in honor of Judge Albritton, my first thought was how deserving and how appropriate.

When I joined the Middle District Court family in 1995, this courthouse was in what is referred to as its design and development stage. It was really a dream that we were trying to get onto a piece of paper.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: Can you turn up the volume or something?

MRS. ALBRITTON: We want to hear every word you're saying.

MR. HAMNER: Okay. Can you hear now?

MRS. ALBRITTON: Speak louder.

MR. HAMNER: Okay. There were nine Article III judges and four magistrate judges having to function in the historic Frank M. Johnson, Jr., Federal Building and Courthouse that was built in 1931. And through the years it had been modified in one attempt after another to make it a function for the judiciary to hold court. That courthouse originally had one district courtroom, a post office, and every other federal agency in Montgomery, and through the years, as the court grew, the space was taken over. And it was all dysfunctional, where the judges had to meet, and at that particular time, the jury room in Judge Thompson's chamber was where we met.

And over the next few years, if those walls could tell the stories of the court. We dealt with armed combat between the court, the General Services Administration,

and even the contractor. But in doing so, this building came into being because of the tenacity of the judges here. I told one of them this morning things like this didn't happen in any other district anywhere but it was the love of the judges, both our district judges and our circuit judges, who locked arms.

We had a mandate from the U.S. Administrative Offices of Courts to build a courthouse and not an office building that could otherwise be known as a courthouse. I know Judge Thompson was very happy to get his jury room back after this courthouse was built, because by then, it wouldn't have been known from its original design. But in the restoration and renovation of the FMJ building, Judge Thompson got his jury room back.

One of the things that I was charged with when I came, we want a user-friendly courthouse. We want it to be user-friendly to the judiciary, to visitors, to litigants, to anyone who might darken these doors. And it's partly because of one aspect of making this building user friendly that this room has come into being. It replaces the old jury room, which I'm sure there are a lot of conversations on those walls that would be interesting for people to hear. But this wonderful space is here to honor Judge Albritton. He was the Chief Judge when it came into being and when the plans were put here in space and dedicated in his honor is most fitting.

He never lost sight of the fact that this was to be a user-friendly courthouse.

And Judge Marks mentioned to you the type things that take place in here. And it contributes significantly to the function of the court. And I think his dedication to this project and particularly to the user-friendly aspect of this courthouse is why we can celebrate today, because while no man does a one-man show, this one, he did all the heavy lifting, and it has made a big difference.

If you look on the writing on the wall, Chief Justice Marshall speaks to the duty of a judge. And as Judge Marks mentioned, Judge Albritton has been here for 33 years. But you can read those words, and it's a more fitting exemplar of what a judge should be and what it should be about. I don't know where you could find one any more applicable than the one to Judge Albritton. The judge for whom this room is named today, William Harold Albritton, III, will live in the judicial history of the Middle District of Alabama and actually beyond.

And, Judge, congratulations.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: Thank you.

(Applause)

CHIEF JUDGE MARKS: And now another individual who has served this court well and as Chief Judge, I'd like to introduce to you the Honorable Keith Watkins.

JUDGE WATKINS: Good morning. Some of you are feeling cool. That's just the natural chill that comes over an audience when I get up to speak.

(Laughter)

JUDGE WATKINS: A good man, who can find.

It's been said that adversity introduces a man to himself. And we at this court have had that opportunity, or misfortune, to witness this truth firsthand several years ago. Every boat needs an anchor, and for our rough seas here, we had two anchors. I'm not going to give any names, but their initials are Myron Thompson and Harold Albritton.

(Laughter)

JUDGE WATKINS: I had my shot at Myron two years ago talking about him listening to the possum in his pickup truck. Today, Harold, you're in the dock. And I'm honored indeed to say a few words to Judge Albritton and to Jane Albritton.

Judge Albritton and I never had the pleasure of meeting in court during our lawyer days; however, we did serve together on the Alabama Bar Commission for one year, which was a big year for him. He was president of the Alabama State Bar, and he was appointed to the bench that year.

The name Albritton was known far and wide in the legal circles all over Alabama and beyond at that time and today still. The Albritton firm in Andalusia was the oldest and one of the most respected law firms in Alabama. Indeed,

Harold has the distinction of having lawyers in bunches, both as ancestors and as descendants.

