

Scott, Armond Wendell ^[1]

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by Andrea Smythe, June 2023

16 July 1873–18 Sept. 1960



Portrait of Judge A.W. Scott. from Scurlock Studio. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

^[2]Armond Wendell Scott, lawyer, municipal judge, and public speaker, was a native of [Wilmington](#) ^[3] and the second of six sons born to Benjamin and Athalia Harris Scott. Benjamin Scott ran a livery stable and a general store at 519 Walnut Street; the 1880 Census documented that Scott lived with his parents and (at the time) three brothers on 5th Street in Wilmington.

Armond Scott started a newspaper with his brother Warren to earn money to pay for their educations. The newspaper, *The Wilmington Sentinel*, was a four-page publication. Armond Scott served as the editor of the paper and would often write articles concerning political issues. In 1896, he wrote an article in the *Sentinel* ^[4] in which he stated that Black people in the United States had “not an enemy greater than” Daniel L. Russell. Through this newspaper, Scott was able to work his way through Biddle (later [Johnson C. Smith](#) ^[5]) University and [Shaw University](#) ^[6], receiving a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B) degree in 1896. He passed the bar exam to receive his law license. Scott was the only Black person in his class.

Scott returned to Wilmington and began to practice law. He was one of four Black lawyers in the city. Scott was also one of two lawyers to give a speech during recruitment for Governor Russell’s [Black Battalion](#) ^[7]. Scott continued publishing political commentary while practicing law. In 1897, he wrote a letter responding to an [anti-Black editorial](#) ^[8] published in the *Wilmington Messenger* by Hugh Oliver. Scott’s [letter](#) ^[9] included quotes from Shakespeare, poetry from Robert Burns, and a listing of many respected historical figures who had Black lineage, in an effort to encourage white Christian men and women to value Black people. Scott strongly advocated for racial equality with his presence in newspaper publications.

During the Wilmington Coup of 1898, a committee of twenty-five men associated with the Democratic party “drew up [list of men](#) ^[10] they perceived as leaders and representatives of the African American community. These men, called the Committee of Colored Citizens (CCC), were attorneys, businessmen, laborers, ministers, and politicians.” Scott’s name was on this list, and he was present at a meeting where the white Democrats made certain demands of Wilmington’s Black community. African American representatives at the meeting were given until the next morning to give a response to those demands. Scott was “selected...to pen the response” and was also tasked with hand delivering the response to the home of [Alfred Moore Waddell](#) ^[11]. Due to continued unrest in the city, Scott encountered hostile and armed white men on the way to deliver the letter. He decided to mail the response instead of risking his safety.

The white Democrats used the lack of written response by the given deadline as an excuse to escalate the conflict. One result of the Coup was that many members of the Black community were forced to leave Wilmington by the new Democratic leaders and the Red Shirts. Fearing for his life, Scott, then only twenty-five, accepted an offer ^[12] to be escorted to the train station in order to leave town.

Scott went to Washington, D.C. after being expelled from Wilmington. He went there with the hope of building up a new law practice. On reaching Washington, D.C., he rented an upper-floor room for \$3.00 a week, sleeping on a couch at night. There were rumors that Scott would ask President McKinley to intervene in Wilmington. Scott denied this and delivered a statement ^[13] to the Associated Press that he was “here in no official capacity whatever and have [had] no intention of saying anything to the President or taking any action in the matter at all...” Scott struggled to find clients for his law practice in Washington. He moved to Pennsylvania and found work as a butler. Scott described the employer as “unpleasant,” which prompted him to leave the job and move to New York. The 1900 census lists him as living in New York City working as an elevator operator and janitor for an apartment house.

An encounter ^[14] with the Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court while working as a bellhop was a turning point for Scott. The justice was the same man who admitted Scott to the Bar Association, and was surprised to see him working as a bellhop. He asked Scott, “Is this what you are doing after we gave you a license to practice law?” Scott didn’t immediately go back to practicing law. Instead, he worked as a Pullman porter ^[15], taught for a year at Shaw University, and then worked again as a bellhop in Palm Beach, F.L. By 1910, he was back in Washington, D.C., again working as an attorney.

