



City of Philadelphia

City Council
Chief Clerk's Office
402 City Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Legislation Text

File #: 170343, Version: 0

Honoring and commemorating the legacy of William T. Coleman, Jr. Esq., former U.S. Transportation Secretary, pioneering figure in the movement for racial equality in the United States, and native of Philadelphia, who passed away at 96 years old on March 31, 2017.

WHEREAS, William Thaddeus Coleman, Jr., was born in Philadelphia on July 7, 1920. Better known as Bill, Mr. Coleman grew up in Germantown, raised by parents who were themselves prominent leaders in the City's African-American community; and

WHEREAS, In his early days at Germantown High School, Bill Coleman was subjected to blatant and egregious racial discrimination, as the school's all-white swim team chose to disband rather than allow an African-American to join, only to be re-established after Coleman's graduation. Coleman was victimized even by the school's faculty; after a presentation to his honors English class, Bill recalled the teacher saying, "Someday, William, you will make a wonderful chauffeur"; and

WHEREAS, In 1941, Mr. Coleman nevertheless graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Pennsylvania, where he was also inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Society. After beginning his legal studies at Harvard Law School, Mr. Coleman enlisted in the United States Army in 1943. Upon his return to Harvard, Mr. Coleman became the first African-American student accepted to a position on the *Harvard Law Review*; and

WHEREAS, Only a few years into his legal career, Bill Coleman would earn a clerkship with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, becoming the first African-American to hold such a position with the nation's highest court. Coleman would later return to the Supreme Court to successfully argue several landmark civil rights cases, including *Loving v. Virginia*, which found laws prohibiting interracial marriage to be unconstitutional; and

WHEREAS, After moving into private practice, Coleman was recruited by then-chief counsel for the NAACP and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall to serve as a strategist and co-author for legal briefs in the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Mr. Coleman would continue his advocacy for the racial integration of educational institutions here in the City of Philadelphia when, in 1965, he was selected to serve as special counsel for the successful effort to integrate Girard College; and

WHEREAS, The breadth of Mr. Coleman's career is nothing short of remarkable. In his private practice, Coleman specialized in corporate and transportation issues, including as a senior partner at the Philadelphia law firm of Dilworth, Paxson, Kalish, Levy, & Coleman. As a public servant, Coleman served in an official capacity in 6 different Presidential administrations, both Democrat and Republican, advising on issues from employment policy to international affairs. Bill Coleman was appointed assistant counsel to the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President Kennedy; he served as a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly; and he became the nation's second African-American cabinet appointee when he served as Transportation Secretary under President Ford. In recognition of his distinguished career in public service, Coleman was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Clinton in 1995; and

WHEREAS, The life and career of William Coleman, Jr., are a testament to the value of diversity in the United States and to the importance of those who fought for equal treatment, both for themselves and for others. Bill Coleman left an indelible mark on the nation that now mourns his passing; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That the Council hereby honors and commemorates the legacy of William T. Coleman, Jr. Esq., former U.S. Transportation Secretary, pioneering figure in the movement for racial equality in the United States, and a native of Philadelphia, who passed away at 96 years old on March 31, 2017.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Lovida Hardin, Mr. Coleman's widow, as evidence of the sincere sentiments of this legislative body.