Some may have referred to the Albritton firm as country lawyers, and geographically they were. We of such fame are used -- or I was anyway. I don't think he may have been. But I was used to chickens being on my mat on Monday morning when I had a trial term, eggs from clients, and, in the country, nicknames like the Reynolds brothers down below Brundidge -- nobody lives above Brundidge; everybody lives below Brundidge -- Red Bug, Skeeter, and Gnat.

(Laughter)

JUDGE WATKINS: They were the Brundidge brothers. But Harold prefers a more precise moniker.

I hadn't been on the bench but about a month before he had me in his office for a talk during which he introduced me to what is now a favorite book, *The Practical Cogitator*. And in this he referred me to a passage written by Justice Robert H. Jackson, who was a small town lawyer in New York probably appointed by Roosevelt because of the New York lawyer connections, went on to be -- prosecuted Nuremberg, and just quite a good lawyer.

Here's what he said about the county seat lawyer; not the county lawyer, but the county seat lawyer. And Harold introduced me to this passage that day in his office.

The County seat lawyer, counselor to the poor and the railroads, to bankers and others who always gave to each the best there was in him and was willing to admit his best was good. That lawyer has been an American institution, about the same in the south, north, east, and west. Such a man understands the structure of society and how its groups interlock and interact because he lives in a community so small that he can keep it all in view.

Lawyers in large cities do not know their cities. They know their circles. And urban circles are apt to be made up of those with a kindred outlook on life. But the circle of the man from the small town is the whole community and embraces persons of every outlook. Such a person sees how this society lives and works under the law and adjusts its conflicts by its procedures. This lawyer knows how disordered and hopelessly unstable it would be without law. He knows -- he knows -- that in this country, the administration of justice is based on law practice. Paper rights are worth, when they're threatened, just what some lawyer makes them worth. Civil liberties are those which some lawyer respected by his neighbors will stand up to defend. Any legal doctrine which fails to enlist the support of well-regarded lawyers will have no real sway in this country.

And such a lawyer, a county seat lawyer, was Harold Albritton. He also showed that kind of respect to the

lawyers in his court because it was a joint venture.

Now, Judge Johnson had a favorite story of how the county seat lawyer doesn't always get the last word. There was a Widow Woman Willis that had a cow back in the depression. And she allowed her only cow to get on the railroad tracks, and a locomotive, unfortunately, destroyed the cow unceremoniously. So she hired Lawyer Moody, the county seat lawyer, to sue the railroad to get her money -- to get some money for her cow. Well, he settled the case and called her, and he said he had settled the case for \$150, is that okay? She said, yes, that's fine. He said, I'll call you in a few days. He called her in a few days to come around to the office, and Mr. Moody handed her a check for \$100. She said, Mr. Moody, my cow, my cow, you said you got \$150; this check is for \$100. He said, well, ma'am, any lawyer would tell you -- if you go down the street and ask, any lawyer, they'll tell you that a \$50 fee is a fair fee in this case. And she said, Mr. Moody, I don't want you to go ask any lawyer, go ask a bunch of widow women.

(Laughter)

JUDGE WATKINS: Well, Harold's best was better than most, and we are richer for having him as a Middle District treasure. He was a perfect fit for this place. Backed by an all-star list of lawyer ancestors and descendants and undergirded by his rock solid wife, Jane, he hit the ground

running right into GSA.

(Laughter)

JUDGE WATKINS: Together, as we've heard from Judge Thompson, this beautiful building, all 400,000 square feet of it, came into existence with Harold herding GSA and Reggie and the contractor. And that was quite a feat. All the while, Judge Albritton managed his court with firmness and grace, always with fairness. He kept his work excellent and up to date despite the distractions. He knew instinctively that litigants and lawyers would remember being mistreated long after they had forgotten being ruled against. He always conducted himself with common sense and compassion.

A good man, who can find. Both Job and the psalmist had the same thought. That applies to Judge Albritton. For as long as life is in me and the breath of the Almighty is in my nostrils, my lips certainly will not speak unjustly nor will my tongue mutter deceit. Until I die I will not put away my integrity. I will walk in my house, and in this courthouse, with integrity of heart. I will set no worthless thing before my eyes.

