

*South Carolina Political Collections*

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## **Robert Witherspoon Hemphill**

*(1915-1983)*

**Papers, 1926 - 1984**

- Volume:** 5 linear feet (plus 10 scrapbooks)
- Processed:** 1995, by H.J. Hartsook; additions, 2001; 2009, by Gabrielle M. Dudley
- Provenance:** Donated by the family of Robert W. Hemphill
- Citation Form:** Robert W. Hemphill Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, The University of South Carolina
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## **Biographical Note:**

Robert Witherspoon Hemphill (1915-1983) represented South Carolina's Fifth District in the United States Congress from 1957 to 1964. President Lyndon Baines Johnson appointed Hemphill to a federal judgeship in April 1964. A distinguished jurist noted for his keen opinions and strong work ethic, Hemphill took senior status in 1980, and continued to hear cases until he suffered a massive heart attack in July 1983. He returned to work shortly before a second attack took his life on Christmas night, 1983.

Hemphill was born in Chester, S.C., to John McLure Hemphill and Helen Witherspoon Hemphill. His father was an attorney associated with the family firm of Hemphill and Hemphill in Chester. Robert Hemphill was educated in the Chester public schools, received his undergraduate and law degrees from The University of South Carolina, and joined the family law firm in 1938. In August 1941, he volunteered for military service as a "Flying Cadet." He served in the Army Air Forces chiefly as an instructor stationed at airfields in Texas training pilots on the B-24 Liberator bomber. During his time in Texas he met Isabella Anderson, his wife of forty years (d. 1982) and mother of his three children, Forrest, Harriet, and Robert Jr. He returned to Chester and the practice of law in September 1945.



Hemphill's career of public service began as a member of the state House of Representatives, 1947 to 1948. He served as Solicitor of the Sixth Judicial Circuit from 1951 to 1956, and won election to the U.S. House in 1956. On his appointment in 1964 to fill the vacancy caused by the retirement of George Bell Timmerman in 1962, Hemphill remarked, "As much as I loved being congressman, and I loved it, I don't believe I could

find anything to make me happier than this position." [*The Charlotte Observer*, 8 June 1964]

At the time of his death, Chief U.S. District Judge Charles E. Simons, Jr. characterized Hemphill as "an outstanding judge of great judicial temperament, and he was one of the hardest-working people I have ever known." The Honorable J. Bratton Davis made similar remarks at a dedication ceremony after Hemphill's death, saying, "In each of his auspicious offices he never slackened his workload; he never failed to carry more than his full share of the load." Hemphill was survived by a second wife, Beverly (d. c. 2014) and his three children.

## **Scope and Content Note:**

The collection consists of 5 linear feet of papers and ten scrapbooks, 1926 to 1984, which chiefly document his service as a member of Congress and Federal District Court judge, 1964 to 1983. The papers are arranged in six series: General, Public, Personal, Speeches, Photographs, and Clippings.

[General Papers](#), 1926 to 1983, consist primarily of correspondence.

The [Public](#) series mainly documents Hemphill's activities in Congress and subsequent judicial career. *Congressional materials* include bills introduced in the House by Hemphill during his seven year-tenure and a 1961 report from a committee of three congressmen (Hemphill was a member) in pursuant of their charge to investigate the feasibility of establishing an Office of International Travel within the Department of Commerce. They based their report on visits to Australia, Denmark, London, Ghana, and numerous other countries. In addition, ten scrapbooks contain clippings from his years in Congress. *Judiciary materials* include Hemphill's court schedules from 1964 until 1982 which provide insight on his heavy workload and eight bound volumes of judicial opinions, 1969-1974, that showcase the wisdom and fairness he was known for in his courtroom. State Senator John Martin noted, "Some of his opinions are classic for the humor and satire in them. He was a hard worker, a man of tremendous energy, and serious-minded, but at the same time he had a delightful sense of humor." [*The State*, 27 Dec. 1983] This series includes correspondence from 1964 that provides fascinating insights into the effort launched by friends of Hemphill to secure his appointment to the bench.



The [Personal](#) series is focused on Hemphill's life outside of public service with an emphasis on his campaigns, frequent correspondence, and writings. It holds material relating to Hemphill's long involvement with the Civil Air Patrol, leadership in the Purity Presbyterian Church of Chester, and his life before embarking on a legal career in 1945. The materials from his early life consist of letters to international pen-pals, high school report cards, and invitations to organizations and other events during his collegiate years. It includes documentation of his political campaigns in 1950 for Solicitor, 1956 for Congress, and involvement with President John F. Kennedy's 1960 Presidential Campaign. The campaign materials such as business cards, signs, and leaflets are included for each campaign. Materials relating to Hemphill's leadership in the Purity Presbyterian Church of Chester and his Sunday

school lesson plans and minutes of the Board of Directors.

Hemphill's frequent correspondence with key South Carolina figures like Solomon Blatt, Donald Russell, Ernest "Fritz" Hollings, and Strom Thurmond are included here. His writings consist of articles and drafts of articles chiefly reminiscence of his courtroom experiences. Many of the drafts were written for the South Carolina Bar Association newsletter, *The Transcript*. In a letter to Thomas Harrington Pope, 13 January 1975, regarding Pope's editorial comments on an article for *The Transcript*, Hemphill noted, "I have a number of stories written, in a notebook in Columbia, that I cannot publish, because they would offend the people who are living....If the

Lord lets me live...I am going to retire at age 65 and then try to see if I can write.”

