

## **Parker, Robert Hunt** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Parker, Robert Hunt**

by Ralph Hardee Rives, 1994

**15 Feb. 1892–10 Nov. 1969**

Robert Hunt Parker, chief justice of the [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, was recognized as an eminent jurist, scholar in history, the classics, and common law, and orator, and as a fearless champion of the average citizen. He was an outspoken conservative in the areas of race, politics, and public morality and, as a result of his innate command of language, he was one of the most highly quotable public figures of his day. Tall, somewhat austere in appearance, impeccably dressed, silver-haired in later years, the epitome of dignity at all times, Parker was referred to as "all judge" [*Washington Daily News*, 27 Jan. 1966], "a judge's judge" [*Charlotte Observer* <sup>[3]</sup>, 12 Nov. 1968], and a "law and order" man long before the phrase became a cliché of political candidates.

Parker was the only son of Romulus Bragg Parker (3 June 1856–31 July 1939), a prominent landowner and businessman of [Enfield](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, and his first wife, Victory Coleman Hunt Parker (10 Nov. 1857–21 July 1912). Educated at the Enfield High School, [The University of North Carolina](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, the [University of Virginia](#) <sup>[6]</sup> (B.A., 1912), [Wake Forest Law School](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, and the [University of Virginia Law School](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, he was admitted to the North Carolina bar in the summer of 1914, approximately a year before receiving his LL.B. degree from the University of Virginia Law School. In 1958 he was awarded the honorary doctor of laws degree from The University of North Carolina.

During World War I Parker served as field artillery officer in the cavalry, attached to the adjutant general's office in France for nearly seventeen months. After the war he practiced law in Enfield and [Roanoke Rapids](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, and in 1923–24 he represented [Halifax County](#) <sup>[10]</sup> in the [General Assembly](#) <sup>[11]</sup>. This began a career of public service in North Carolina that led from solicitor, superior court judge, supreme court associate justice, supreme court senior justice, and, finally, to chief justice of the supreme court. Parker was the third native son of Halifax County to serve as chief justice in the twentieth century.

"Judge Parker," as he was affectionately known in later years, served as solicitor of the Third Judicial District from 1924 to 1932, when he was appointed to the superior court, having been chosen by the district judicial committee to fill the unexpired term of the late superior court judge Garland Midyette of Jackson. Parker was reelected for three eight-year terms in 1934, 1942, and 1950. As a superior court judge, he was given special assignments involving election violations, tax dodgers, mob violence, and several notorious criminal and civil cases.

In 1952 he ran for the supreme court and became the first person in North Carolina history to unseat a state supreme court justice at the polls; this was the last time that anyone reached the high court bench other than by appointment. Upon the retirement of Chief Justice Emery Denny in 1966, Governor Dan K. Moore named Parker to replace him and, in 1968, Justice Parker was reelected for an eight-year term.

During Parker's seventeen years on the North Carolina Supreme Court, twenty-three of his opinions were selected for inclusion in the *American Law Reports*. Among the landmark cases in which his opinions gained state and national attention was *State v. Goldberg* (1964), in which he affirmed the conviction of professional gamblers on several counts of conspiring to bribe college basketball players. In 1968 he upheld a permanent injunction against commercial diving operations involving three Confederate blockade-runners in the coastal waters off [New Hanover County](#) <sup>[12]</sup>. During his tenure, the state's judicial system underwent wide-ranging reform and substantial enlargement with the creation of an intermediate state court of appeals and a district court system below the superior courts. In this period, the responsibilities of the state's chief justice and of the administrative staff increased significantly.

Parker gained the title of the "Fighting Chief Justice" because no fight was too difficult or too unpopular for him to wage when he felt that North Carolina's heritage was being threatened. He insisted that judges did not make law but, rather, were interpreters of the constitution and should follow the doctrine of *stare decisis*.

He was a member of the Commission to Study Improvements in the Administration of Justice in North Carolina (1947–49) and a member and later chairman of the Judicial Council. Unlike many former chief justices, Parker was an extremely popular public speaker throughout the state. His courtly manner and strong sense of integrity and decorum, and the fact that he was "predictably honest," caused him to be in great demand as an orator and his stirring patriotic addresses were widely acclaimed. He made his last public appearance one month prior to his death when he addressed the [North Carolina Bar Association](#) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Parker was a member of several veterans' organizations including the American Legion, the "40 and 8," and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. An honorary member of the [Society of the Cincinnati](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, he served on the Confederate Centennial Commission and the Governor Richard Caswell Memorial Commission. He was a member of the Episcopal church.

On 28 Nov. 1925 Parker married Mrs. Rie Alston Williams Rand (21 May 1888–12 Aug. 1976) oGreensboro [15]. They had no children. Chief Justice and Mrs. Parker were buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Enfield, near the grave of Governor John Branch [16], one of Parker's favorite heroes.

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