

Johnson, Jeff. Deems ^[1]

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by [C. Sylvester Green](#) ^[2], 1988

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Jeff. Deems Johnson, attorney and [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) ^[3] justice, was born in Garland, [Sampson County](#) ^[4], the son of Jeff. Deems and Mary Lily Wright Johnson. He was the third of five children. After completing his elementary and secondary education in Garland, he attended Trinity Park preparatory school in Durham in 1917–18. In the fall he enrolled in [Trinity College](#) ^[5] and, having registered for military service on 12 Sept. 1918, joined the Student Army Training Corps in which he served as a private until discharged on 11 Dec. 1918, a month after the Armistice. He was graduated with the bachelor of arts degree in 1923. At Trinity he was active in many campus organizations, including several where membership was based on scholarship and leadership. [Baseball](#) ^[6] was his favorite sport, and he gained wide note as a collegiate player, starring on championship teams during his four years there. During the summer he played for or managed baseball teams successively in Clinton, Mount Olive, Maxton, and Roanoke Rapids as well as in Meridian and Artesia, Miss. In his senior year he declined an offer from the Pittsburgh Pirates to play professional baseball.

After graduation Johnson taught history and government at Reynolds High School in Winston-Salem. In September 1924 he returned to Trinity College and entered the law school then headed by the inimitable dean, [Samuel F. Mordecai](#) ^[7]. In 1926 he was graduated with a certificate in law (law degrees were not conferred then) from [Duke University](#) ^[8], the change in names having occurred in his first year of law study. He had the distinction of leading his class scholastically, and he passed the state bar examination in August.

Returning to Sampson County, Johnson opened an office in Clinton and made his home there for the rest of his life. He was an attorney for the town of Clinton from 1928 to 1941. He also served in the state senate for the two special sessions of 1936 and 1938 and the regular sessions of 1937 and 1941. His election was hailed as unusual because he won as a Democrat in a "rockribbed" Republican county. During the 1941 session, he was a member of the prestigious senate committee for the codification of the state laws. He was a member of the [North Carolina Bar Association](#) ^[9], of the county and national bar associations, and in 1939 of the executive committee of the Sixth Judicial District Bar.

On 1 July 1941 Governor [J. Melville Broughton](#) ^[10] named Johnson a special judge of the Superior Court, Eastern Division, in which he rendered notable service for two terms (1941–45). Resuming the practice of law, he was a member of the North Carolina State Board of Law Examiners during the years 1948–50, and continued to be active in political and community affairs, serving as chairman of the Sampson County Democratic Executive Committee and one term as commander of the local post of the American Legion, which he joined in 1926.

Johnson was manager of the successful senatorial campaign of former Governor Broughton in 1948 and of the unsuccessful campaign of Senator [Frank P. Graham](#) ^[11] in 1950 when he sought election to a full term following the interim appointment of Governor [W. Kerr Scott](#) ^[12].

After the death of Supreme Court Associate Justice A. A. F. Seawell on 14 Oct. 1950, Johnson's name was among the large number recommended to Governor Scott for the interim appointment, which the courts ruled would hold only until the general election in November. Johnson was not named to the vacancy, but instead was his party's nominee; winning the election, he took the oath on 29 Nov. 1950. Two years later he was reelected. In February 1955 Johnson was elected a trustee of Duke University, one of the few extra responsibilities he accepted while a member of the North Carolina Supreme Court. At its 1956 commencement [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[13] conferred on him the honorary degree of doctor of laws.

At one time Johnson was chairman of the Methodist church's Board of Stewards in Clinton, and he served on the board of trustees of the church. He was also a longtime member of the local lodge of Ancient, Free, and Accepted [Masons](#) ^[14]. On 17 Aug. 1935 he married Virginia Frances Faison, the daughter of Isham Francis and Isabel Pigford Faison of Faison. They had three children: Frances Faison, Mary Lily (Mrs. James Garland Nuckolls), and Jeff. Deems III.

Johnson died in Duke Hospital, Durham, and was buried in the Clinton city cemetery. A portrait, painted by Irene Price of Blowing Rock, is in the possession of the family.

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