

# Henry Frye, Chief Justice: An interview

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*Courtesy of the North Carolina Supreme Court.*

Henry Frye made a significant mark on North Carolina history on September 7, 1999, when he took the oath of office as the first African American chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court. In 1983 he became the first African American appointed as an associate justice to the court. Chief Justice Frye also made history in 1968, when he became the first African American elected to the North Carolina legislature in the twentieth century. The Tar Heel Junior Historian Association is honored that Chief Justice Frye agreed to an interview for this issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine. He is indeed a notable part of history and has achieved “legendary” status in the eyes of many North Carolinians. For insight into this living legend, see the interview below.

**THJHA:** Chief Justice Frye, could you give us some background on your childhood?

**Frye:** I was born in Ellerbe, Richmond County, on August 1, 1932, to Walter A. and Pearl (Motley) Frye (both deceased).

**THJHA:** When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

**Frye:** I was not sure what I wanted to be—a pharmacist, chemist, biochemist.

**THJHA:** What effect did your rural upbringing have on your life?

**Frye:** I learned the value of working together with others, how to repair things, and how to build things. I learned that if you told someone that you would do something, it was important that you do it and not let people down.

**THJHA:** How were relations between blacks and whites when you were a child and a young adult?

**Frye:** Relations with blacks and whites were generally good on the job and during the workweek. We went our separate ways on the weekends. We also went to separate schools, and the white students had newer books and better school buses.

**THJHA:** Could you tell us about the schools you attended?

**Frye:** I attended the same school from first through twelfth grade. It was known then as Ellerbe Colored High School. However, my diploma reads “Ellerbe High School.” After graduation, I attended what was then A&T College, now North Carolina A&T State University. In those days, white students interested in studying agriculture could attend State College in Raleigh, while black students attended A&T College in Greensboro. At A&T, I started as an agricultural science major, then changed to a biology major with a double minor in chemistry and air science.

**THJHA:** When and why did you join the Air Force? How long were you enlisted? What did serving in the military teach you?

**Frye:** I was an Air Force ROTC cadet and received a commission as second lieutenant in the United States Air Force Reserve upon graduation from college. I was called to active duty in the air force in December 1953, serving in San Antonio, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Suwon, South Korea; and Fukuoka, Japan. I served in the air force from 1953 to 1955. I returned to the United States in December 1955 and visited Disneyland in California before returning to North Carolina. I worked at a chemical laboratory in Brooklyn, New York, in 1956, returning to North Carolina in August to get married and to attend law school at the University of North Carolina.

**THJHA:** What action did you take after not being allowed to vote in Richmond County in 1956?

**Frye:** When I tried to register to vote in my hometown of Ellerbe, I was told that I did not pass the literacy test, which was required in order to vote. This seemed strange to me, that a person could be an honors graduate of a North Carolina college, an officer in the United States Air Force, and be accepted to the UNC Law School but couldn't pass a literacy test for voting. Others agreed. When I returned to vote after talking with the chairman of the board of elections, I passed the test with ease.

When I was elected to the legislature, my first bill was to have a constitutional amendment to abolish the literacy test.

**THJHA:** Tell us about your family.

**Frye:** My wife is Shirley Taylor Frye. She has a successful career of her own. We have been happily married for over forty-three years. We have two children, Henry Eric and Harlan Elbert. I also have three lovely grandchildren.

**THJHA:** What are your hobbies or interests? List any community activities in which you participate.

**Frye:** I like playing golf and bowling, as well as writing poetry. I am a deacon at Providence Baptist Church in Greensboro.

**THJHA:** What is the makeup of the supreme court? When does a case appear before the court?

**Frye:** The makeup of the court is as follows: there are six associate justices and one chief justice. Currently, four of the justices are Republicans, and the other three are Democrats.

There are three main ways that a case appears before the supreme court. If there is a dissenting opinion in the state court of appeals, the losing party has a right to an appeal to the supreme court. Second, a party may petition this court for discretionary review of a unanimous decision of the court of appeals. Finally, all cases in which the defendant is sentenced to death, and Utilities Commission general rate cases, may be automatically appealed to this court.

**THJHA:** How is being chief justice different from being an associate justice?

**Frye:** Being chief justice involves many additional administrative responsibilities. These responsibilities vary greatly, from heading various committees and commissions to assisting the Administrative Office of the Courts in its key role of managing the court system throughout North Carolina.

**THJHA:** When you look back over your life, what one moment stands out foremost in your mind, the moment of which you're most proud?

**Frye:** I've had a lot of great experiences, but two of the best were speaking at my son Harlan's graduation from Grimsley High School [in Greensboro] and administering the oath of office to my son Henry Jr. as an elected superior court judge.

**THJHA:** What was the best advice that you ever received or that has stayed with you throughout your life? Do you have any advice for the students who are reading this magazine?

**Frye:** My high school principal, Mr. S. B. T. Easterling, told me that winners never quit, and quitters never win. He also told me to make every occasion a great one, for I would never know whether fate had chosen my name for a higher place. I have never forgotten this advice.

My advice for young people is to study and make good grades in school. Learn to get along with people. Develop good study habits. Dream about what you want to do and to be, then go to work to make your dreams come true. Listen to people who have failed, and try not to make the same mistakes those people made. Listen to people who have succeeded, and follow their advice.

**THJHA:** What would you say to a young person who may be having doubts about achieving certain goals in life?

**Frye:** To a young person who may be having doubts about achieving certain goals in life, never doubt your ability to succeed. With determination, dedication, and a positive attitude, you can achieve your goals and lead a prosperous life.