Hemphill was very popular in his district and threw his support behind the presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy in 1960. He was virtually the only House member from South Carolina to campaign actively on Kennedy’s behalf. Hemphill said of Kennedy, “He was my kind of guy. He didn’t want to be good, he wanted to be the best, and that’s what it takes.” [The Charlotte Observer, 1 April 1964]



After Kennedy’s election, rumors began circulating that Hemphill was in line for a federal judgeship. Responding to one report on March 2, 1961, Hemphill stated, “I have been watching the political winds...my chance of being Federal Judge...is very thin. Olin [D. Johnston] has many commitments and I never knew there were so many people who did so much for the party - that is, until we won [the presidency]....I plan to offer for Congress in 1962, although there has been terrific pressure on me to run for Governor.” Writing Wesley Walker of Greenville on 29 Aug. 1962, Hemphill noted, “The situation insofar as the Judgeships are concerned continues to be fluid. If Judge [George Bell] Timmerman resigns, as he states that he will do, I expect to seek that particular Judgeship, but....I cannot afford to make any public statement because of my duties in connection with the Democratic effort this fall. I do not think Olin Johnston will be in any trouble, but trouble could develop....”

The [Speeches](#) series is composed of the text of speeches presented by Hemphill as well as speech materials like programs and invitations. Hemphill spoke to diverse groups such as the Order of Mason’s Ladies Banquet and at the graduations Chester High School and Winthrop College. Often, he would use these speeches for some of his writings for *The Transcript*.

[Photographs](#) illustrate Hemphill’s early childhood, Air Force and Civil Air Patrol involvement, and family vacations. Also found here are his official photographs as Congressman and Federal Judge.

The [Clippings](#) series pertain chiefly to Hemphill’s public career. In addition, ten volumes of scrapbooks contain clippings relate to his work as South Carolina’s 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional District.

### **Series List:**

[General](#)

[Public](#)

[Personal](#)

[Speeches](#)

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Biographical Information

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General Papers:

1926,-1942

1943-1950

1951-1958

1959-1960

1961:

Jan.-May

June- Dec.

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1965-1969

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1972:

Jan.-July

Aug.-Dec.

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1975:

Jan.-May

June-Dec.

1976

1977

1978:

Jan.-May

June-Dec.

1979:

Jan.-July

Aug.-Dec.

1980-1981

1982-1984 and n. d.

Box 2

Public:

Congressional:

General

Bills Introduced in the House (by Hemphill)

International Travel, Report on Investigation of Justification for, Office of International Travel of the U.S.

Department of Commerce, 3 Feb 1961, 40 pp. (committee composed of Hemphill, Leo O'Brien, and Dan Rostenkowski)

Judiciary:

General:

1939-1970

1971-1974

1976-1982, n.d.

Annual Report, Eastern District of South Carolina, fiscal 1963-1964

Calendars / Schedules, U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina:

1964-1965

1966-1967

1968

1969

1970

1971

1972

1973

1974-1976

1977-1978

1979

1980-1982

Federal District Court Judge Endorsement Letters (2 folders)

Hemphill Nomination, Report of the Proceedings of hearing before U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, Apr. 22, 1964.

Judicial Opinions [bound volumes]:

1964-1967

1967-1970

1970-1972

1973-1974

1975

1976

1977-1978

1979

*US v Herbert U. Fielding* [tax evasion case of Charleston politician]

Box 3

Personal:

General

Campaigns:

1950, Solicitor of the Sixth Judicial Circuit of South Carolina

1956, Fifth Congressional District of South Carolina

1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Campaign

Topical Files:

Chester High School

Civil Air Patrol:

1961, 1965

1966-1979, n. d.

Christmas Cards

Family Correspondence

Financial Records, 1944, 1965-1981

Johnston, Julia, Estate of, 1956-1972

Johnston, Olin D. Memorial Fund:

1965

1966-1973

Persons:

Blatt, Solomon

Gettys, Tom

Ness, Julius B. "Bubba"

Russell, Donald

Thurmond, J. Strom

Purity Presbyterian Church, Chester (2folders)

United States Army Air Force:

1941-1943

1944-1945, 1973-1974

University of South Carolina, 1932-1937

Writings (mostly articles and drafts):

General

A - H

I - Q

"Is Justice Ever So Near," 1975

R

"A Return to Chester," 1976

S

T

"Tales That May Have Been Told," 1974

Box 4

Speeches:

1948-Sept. 1957

1957, Oct.-May 1958  
1958, June-Dec.  
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1960  
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1976, July-Feb. 1977

1977, June-Apr. 1978

1978, May-May 1979

1979, June-Dec.

1980-1981

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Photographs:

General

Antarctica Trip, 1960

Family

Groups

Portraits

South Carolina Congressional Delegation

With John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson

Clippings:

1930 - 1962

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n.d.

SCRAPBOOKS [ten volumes] [related to Congressional career 1957-1964]

Box 5