

## Scott, Armond Wendell <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Scott, Armond Wendell

by John Macfie, 1994

**1873–18 Sept. 1960**

Armond Wendell Scott, lawyer and municipal judge, was a native of [Wilmington](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and the second of six sons born to Benjamin and Athalea Harris Scott. The elder Scott ran a livery stable and a general store at Sixth and Walnut streets, purchasing many of his supplies from ships tied up at the wharves. Apparently, when Armond Scott was around twenty he founded the *Record*, a small newspaper dedicated to black interests. He worked his way through Biddle (later [Johnson C. Smith](#) <sup>[3]</sup>) University and in a similar fashion attended [Shaw University](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, from which he received a law degree in March 1898. He passed the bar exam and was the only black in the class.

Scott then returned to Wilmington and began to practice law. Early in November 1898 a simmering conflict between [Democrats](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and "radical Republican whites and blacks" came to a boil on the morning of the tenth, when a race riot erupted and the *Daily Record* building was burned to the ground. For some time prior to this, the *Daily Record* and the *Raleigh News and Observer* had been exchanging editorials inflammatory in nature, and the Democratic supporters claimed that Scott was responsible for the *Record's* views. Years later, however, some Wilmington whites disputed the accusation, saying that Scott had sold his interest to [Alex Manly](#) <sup>[6]</sup> and was only his assistant at the time.



Image of Armond Wendell Scott, from National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, published 1949 by artist J. B. Lomack. Presented on National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. <sup>[7]</sup>

In any case, young Scott, knowing that the opposition had demanded he leave town, decided to accept an offer from a brother-in-law, Dr. Tom Mask, to go to Rose Hill, a railroad stop about twenty miles away, in Mask's buggy. On reaching Washington, D.C., with some savings, Scott rented an upper-floor room at Fifth and D Street, N.W., for \$3.00 a week, sleeping on the couch at night, and again began the practice of law. However, because his clients were too poor and too few and his money was exhausted, he turned to more lucrative jobs, such as elevator operator, Pullman porter, and bellhop, the last at a fashionable hotel in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. At this nadir of his career, when years of study seemed wasted, fortune smiled unexpectedly. He was instructed to take a jug of ice water to a certain room, where he was suddenly confronted by the chief justice of the [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) <sup>[8]</sup> (most likely [William Faircloth](#) <sup>[9]</sup>), who had admitted him to the bar.

The justice thundered, "Is this what we gave you a license to practice law for? . . . I don't care if you have had bad luck. Go back and start again!" Smarting from the accusation, Scott returned to Washington, reopened an office, and was eventually able to establish a successful practice, most of it in criminal law. In 1935, when Scott was sixty-two, President Franklin D. Roosevelt managed to get Scott's nomination to the Washington, D.C., municipal court approved, but only after a great hue and cry about FDR employing the "spoils system," a claim based on the fact that Scott's predecessor,

James Cobb, had been a Republican <sup>[10]</sup>. In spite of this inauspicious beginning, Judge Scott was now launched on a long career aptly described as "colorful."

It was said that his bench served as both a pulpit and a stage. He thrived on crowded courtrooms. "Where's the audience?" he was likely to ask if benches happened to be largely empty. His own experiences had made him considerate of the poor. To counsel the sinful, forgive the penitent, and sympathize with the unfortunate became one of his dictums. He often used another dictum, "He that knoweth the reason of the law, knoweth the law," to explain to the accused why he or she was in court. It was said of Judge Scott that he dispensed a brand of justice "flavored with philosophy and the tolerance that comes to men who have studied the passing parade."

On the other hand, he was aroused to fury by witnesses who perjured themselves on the stand. Also vexing were lawyers who avoided courts where only the poor could be found, thus making it difficult for the bench to see that the accused had legal representation. He chided his fellow judges who gave convicted bootleggers nominal fines and began handing such lawbreakers jail sentences right and left. When, on one occasion, a child had to testify and obviously did not know the meaning of truth, Judge Scott said angrily, "It's incredible! This child has never been to Sunday School. We talk of juvenile delinquents when the real trouble is adult delinquents."

When Scott's term expired in 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower chose not to name a successor for two and one-half years so that Scott could qualify for the twenty-year retirement pension. Even then he existed in a state of semiretirement, serving as a judge for three months a year. "It's better to wear out than rust out," he would say. At a dinner in October 1956, when Scott was eighty-three, he was honored by friends of the bench, bar, and the community. In 1958 one of his dreams was realized when action was taken to treat alcoholics as people needing medical attention, rather than just handing them another jail term. For years these inebriates had hung around the courthouse steps, waiting their turn to face "The Dean," as he was known to them. He died two years later at age eighty-seven and was buried in Lincoln Cemetery.

Scott was married twice, first to Effie Harris, of Washington, D.C., who left a son, Armond Wendell II, and then to Annie Cotton of Alabama. He was a member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church and an Elk, holding the post of grand ruler during the governorship of Al Smith, whom he backed for the presidency. The judge left behind an unfinished autobiographical sketch, *Up from Hell*, telling the story of his life from youth in Wilmington to old age in Washington, D.C.

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#### **Additional Resources:**

Scott, Armond Wendell. [Armond W. Scott]. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. <http://npgportraits.si.edu/eMuseumNPG/code/emuseum.asp?rawsearch=ObjectID/.is/.48637/.false/.false&newprofile=CAP&newstyle=single> <sup>[7]</sup> (accessed July 16, 2014).

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#### **Subjects:**

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Judges <sup>[13]</sup>

Lawyers <sup>[14]</sup>

UNC Press <sup>[15]</sup>

#### **Authors:**

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#### **Origin - location:**

New Hanover County <sup>[17]</sup>

Wilmington <sup>[18]</sup>

Raleigh <sup>[19]</sup>

Shaw University <sup>[20]</sup>

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