

# Bio

A loving soul, a great intellectual and an inspiration to all, a loving soul, an intellectual giant and an inspiration to all family who knew him, John Henry Thomas, passed away at age 93 on February 19, 2015 in Plano, Texas with his daughter at his side. He was born to Mary and Hillary Thomas on September 19, 1921. He was the youngest of six children, all of whom are predeceased. With his passing, a generation of Thomases native to Louisiana and Oklahoma becomes written history as he was the patriarch of the family.

John was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma where he lived most of his life. He was a graduate of the great Frederick Douglass High School, class of 1940, and worked many summer jobs, both skilled and unskilled wherever work could be found.

Parts of his early life are not well documented. He was quiet and studious, spending time sculpting beautiful art of the human body in clay. In his young adulthood, he lived and took care of the family homestead at 709 N. Wisconsin. He desired to be a pianist and bought an upright piano for the family's house and he took a lot of pride in paying only \$10 for it. One particular conversation with his niece revealed that he "worked at Sam Ship and Drydock in Chester, Pennsylvania." She later discovered that he meant the historic Sun Shipbuilding and Drydock where he trained to be a ship filter in the inner bottom section. He became foreman of that section before being called for World War II. How he arrived at Sun Ship or how long he stayed is unknown.

He attended Talladega College in Alabama one year before he enlisted in the U.S. Marines. He was one of 20,000 Black Marines who underwent boot camp training at Montford Point in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. As a leader in the Marine Corps, he attained the rank of Staff Sergeant, proudly wearing the chevron insignia and having responsibilities in the training of enlisted marines as well as in radar, a technology crucial during the War to help find distant objects, particularly aircraft and ships. In 2012, he and his daughters traveled to Washington, DC to receive a Congressional Gold medal. After his military service he graduated from Talladega, class of 1948, with a major in chemistry.

After the war, he worked at Tinker Air Force Base for 27 years in radar, ECM and IFF where he was a supervisor and subsequently became head of the department. He came to be regarded as one

of the best radar technicians in the world. He did highly classified work and was assigned work in Japan and other countries to maintain complex radar projects. One such project was a secret mission to Vietnam in June, 1965. He returned early to come back to the States for the funeral of his sister, Mary Thomas Thomas in July 1965.

In retirement, John bought farm land where he raised vegetables and pigs. He was also a Mason.

Seldom called John, he was affectionately known as Uncle John Henry. He was named after the historic John Henry by his mother, Mary Smith Thomas, who anticipated that John's drive in life would be similar to that of the historical icon. His mother attended Lincoln University in her homestate of Missouri. This was a rare achievement for a Black woman at the turn of the 20th century and her experience with college inspired John's life-long appreciation of education.

His love for family was enormous and everybody knew he loved watching sports and eating cornbread dressing. His door was always open and he came to be known both as family philosopher and family philanthropist. He highly valued education. Anytime family would come to visit, they came to expect an inquiry about their education or job status.

He and Lorene raised two daughters, Phyllis and Debra whose love for him is boundless and two of John's sons, John, Jr. and Reginald.

Preceding him in death were his parents, his wife Lorene, his son John, Jr. and his five sisters and brothers (Robert, Toussaint, Mary, Ada, Alma Lou). He will be sorely missed by his son Reggie Thomas, daughters Phyllis Ann Taylor and Debra Wright; two grandchildren, one great grandson and nieces and nephews in Oklahoma City and across the country.

His life was celebrated on Monday, March 2, 2015 at Rolfe Funeral Chapel in Oklahoma City. Before he departed this life, he asked that his family be comforted by the words on the next page.