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Tribute to
Thomas Adams Duckenfield
On the Occasion of the Presentation of the
Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit for 1993
by the Washington Bar Association
Washington, District of Columbia
May 1, 1993

Prophetically, in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote a passage in his book **Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community** that is appropo in this posthumous tribute to Thomas Adams Duckenfield, Sr. King said,

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. (original emphasis). In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing in both naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The 'tide in the affairs of men' does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: 'Too late.' There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. The moving finger still writes, and having writ moves on...We still have a choice today..."

These words appropriately describe the prodigious legal career of this year's recipient of the Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit. In fact, the record discloses some similarities in the lives of King, Houston, and Duckenfield. Each of these distinguished people recognized that they, and the people they

served were "faced with the fact that tomorrow is today." Each worked diligently to fill their cup of life and to drink from it before it was "too late."

During his racing and busy life, tomorrow was always today for Thomas A. Duckenfield. He expressed this accelerated theme to us in his "Lockean poetry," his archival nature to preserve history and its interpretation, and in his concern for excellence in education. Each of these themes were connected and interconnected with the law, the law that he loved. Miraculously, Tom was able to weave these themes into the important work of building and supporting institutions: institutions like the Law Students in Court Program, District of Columbia Service Corps, National Conference of Christians and Jews, Neighborhood Economic Development Corporation, and numerous others groups to which he belonged.

However, deep in his bosom, and rooted to his soul was the maintenance, security and building of the African American bar as an institution. Hence, the Washington Bar Association and the National Bar Association were forced to listen to Tom's philosophy about building institutions in the tradition of a John McDaniel (former WBA president), and to read his expressions about the need to develop an economic base in the African-American community.

Tom's words as president of the National Bar Association speak for themselves. Out of the Booker T. Washington school of thought, Tom reminded us in November, 1989 that "if African Americans really hope to enter into the entrepreneurial market place, we will first need a support structure or an infrastructure behind us...Our

entrepreneurial challenge as lawyers is to lift the veil of obsolescence from the African American masses who have been bypassed by technology." In the tradition of Charles H. Houston, and Thurgood Marshall, on February 1990, Tom reminded us that "an education is the foundation of a civilized people and it is the most fundamental tool that we as African Americans can use to make changes...." Concerned about the elderly, Tom chided African American lawyers to take their place "on the front lines in the struggle for senior citizens' rights." Concluding his year as bar president, Tom, lamenting on the conditions of his people, concluded that "the core issue remains[--] racism."

Like Charles Hamilton Houston, Duckenfield was a philosopher, a lawyer keenly aware of the need for groundwork to secure the liberties of the downtrodden. Like King, he was a dreamer. However, Thomas Duckenfield was also a leader of the Washington Bar Association, the nation's most influential affiliate of the National Bar Association; and he was the president of the National Bar Association, a bar group that Tom led to a new level of service and greatness. The Duckenfield presidency of the Washington Bar Association and the National Bar Association firmly planted Tom's seed in the history of the nation.

Earlier in his career, he was chief deputy register of wills at the D.C. Superior Court and Clerk of the court. He touched several student's lives as an adjunct professor at Howard University School of Law, and ended his illustrious career as vice president and general manager of Washington Gas Co. Both Houston and Duckenfield died in the prime of their lives, but not before

each substantially achieved lofty goals and immeasurable objectives. For Duckenfield, procrastination was no thief of time.

Tom was our friend. We have not gotten use to his absence. We are richer in every respect because Tom forced us all not to procrastinate and to be vigilant in the advancement of African Americans in the political and judicial landscape of the District of Columbia and the nation, and to never neglect our duty to the God of our "weary years...of our silent tears." Tonight is the Washington Bar Association's way of recognizing a leader, who earned the respect of each of us, and who, with Evelyn Newman Duckenfield, raised three sons (Thomas, David, and Pace) who carry their father's torch of light on to the next generation.

The Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit bestowed on Thomas Adams Duckenfield tonight is evidence that his visible life has been faithful to the traditions of Charles Hamilton Houston.¹

J. Clay Smith, Jr.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community 191 (1968); Thomas A. Duckenfield, "Roots and Wings," 3 NBA Magazine 1, Oct., 1989; Thomas A. Duckenfield, Legal and Entrepreneurial Prowess, 3 NBA Magazine 1, Nov., 1989; Thomas A. Duckenfield, Education: The Tool For Change, 4 NBA Magazine 1, Feb. 1990; Thomas A. Duckenfield, Planing for and Protecting the Golden Years, 4 NBA Magazine 2, June, 1990; Thomas A. Duckenfield, Marching in Time Down the Road Toward Justice, 4 NBA Magazine 1, July, 1990. See also Thomas Duckenfield Dies; Washington Gas Light Executive, Wash. Post, Aug. 4, 1992, at B6; Thomas Duckenfield, 57, Is Dead; Headed Black Legal Association, N.Y. Times, Aug. 5, 1992, at B6; Courtland Milloy, A Model Role Model, Wash. Post, Aug. 9, 1992, at B1.