

Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Lenore Prather died April 11

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Former Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Lenore Loving Prather died Saturday, April 11, at her home in Columbus. She was 88.

Her former colleague, former Chief Justice William L. Waller Jr. of Jackson, called Justice Prather a trailblazer. He recalled her as a mentor and role model. Her accomplishments included numerous firsts for women in the legal profession. “She served with class, character, scholarship and impeccable integrity.” He noted that she also deserves recognition for her role in the funding and design of the Mississippi Supreme Court Courthouse, the Gartin Justice Building in Jackson.

Chief Justice Prather was the first woman to serve on the Mississippi Supreme Court and was the court's first female chief justice. In that role, she was the leader of the judicial branch of government in Mississippi.

She began her judicial career as West Point Municipal Judge in 1965, and served until September 1972, when Gov. John Bell Williams appointed her Chancellor of the 14th Chancery District of Chickasaw, Clay, Lowndes, Noxubee, Oktibbeha and Webster counties. She was the state's first woman chancellor. Gov. William Winter appointed her to the Supreme Court in 1982. She became a presiding justice in January 1993. She served as Chief Justice from January 1998 to January 2001.

Justice Prather wrote the landmark decisions of *Albright v. Albright* and *Ferguson v. Ferguson*. *Albright* created a list of considerations, now known as *Albright Factors*, to determine the best interests of the child in parental custody disputes. *Ferguson* adopted guidelines for equitable distribution of marital assets in divorce, including giving women credit for their non-financial contributions to the family.

After she left the Supreme Court, she served as interim president of MUW from July 2001 to June 2002. Justice Prather was born Sept. 17, 1931, in West Point, Mississippi, the daughter of Byron Herald Loving and Hattie Hearn Morris Loving. She graduated from West Point High School in 1949, then studied communications and political science at Mississippi State College for Women, now Mississippi University for Women in Columbus, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1953.

She earned her law degree from the University of Mississippi School of Law in 1955. During her first year in law school, in 1953, she was one of only three female law students enrolled at Ole Miss. In a September 2002 oral history interview, she recalled that three women law students at that time was the most who had been enrolled at the same time. One of her fellow students was Mary Libby Payne, who went on to become the first woman judge of the Mississippi Court of Appeals.

Justice Prather grew up around the law and the courthouse. Her father was an attorney, state representative and senator. His law office was near the courthouse in West Point. Her mother was a legal secretary. Justice Prather was a fourth-generation lawyer and practiced with her father in her early career. She later practiced law with her husband, Robert Brooks Prather, whom she married in 1957. While practicing law, she also taught speech at Mississippi State University. MUW awarded her its Medal of Excellence in 1990 and the MUW Alumni Achievement Award in 1993. The University of Mississippi inducted her into the Hall of Fame in 1986. The University of Mississippi School of Law named her Alumna of the Year in 1995, and in 2012 inducted her into the Law Alumni Hall of Fame. Gov. Haley Barbour awarded her the Mississippi Medal of Service in 2009.