A good judge and a good man, Harold Albritton.

Congratulations, Harold. And thank you, Jane.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: Thank you.

(Applause)

CHIEF JUDGE MARKS: And now another man who largely

needs no introduction, our own Judge Myron Thompson.

JUDGE THOMPSON: Thank you, Judge Marks, Reggie, Keith, other Judges, family and other friends of Judge Albritton.

Can you hear me, Jane?

MRS. ALBRITTON: Barely.

JUDGE THOMPSON: Barely? I'll do this. I'll take this off and talk to Jane.

(Laughter)

JUDGE THOMPSON: I am one lucky man that I have gotten to speak after Reggie and Keith, for during their remarks, I had what you call that aha moment. When the Chief sent around an email asking whether we could rename the third-floor conference room the Albritton Conference Room, I voted a quick yes. But I thought I was talking about Jane, the Jane Albritton Conference Room.

(Laughter)

JUDGE THOMPSON: Now I understand it's you, Harold, we're honoring here today.

But, Jane, I'll now have to wait and give that 30-minute memorized speech on another occasion. And Harold, I have this short speech for you.

(Laughter)

JUDGE THOMPSON: Fortunately, I also have my remarks from some almost 20 years ago at the dedication of the

portrait of Harold. And what I said back then remains even more true today as we rename this conference room The Albritton Conference Room.

Jane and Harold met on a date the first week of school at the University of Alabama, an event, as we can now all see, that essentially destined Harold to greatness. Harold, back then in 2004, I noted that the past two years for me had been particularly difficult and difficult for this court. Aside from the fact, as you know, we moved into this wonderful new courthouse, the court itself had been the center of media attention with cameras out front, not to mention demonstrators out front too.

But through it all, one person maintained a tight and steady control of everything related to this court. One person maintained that delicate balance between the right to free speech and free press and the right of the public to have free, unfettered, and open access to the courthouse. That person was Harold. Quietly, never asking for the limelight, Harold, as the Chief District Judge, made sure that the ability of this courthouse to perform its daily and routine duties was not in any manner hindered.

Harold, as to maintaining the speech and access balance, I now offer you the presidency of any university you want.

(Laughter)

JUDGE THOMPSON: In fact, I think they would welcome you.

I said it before back then in 2004 and I'll say it again as a testament to the high regard in which I hold Harold. During your seven years as Chief and, in particular, during the last two difficult ones, I was so fortunate to have you as my Chief and as a friend. But I would like to offer some additional words before I sit down about the artist who did the artwork in this courthouse as well as the painting that will, I think, be hanging outside Albritton Conference Room.

When I was Chief and we were considering what art should be in this new structure, Circuit Judge Ed Carnes sent me an email saying -- you know, I'm not exaggerating on this. Any of you who know Ed will realize I'm definitely telling the truth. He said, Myron, I assume we're not going to have any nude art, are we?

(Laughter)

JUDGE THOMPSON: To be honest with all of you, I had not even considered nudity as a possibility until I got Ed's email. Anyway, the what-should-be-the-art became an easy question for us to answer. David Braly was the obvious and immediate answer. He beautifully and intricately echoed throughout the new courthouse the nature of the historic courthouse. From the ceiling in the historic courtroom to the

alcove behind the bench in that courtroom, he beautifully replicated these aspects in each district judge's courtroom as well as in the atrium ceiling of the new courthouse.

David regrets that he cannot be here, but he wants everyone to know that he is deeply honored that he was given the task of doing the art for our new courthouse and also the picture that I understand, was it your tenth reunion that your law clerks gave you, Harold, and which will now hang outside this Albritton Conference Room? He added that he wanted all to know that without the continued support of his husband, Mark Montoya, he could not have achieved what he did.

Congratulations, Harold, on having the conference room named after you, though for me it will always be the Harold and Jane Conference Room, and under my breath, that's what I will say as I walk through that door.

(Laughter)

JUDGE THOMPSON: Before I sit down, actually, I want to tell a little story. And I'm not a person who watches much TV, and I definitely don't like watching TV shows about lawyers, but there is one show that I particularly like called Rumpole of the Bailey. And I watch that religiously. And mainly because it casts aspersions on judges. It's a show about judges. And if any of you have seen the show, you realize that Rumpole in the show is always sitting in court sort of twiddling his thumbs and he has this sort of voiceover

of his thinking.

