

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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U.S. Civil Rights Commission Mourns the Death of Celebrated Civil Rights Pioneer Percy E. Sutton

Washington, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights mourns the passing of Percy E. Sutton at age 89, one of the nation’s foremost civil rights lawyers and activists, media entrepreneurs and public servants.

The son of a former slave and the youngest of fifteen children, Percy Sutton served his country with distinction during World War II as a member of the famed Tuskegee Airmen and again during the Korean War as an Air Force intelligence officer. After his military service, Sutton worked virtually around the clock as a postal worker and subway conductor to put himself through law school during the day, graduating from Brooklyn Law School. His Harlem law office, founded in 1953, represented Malcolm X and handled the cases of more than 200 defendants arrested in the South during the 1963-64 civil rights marches. A Freedom Rider, Sutton would be elected to two terms as president of the New York office of the NAACP. In 1965, he was elected to the New York State assembly and later served as Manhattan borough president starting in 1966, becoming the highest-ranked black elected official in the state.

A true innovator and renaissance man, Sutton operated the first black-owned radio station in New York City and built a media empire that encompassed radio and cable television stations and programming in numerous markets throughout the United States. One of his signature achievements is his purchase and restoration of the landmark Apollo Theater in Harlem, which contributed to the area’s cultural and economic regeneration.

Commission Chairman Gerald Reynolds said, “Percy Sutton is an inspiration to all Americans, not only to those who served with him in the forefront of the civil rights movement, but to all who seek a better future for themselves and their children. His story of moving from humble beginnings as the son of a former slave to becoming a lawyer and entrepreneur is truly remarkable. He is an example, particularly to young people, of the value of education, hard work, diligence and commitment to public service. He leaves behind a nation enriched by his lasting achievements.”

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*The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent, bipartisan agency charged with monitoring federal civil rights enforcement. Members include Chairman Gerald A. Reynolds, Vice Chair Abigail Thernstrom, Commissioners Todd Gaziano, Gail Heriot, Peter N. Kirsanow, Arlan D. Melendez, Ashley L. Taylor, Jr., and Michael Yaki. Martin Dannenfeler is the Staff Director. Commission meetings are open to the general public. The Commission’s website is <http://www.usccr.gov>*