As Scott’s law practice began to do well, he began to re-associate with politics. In a 1928 letter declining a post on the G.O.P. Committee, Scott took a strong political stance and criticized ^[16] the party’s treatment of Black voters. In 1935, when Scott was 62, President Franklin D. Roosevelt secured Scott’s nomination to the Washington, D.C., municipal court. Initially his nomination faced quite a bit of opposition ^[17]. Despite the opposition being from both Republicans and Democrats, Scott’s appointment led to claims that “Democrats were using the ‘spoils’ system.” These same detractors also argued that Scott’s experience was mostly in criminal cases. They argued that he did not have the expertise necessary to oversee the civil cases of the municipal court. Scott responded to this claim by compiling a list of 500 civil cases that he worked on to illustrate his qualifications for the appointment. He was later confirmed as a municipal judge without a single vote against him in the Senate. In 1940, Scott appeared at the North Carolina statewide Negro Democratic Convention ^[18] held in Greensboro.

According to Scott, his judicial career ^[19] dealt “out justice not from the books, but from the heart.” He was known as a skilled speaker and would often give lengthy lectures to those who appeared before him. Scott’s obituary in the Washington Evening Star ^[20] stated that he “rarely passed up an opportunity to speak out against the things he found distasteful; to counsel the sinful, forgive the penitent and sympathize with the unfortunate.” Scott also condemned elements of the justice system like predatory lawyers and police brutality. Scott received honorary Doctorate of Law degrees from Shaw University in 1940 ^[21] and Virginia State College in 1951 ^[22].



Photograph of Armond Scott and Annie L. Dismukes. ca. 1930-1960. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution. ^[23] Scott had a 20-year career as a judge in the Washington, D.C. municipal court. He was reappointed to the post several times until he officially retired in 1955. When Scott's term expired in 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower chose not to name a successor so that Scott could qualify for the 20-

year retirement pension. Judge Scott was honored by friends of the bench, bar, and the community at two dinners in 1956, one ^[24] in Wilmington in January and another ^[25] in Washington, D.C. in September. Scott continued to work for three months of the year until 1957 despite being retired.

Scott remained involved with Johnson C. Smith University and Shaw University throughout his life, as well as many other organizations. He was a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks and served as Grand Exalted Ruler ^[26] from 1916-1919. In 1931, Scott headed up the membership campaign for the 12th Street Branch ^[27] Young Mens' Christian Association (YMCA) in Washington D.C. He was also a member of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity and was awarded the Laurel Wreath ^[28], the fraternity's highest honor. In 1957, Scott was elected to Shaw University's Board of Trustees ^[29].

Newspaper notices document Scott's frequent guest speaker ^[30] appearances, many of them in North Carolina, starting in 1918. He was the commencement speaker ^[31] at Johnson C. Smith University in 1936. He was a guest speaker for the Alpha Kappa Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity at North Carolina College in 1939. He also delivered the commencement address ^[32] at Shaw University in 1956; he told graduates that their "success or failure depends largely upon the preparation you have made... and your will to succeed in whatever you undertake." He was also a guest speaker on two different radio shows.

Scott was married twice. In 1907, he married Estelle (also called Estella) A. Harris, of Washington, D.C. Estelle died ^[33] on October 31, 1932. Armond and Estelle had one son, Armond W. Scott, II. In 1937, Scott married Annie L. Dismukes ^[34] of Alabama. He was a member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

Armond Scott died on September 18, 1960 after a long illness. He is buried in Lincoln Memorial Cemetery ^[35] in Maryland. Scott also wrote a set of unfinished, unpublished memoirs, titled *Up from Hell*. They are in the possession of his family. In 2021, a portrait of Scott was featured in an exhibition ^[36] that highlighted "some...Black Americans who helped usher in change in the Wilmington area."

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Additional Resources:

"Armond Wendell Scott X Clarence Heyward." Initiative 1897 - Continuum of Change | Armond Wendell Scott. Accessed June 19, 2023 <https://www.1897ilm.com/art/two-fronts> [59]

Image Credit:

"Judge and Mrs. Armond W. Scott [from negative] [black-and-white cellulose acetate photonegative]." Retouching pencil and ink on negative. Scurlock Studio Records: Archives Center, National Museum of American History. Smithsonian Institution. ca. 1930-1960. https://collections.si.edu/search/detail/ead_component:sova-nmah-ac-0618-s04-05-ref82759?q=armond+scott&record=17&hlterm=armond%2Bscott [23].

"Judge A[rmond] W. Scott [cellulose acetate photonegative]. Ink on negative. Scurlock Studio Records: Archives Center, National Museum of American History. Smithsonian Institution. https://collections.si.edu/search/detail/ead_component:sova-nmah-ac-0618-s04-05-ref82700?q=armond+scott&record=16&hlterm=armond%2Bscott [2]

Subjects:

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Black and African American People [62]

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Lawyers [64]

Authors:

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Origin - location:

New Hanover County [66]

Wilmington [67]

Johnson C. Smith University [68]

Raleigh [69]

Shaw University [70]

Years:

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