And I was watching one show in particular not too long ago, and I had just celebrated over 40 years on the bench, and Rumpole was sitting in court, his client was sitting next to him, and Rumpole says, The judge up there, you know, he's a tough judge, been on the bench 40 years. And of course, it caught my attention because I've been on the bench over 40 years. And Rumpole's client leans over and says, He's been on the bench 40 years as a trial judge? And Rumpole says, Yeah. He said, You would think after 40 years he would get the knack of it and be a real judge.

(Laughter)

JUDGE THOMPSON: Anyway, Harold, now that you are no longer a trial judge and have retired into being a real judge, I congratulate you again, and to Jane, of course. And thank you very much. What an absolutely wonderful and appropriate dedication. Thanks.

(Applause)

CHIEF JUDGE MARKS: Before we hear from the man of the hour, Reggie Hamner would like to say a few words that have come to mind.

MR. HAMNER: Yes. I told you there were stories about this courthouse that after a lot of people die, I may write a book. But at this point in time, Judge Thompson mentioned the work of David Braly. And how David got to be

the artist of this courthouse is a story in and of itself, and Judge Albritton played a huge role in it.

The General Services Administration in every city where you build a courthouse, they make a contribution. In our case, it was a quarter of a million dollars to put a piece of public art in the area. Judge Thompson appointed an art and architecture committee of some 23, 24 people here in Montgomery. I remember the executive director of the Museum of Art was the chair of the committee. And, of course, when someone can -- an artist particularly can get a quarter of a million dollars, you have a lot of people who submit portfolios for study.

Our committee met. And if you had told me that you could get 29 people in Montgomery, Alabama, to all agree on the same topic and it didn't include whether the sun was shining or not, I would not have believed it. But we spent four days looking at submissions from artists all over the world, in fact. The result is the fountain out front. That is the piece of art.

But that's not the whole story. When we were looking at the portfolios, we had prominent artists from all over the country. David Braly had submitted a portfolio to be studied. He was one of the few people who was not present or available to discuss the art. He happened to be in England teaching Prince Harry and Prince William to draw.

And when the committee made its recommendations to GSA, David was not put on there because he didn't have the international reputation. We had to give them three names. I always felt guilty about that. And I went to David and I said, David, I have no authority, no portfolio, no nothing, but I want to take you down to the courthouse and see what you would do if you had an art input into the courthouse.

If you go downstairs in the lobby, you'll see the napkin that he sketched the niches on in the courthouse. And I remember going to Judge Albritton and said, Judge, I've done this. He knew David. I said, What do you think of this? He says, I think it's great. How can we get it done?

And as things turned out, when you see the niches behind the bench that David did and they, as Judge Thompson said, carry a lot of the history of both the old building and this building to it. But David came in and did the niches behind each of the benches in the courthouse. And the most fun we had was when we told GSA we've taken care of the niches. And we backed \$5,000 out of the contract for plain white paint that would have been behind the benches, and we had enough money for David's commission to put the niches in the bench that's there.

And Judge Thompson referenced your coming to the bench. And I remember that day well, because I picked up a member of the American Bar Association Standing Committee on

the judiciary, which had to look and approve every person who was nominated for a federal judgeship in the United States. Her name was Sylvia Walbolt, and she was a Tampa lawyer. I had picked her up, and I said, Seldom do we get a committee member coming to an investiture. She said, Reggie, it was the most beautiful, complete nomination, and I wanted to see the lawyer that was responsible for it. She said, We never had a nomination come through the committee since I've been on it, and she said, it was worth the trip to Montgomery. I just wanted to see this paragon of judicial virtue.

(Laughter)

CHIEF JUDGE MARKS: And now would our honoree please come forward and give your remarks. Thank you.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: Well, thank you. I had remarks written somewhere.

Well, I'll just wing it.

I'm so moved by all this that I'm having to clear my throat and think about it because this is such a wonderful honor. And I appreciate it so much. And thank you to the fellow judges for all that you've said. You've been wonderful to work with through the years. And we have the finest, best of judges in the country here with us, and I'm so thankful to have them all here today.

