



- *Legislator*
- *Educator*
- *Activist*

TIMELINE

1927 – Graduates from Atlanta University (B.A.)

1929 – Receives graduate degree from Ohio State University

1930 – Marries Henry Cook Hamilton

Grace Towns Hamilton

1907–1992

Inducted 2006

Grace Towns Hamilton was the first African-American woman elected to the Georgia General Assembly.

Born in Atlanta on February 10, 1907, Grace was the oldest of four surviving children of Harriet McNair and George Alexander Towns. Her father was the son of a former slave and the grandson of the unacknowledged half-brother of George Washington Towns, a Georgia governor. Educated at Atlanta University, her father completed a second bachelor's degree at Harvard before becoming a professor of English and Pedagogy at Atlanta University for the next 30 years. Grace's mother also graduated from Atlanta University, and taught elementary education before devoting herself to family.

Atlanta University was a haven for young Grace. Its insular community provided a unique opportunity to enjoy freedom of ideas while sheltering her from racism. Many years later she reflected on the circumstances of those years: "Yet my sheltered upbringing was a disadvantage, too. I had gone through high school and college in Atlanta University and didn't learn what the real world is like until...I got a job."

Having received a bachelor's degree in 1927, Grace transferred to Ohio State University for graduate study in Psychology. While a student there, she accepted a position as Girl's Work Secretary with the Young Women's Christian Association of Columbus. It was her first job.

Taking her Master's degree in 1929, Grace returned to Atlanta to teach at Clark College and the Atlanta School of Social Work. In 1930 she married Henry Cooke Hamilton. Originally from Atlanta, Henry was a faculty member of LeMoyne College in Memphis, Tennessee. The couple lived in Memphis for a decade. Their first and only child, Eleanor, was born there in 1931. Balancing family and professional life, Grace taught Psychology at Le Moyne College and later conducted government surveys before joining the national staff of the YWCA, for which she developed interracial programs on college campuses.

In 1941 Henry accepted a position as head of Atlanta University's high school program. Returning to her hometown, Grace immersed herself in the Atlanta

1930 – Moves to Tennessee; begins teaching at LaMoyné College; later conducts surveys

1931 – First and only child, Eleanor, is born

1935 – Gives up teaching to work in public sector

1945 – Begins 11 years of working through Atlanta Urban League to assist veteran housing effort

1954 – Assumes role as Assistant Director of Program Planning for the Southern Regional Council; also active in NAACP and other organizations as well as election efforts of Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr.

1961 – Begins operating own community relations firm

1964 – Appointed by Mayor Allen to Atlanta's Fund Appeals Board

1966 – Serves as temporary director of the Atlanta Youth Council

1966 – Appointed by U.S. President Lyndon Johnson to the Committee on Recreation and Natural Beauty

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community. Beginning in 1943 she served as executive director of the Atlanta Urban League. Under her leadership the AUL waged intensive campaigns advocating education, healthcare, housing and voting rights for African Americans. However, while successfully working to improve conditions within the black community, Grace chose to sidestep the issue of segregation. That decision brought her into conflict with other organization leaders, and in 1961 she lost her post.



A period of private consulting followed for Grace. Meanwhile, the civil rights movement was growing, and the demand for racial justice spurred the Supreme Court to mandate changes, including legislative and congressional redistricting. With the federal government applying pressure to ensure racial equity in the southern electoral process, Grace saw an opportunity. In the special primary election of May 1965 she captured the Democratic nomination for state representative for Atlanta's 31st district. In January 1966, when she was sworn into office, Grace became the first African-American woman elected to the Georgia General Assembly.

In 18 years of service in Georgia's state legislature Grace worked tirelessly to expand political representation for blacks in city, county and state governments. As a principal architect of the 1973 Atlanta City Charter, she helped ensure that black representation on the Atlanta City Council was in proportion to population. In 1972, when Andrew Young was elected to Congress to represent Atlanta's fifth district, he credited Grace for his election. He was the first African American from Georgia to win a seat in Congress since 1870.

Over the course of her career Grace led many congressional and legislative reapportionment battles to counter measures by white legislators to manipulate district lines. But in 1980, following a census and another reapportionment battle,

Grace boldly aligned herself with the white leadership against militant young African Americans who sought to use the new electoral law to gain a “sure” seat for their candidate in the 5th Georgia Congressional district. Her stance outraged the black community and eventually resulted in her defeat in the 1984 election.

Disappointed, Grace nevertheless remained engaged—working for the good of the greater Atlanta community. She continued to enjoy recognition and awards, though she would hold only one other public office as advisor to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Serving from January 1985 to January 1987, her resignation coincided with her husband’s death.

Grace died June 17, 1992, at the age of 85. A front-page obituary in the Atlanta Journal remembered her as a great leader and public servant. Among many posthumous honors, the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus established the Grace Towns Hamilton Leadership Award and the Grady Memorial Hospital gave her name to its Women’s and Infants Pavilion.

Additional Resources

Georgia Encyclopedia

<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/HistoryArchaeology/SunbeltGeorgia/People-7&id=h-742>

African American Registry

http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/688/Grace_Hamilton_a_fighter_for_those_less_fortunate

Atlanta’s Civil Rights Movement

http://www.atlantahighered.org/civilrights/essay_detail.asp?phase=1

Atlanta History Center

<http://www.atlantahistorycenter.com>
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