

Ralston, Elreta Melton Alexander^[1]

Ralston, Elreta Melton Alexander

21 Mar. 1919 – 14 Mar. 1998

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Elreta Melton Alexander was a pioneering African-American attorney from [Greensboro](#)^[2], North Carolina. Born in Smithfield, North Carolina, she was the daughter of a [Baptist](#)^[3] minister and a teacher, and grew up comfortably as a part of the black middle class. Coming of age during the [Jim Crow](#)^[4] period of the South, she was raised by her educated, middle-class parents to be a leader in the community. The descendant of two white grandparents, her bi-racialism formed her early awareness of colorism within the African-American community. Alexander received her Bachelor of Arts from [North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University](#)^[5] in 1937 at age 19 before going on to become the first African-American woman to graduate from [Columbia Law School](#)^[6] in 1945. In 1947, she became the first African-American woman to practice law in North Carolina.

After establishing her practice in Greensboro, Alexander became a successful attorney. In 1964, she defended Charles Yoes, who stood with three other men accused of raping a white woman, Mary Lou Marion. The trial went on to become the longest criminal trial in Guilford County court history at the time, and changed the county's jury selection procedures. Alexander was more than a pioneer in the legal field; she was a fierce opponent of the system of racial inequality and segregation known as Jim Crow. During her career as an attorney she placed herself in the middle of contentious trials that addressed inter-racial relationships, racial bias, sexual assault, and drug possession. While best-known as an advocate for juvenile offenders and African Americans, she defended a wide range of clients. She even represented members of the [Ku Klux Klan](#)^[7] and credited herself with many of them "drifting away from the fold."

Alexander continued to highlight the injustice of segregation and the treatment of African Americans since slavery, in her book of poetry, *When is a Man Free?* The book made a small splash in Greensboro, with a local newspaper describing it as a book "composed of two narrative poems which deal with the meaning of freedom to mankind and individuals."

In 1968, Alexander became the first African-American woman to become an elected district court judge. During her tenure she created the controversial Judgment Day program, aimed at rehabilitating young, first-time offenders. In 1974, Alexander ran for [North Carolina Supreme Court](#)^[8] chief justice, losing in the [Republican](#)^[9] primary to James Newcomb, a white, fire-extinguisher salesman. Newcomb went on to lose to Democrat Susie Sharp, who became the first elected female state Supreme Court chief justice in the country. Alexander's loss prompted changes to North Carolina judicial election requirements.

Her first husband, Dr. Girardeau "Tony" Alexander was a prominent surgeon at L. Richardson Hospital, the segregated hospital for African Americans in Greensboro. Their marriage, which lasted thirty years, was often troubled. By the time their only son, Girardeau, III, reached his teens, he was a diagnosed schizophrenic and had been in and out of psychiatric facilities. Their marriage ended in divorce in 1968. On August 23, 1979, Judge Elreta Melton Alexander became Judge Elreta Alexander Ralston, after marrying John Ralston, a white, retired Internal Revenue Service Officer ten years her senior.

Judge Alexander Ralston died on Saturday, March 14, 1998, just short of her seventy-ninth birthday. She requested there be no funeral, and her ashes were buried in a small grove behind a nursing home in Greensboro. As he reflected on his personal and professional relationship with Judge Alexander, Alexander's law partner, Donald Speckhard stated, "She pioneered doing what she wanted to do and she wasn't doing it because she wanted to be the first black person to do this or do that or be remembered in that vein only. She believed in what she did and she certainly caused a lot of changes in Guilford County just by being who she was." Fellow attorneys remembered her as a brilliant legal scholar and as a tough, but fair, judge. Her long obituary in the *Greensboro News and Record* declared, "Her influence will be felt for years," and predicted that even without her accomplishments; she would be remembered for her forceful and outgoing personality. While not a well-known figure in the [Civil Rights Movement](#)^[10], Alexander dedicated her career to civil rights and challenging the status quo of the [segregationist](#)^[11] South.

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[Civil Rights](#) [16]

[Judges](#) [17]

[Lawyers](#) [18]

[Women](#) [19]

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[Smithfield](#) [22]

[Guilford County](#) [23]

[Greensboro](#) [24]

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