And I want to thank Reggie Hamner for being here.

MRS. ALBRITTON: Judge, louder.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: I want to thank Reggie Hamner for being here.

JUDGE THOMPSON: Only Jane could do that.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: If it were not for Reggie, we wouldn't have this room.

MRS. ALBRITTON: Wait a minute. Charlotte can't hear you.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: Well, I'm doing the best I can.

(Laughter)

MRS. ALBRITTON: That was good.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: Now, let's see. Where was I?

(Laughter)

JUDGE ALBRITTON: We wouldn't have this room if it were not for Reggie Hamner.

Reggie and I go way, way back. He was executive director of the State Bar when I was president of the State Bar. And we had known each other before then, and we've known each other ever since. And when it came time to build this courthouse, we needed somebody who could take charge of it. The General Services Administration was very hard to work with, and we needed somebody who could crack the whip, get their attention, and make them do right. So we found Reggie. And we wouldn't have this room here if it had not been for him.

And, Reggie, I thank you for everything you've done through the years for this court and for me personally. And it's great to have you here today.

MR. HAMNER: Thank you.

JUDGE ALBRITTON: When I first got involved with the courthouse, I was Chief Judge. And I went to Washington to talk to them up there about this room. I went to the Supreme Court building. I knew some of the justices because of a lecture series that my family sponsored at the University of Alabama through the years, and I had known other members over there and people over there for a number of years.

So I went over to the Supreme Court building and found the person who was in charge of paintings that were hanging there because I had seen this beautiful painting of Chief Justice John Marshall there at the Supreme Court building. And I talked to the person there, and I asked if there was a copy of that anywhere. And he said, no, this was the only one in existence. And I said, well, and I told him about this room. And I said, I'd like to have you make a copy of that for us to bring down here and display in our courthouse. And he said, okay, he would agree to that with the understanding that this would be the only one other than the one in the Supreme Court building that would be anywhere in the country.

So far as I know, it's still the only one. So

it's this one and the one in the Supreme Court building so far as I know that are the only ones. Then we went on to -- we had it put on canvas and brought down here and framed and hung by Stonehenge, and then we had these words inscribed on the wall by David Braly, who did such great artistic work throughout the courthouse.

And I had that written down somewhere, but I can't find it.

Well, wait a minute. Here it is, I think.

Naw, that's not it.

(Laughter)

JUDGE ALBRITTON: I'll just call y'all's attention to it and ask you to read it because it's beautiful words. And it reminds us, all the judges, of what our duty is. And these are the words from the Supreme Court opinion in the landmark case of *Marbury versus Madison*, which dealt with the ability of the Supreme Court to overrule things. So I'll call your attention to reading that since I've lost my notes and I can't read it for you.

(Laughter)

JUDGE ALBRITTON: At any rate, when Chief Judge Marks came down to tell me that the decision had been made to name this special room after me, it really brought tears to my eyes. And they're still there. And I want you, and all of you, to know how much I appreciate it. I'm very grateful for

it. I don't know what I've done to deserve it, but I thank you and I'm glad you did it.

So with that, I look forward to seeing all of you at the luncheon. And thank all of you very much.

(Applause)

CHIEF JUDGE MARKS: Thank you so much, Judge Albritton. This is really, like I said earlier, where the big bulk of the work of the court is performed. And I would even say it's the heart of the court. And so this is very fitting that your name is affixed to the wall outside.

I would like to invite you all to remain in here and wander out into the hallway. You will see David Braly has put Judge Albritton's name on the outside of the room. And under his name is a piece of art that Judge Albritton has donated to the court that is a piece of art by David Braly which shows the niches behind each of the judge's benches. And so we appreciate very much your giving that to the court and allowing us to hang it under your name outside of your conference room.

We do have a lunch scheduled. I would ask that you stay up here until 11:45. At that time, we will start to move downstairs. The lunch will be on the second floor, the rotunda area. Just look for Reggie, the eagle, and you will see the food down there.

So please do enjoy some refreshments and visit.

And we will get some pictures made. And I'm so thrilled that you're all here. And we will make our way downstairs at 11:45.

Thank you so much for coming.

(Applause)