

Yes, he did
Strom Thurmond's Daughter
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And all the laws did not prevent him

It often happened in the segregated South a century or two ago: a powerful white man fathered mixed-race children with a black slave or servant. Until this week, Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings was the most famous of these once-secret liaisons. Now comes a rival: the late Senator Strom Thurmond, whose 24-hour filibuster against a 1957 civil rights bill is still the longest-ever speech on the Senate floor.

On December 15th his family said that they "acknowledge Ms. Essie Mae Washington-Williams' claim to her heritage." Her father died in June, a ripe 100.

Ms. Washington-Williams, a 78-year-old former school teacher who lives in Los Angeles, had until now denied the relationship, insisting that she and the senator were merely "close friends." They had agreed to put it like this decades ago, she says, to save him embarrassment and protect his political career. If she stayed quiet – as she did – her father would help her with money.

Essie Mae was born in 1925 to a 16-year-old black maid, Carrie Butler, who worked in the Thurmond's family home in strictly segregated Edgefield, South Carolina. Strom, then 22, had been living at home and teaching at a local school.

The parentage of the light-skinned child was for years an open secret among local blacks. Whispers began among whites when Strom Thurmond, by then South Carolina's governor, arranged for his daughter to go to the all-black South Carolina State College in the 1940s. He visited her there a number of times, arriving in his gubernatorial limousine. Later, annual meetings at his Senate office in Washington, and regular financial payments, apparently continued until his death. But he never admitted publicly that she was his daughter, even when a South Carolina newspaper said in 1972 that he had "coloured offspring."

This week his daughter said that "within his heart, I don't really think he was [a racist]", blaming all that on his political career. Thurmond was quite a liberal state governor: he denounced lynching and called for more money to be spent on black schools. But he changed when he ran for the presidency in 1948, declaring that "on the question of social intermingling of the races, our people draw the line. And all the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches...."

He married a former beauty queen in 1968 and had four legitimate children, three of whom are still living and were mentioned in his will. His black daughter was not, but she has "no intention" of contesting her father's will.