

South Carolina Political Collections

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Rembert Coney Dennis

(1915-1992)

Papers, 1938-1992

Volume: 7.5 linear feet

Processed: 1995, by Herbert Hartsook and Wilma Woods

Provenance: Donated by Mrs. Natalie Dennis

Citation Form: Rembert C. Dennis Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, The University of South Carolina

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Biographical Note:

“He walked with and was one of the giants in the South Carolina Senate, and when he left the Senate, it was truly the end of that era.” Thus, Isadore Lourie characterized the passing of Rembert Coney Dennis (1915-1992). Dennis served in the South Carolina House from 1939 to 1942, when he was elected to represent Berkeley County in the Senate. He served in the Senate from 1943 until 1988, when ill health forced his retirement from public life. He was one of the most influential legislators of his time.

Rembert Dennis was born in 1915 in Pinopolis to Edward James and Ella Mae Coney Dennis. He graduated from Berkeley High School, and while in school worked for three years as a Senate page. He graduated from Furman University in 1936 with a B.A. degree. While at Furman, Dennis was elected President of the Student Council, played football, and ran track. After graduation, he took a job with the U.S. Maritime Commission in Washington and began law school at Georgetown. In 1940, he received his law degree from the University of South Carolina. Upon his election to the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1938, Dennis became the third generation of the Dennis family to represent Berkeley County in the General Assembly.

In 1942, Dennis sought and won election to the South Carolina Senate, following his father and grandfather before him. Conscious that his action opened him to criticism as a slacker, Dennis recalled for oral historian Dale Rosengarten—“I had a burning desire to fill the seat that my father had lost by assassination and my mother had lost because it was too early for women to be accepted for higher office.... It was my feeling that I was going to be severely criticized for running for political office when I was of the age that I was expected to be in military service.... I decided I would run and abide by the results and publicly stated that it was their [the public’s] decision and I would be a volunteer for service if I didn’t win....”

Dennis was an able legislator, a coalition builder who promoted fiscal conservatism yet social progressivism. Between 1943 and his retirement in 1988, he ascended to lead the Senate, succeeding Edgar Brown as Chair of the Finance Committee in 1972, and in 1984, following the death of his close friend Marion Gressette, as President Pro Tem of the Senate.

In recalling his ambition, Dennis commented that during the early 1950s—“I wanted to be governor, and then United States Senator. I thought I was a good candidate then for anything, but maybe President. But as I served I learned. The more I learned, the more I found out the less I knew.... I thought, when I got to be Chairman of the Finance Committee, with my years of seniority, I was getting along about as good as the governor, but I had a desire to get into the national picture. I gave it up quickly when I got so busy as Senator, and Chairman of the Finance Committee.”

Ill health forced Dennis to retire from public life in 1988. He suffered a heart attack in 1976 and was involved in two serious automobile accidents, in 1984 and 1985. He passed away in 1992 at the age of seventy-six.

Scope and Content Note:

The Rembert C. Dennis Papers, c.1938-1992, consist of 7.5 ft. of personal and public papers arranged in six series: General, Speeches, Topical Files, Audio-Visual Recordings, Clippings, and Scrapbook Material. Unfortunately, the bulk of the Senator’s papers was destroyed in a 1985 fire that devastated the Dennis home.

General Files, arranged chronologically, include personal and public correspondence and press releases. Of particular interest is Dennis's 1978 hand written memorandum—"Legislative Priorities and Pending Legislation for the Coming Session." Material from 1984 includes letters to Dennis on his selection as President Pro Tempore and a copy of his acceptance speech before the Senate. Papers for 1988 document his decision not to seek reelection.

Speeches are arranged chronologically and include drafts and related correspondence as well as the finished speeches.

Topical Files include notes and interview questions of Dale Rosengarten used in her extensive oral history with Dennis, and the edited and verbatim transcripts of that interview.

Audiovisual materials include photographs and the cassette recordings of the Rosengarten interview.

Clippings, 1951-1995, are arranged chronologically and include photocopies of articles collected by Colleen Bradley in her research of Dennis.

Scrapbook Material includes clippings, invitations, programs, and awards assembled by Dennis and his family and staff. Much of this material shows damage from the fire, one volume, 1982-Jan. 1987 is unscathed.

Timeline

1915	born August 27 at Pinopolis to Edward and Ella Mae Dennis
1930	father assassinated
1936	graduated from Furman University, A.B.
1936-37	attended Georgetown University Law School
1938	elected to S.C. House
1939-42	served in S.C. House
1940	graduated from U.S.C. School of Law, LL.B
1942	elected to represent Berkeley County in Senate.
1943-88	served in S.C. Senate
1944	married Natalie Brown of McCormick Member, State Democratic Executive Committee, 1944-1988
c.1953	Bushy Park Authority development getting underway, to attract industry to Berkeley & Charleston Counties
1961	served on Senate Fish, Game, and Forestry Committee, 1961-1975, and chaired the Committee, 1967-1975
1972	succeeded Edgar Brown as chairman of Finance Committee, 1972-1988 Member, S.C. Budget and Control Board, 1972-1988 Ex-officio member, S.C. Wildlife and Marine Resources Commission, 1972-1988
1984	elected President Pro Tempore, Mar. 13, after death of Marion Gressette
1988	retired in poor health
1992	June 20, died at age 76

COLLECTION INVENTORY

Biographical Information

Box 1

General Papers:

1973-1980
1981-1985
1986
1987
1988
1989
1990
1991-1992 & n.d.

Speeches:

1954-1956, 1972, 1974
1975
1976
1977
1978
1979:
 Mar.
 Apr.-Sept.
 Nov.-Dec.

1980

1981

1982:

 Jan.
 Feb.
 Mar.-May
 Oct.-Nov.

1983:

 Apr.-June
 Sept.-Dec.

1984:

 Mar.
 Apr.-July

1985-1988

n.d. (3)

Topical Files:

Dennis Building, 1981

Financial Records

Oral History Interview Records:

 McNair Project Transcript

 Rosengarten Interview conducted for U.S.C. [see also Audio-Visual Records]:

 Notes

 Transcript [edited by Colleen Bradley]

 Verbatim Transcript (4)

Audio-Visual Records:

Box 2

 Photographs

 Audio-cassettes of Rosengarten Interview [20]

Clippings:

 Loose:

 1951-1979

 1980-1986

 1988-1995

Scrapbook Material:	Box 3
1938-1939, 1942-1961, 1963-1965	
1968-1971, 1973	Box 4
1975-1977	Box 5
1978-1981	Box 6
1982-Jan. 1987 [bound volume]	Box 7