

Bell, Jesse Spencer ^[1]

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by William T. Moye, 1979

1 Apr. 1906–19 Mar. 1967

Jesse Spencer Bell, federal judge and state legislator, was a native of [Charlotte](#) ^[2], the son of James Ardrey and Jessie Mabel Spencer Bell. Having attended Charlotte public schools, he entered [Duke University](#) ^[3] and received his A.B. degree in 1927. He then began studies at [Duke Law School](#) ^[4] but switched to [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5]. After study at [Harvard Law School](#) ^[6] during 1929, he was admitted to the bar that same year. He returned to The University of North Carolina, receiving his LL.B. in 1930.

Bell initially practiced law with his father, with state Senator H. N. Pharr, and with the latter's son, Neal Y. His career was interrupted by [World War II](#) ^[7]; drafted in 1941, he served until 1946, when he was discharged with the rank of major. In 1943, Bell married Katherine Castellet. After the war he returned to Charlotte, where he later formed the firm of Bell, Bradley, Gebhardt and Delaney.

Bell served as president of the [Mecklenburg Bar Association](#) ^[8] (1952–53) and of the [North Carolina Bar Association](#) ^[9] (1953–54). In 1955 he was appointed chairman of the bar association committee on reorganization of the state courts. The committee recommended the establishment of a uniform system of district courts under the [state supreme court](#) ^[10]; most of its suggestions were enacted in the early 1960s.

Locally, Bell was active in the Social Planning Council of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg United Community Services. He served as the first chairman of the city-county planning commission, strongly advocating perimeter zoning to control suburban growth. In 1957 he was appointed to the state senate, to which he successfully won reelection twice, serving until 1961. Here he followed his father: James Ardrey had served two terms as state senator from Mecklenburg. Both his appointment and his reelection in 1958 split the Democratic party in the county. In [Raleigh](#) ^[11], Bell pushed for legislation enabling cities to participate in federal urban renewal programs and for reapportionment of the [General Assembly](#) ^[12].

In 1961, [President Kennedy](#) ^[13] appointed Bell to the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. In 1965, Bell participated in the decision requiring reapportionment of the state's legislature and its congressional districts. When he died, he had just been named by Chief Justice Earl Warren to head a study committee of federal judges to prepare guidelines for courts, judges, and lawyers on the question of free press versus fair trial.

The *Charlotte News* named Bell the "Man of the Year" for 1955. In 1960 [Catawba College](#) ^[14] bestowed on him an honorary LL.D. The North Carolina Bar Association presented him its John J. Parker Award for Conspicuous Service to Jurisprudence. He died of a massive heart attack just short of his sixty-first birthday and was buried at Elmwood Cemetery in Charlotte.

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Charlotte Observer, 20 Mar. 1967.

North Carolina Manual (1961).

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Who's Who in America, 1964–65.

Additional Resources:

J. Spencer Bell Papers. J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte: <http://library.uncc.edu/manuscript/ms0133> ^[15]

Remembering the Fourth Circuit Judges: A History from 1941 to 1998, *Washington and Lee Law Review*, Issue 2 Volume 55, Article 5, 3-1-1998: <http://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1504&context=wlulr> ^[16]

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Authors:

Moye, William T. [20]

Origin - location:

Charlotte [21]

From:

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. [22]

1 January 1979 | Moye, William T.

Source URL: <https://ncpedia.org/biography/bell-jesse-spencer>

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