

# **RICHARD H. AUSTIN**

## **Michigan Secretary of State**

### **1971-1994**

**R**ichard H. Austin was the longest-serving Secretary of State in Michigan history. During his distinguished public service career, which spanned more than 30 years, Secretary Austin earned a national reputation as an outstanding and effective advocate for increased voter registration and traffic safety.

Austin was born on Stout's Mountain, Alabama on May 6, 1913. Following the death of his father at age 11, Austin and his family moved to Detroit. Austin graduated from Cass Technical High School and the Detroit Institute of Technology. Austin married Ida Dawson in 1939. They had one daughter, Hazel.

In 1941, Austin became a certified public accountant, the first African-American CPA in Michigan, and was a senior partner in the firm of Austin, Washington & Davenport. His public service career was launched as an elected delegate to Michigan's Constitutional Convention in 1961-62. In 1966, he was elected as Wayne County Auditor. In 1970, he was elected as Michigan's 39<sup>th</sup> Secretary of State, the nation's first African-American Secretary of State and the first African-American to hold a statewide elected office in Michigan. He won re-election five times.



As Secretary of State, Austin earned the name, "Mr. Traffic Safety." He defined the Secretary of State's office as the lead advocate in traffic safety matters. These matters included safety belt and child restraint laws, a mandatory motorcycle helmet statute, and measures to address driver education and traffic safety. In recognition of his success, the Governor's Traffic Safety Advisory Commission renamed its annual award after Secretary Austin.

Austin was also recognized as a national pioneer and trailblazer in Michigan's election process. Under his leadership, Michigan was the first state to implement a "motor voter" law that expanded the voter registration system. This allowed people to register to vote when they renewed their driver license and vehicle registration. Michigan's law served as a model and led to the enactment of the National Voter Registration Act.

Ever humble and gracious, Austin sought out opportunities to serve his community. He actively participated in the United Way Community Services, the NAACP, the YMCA, the YWCA, and the Urban League. Richard H. Austin died on April 20, 2001.

In 2005, the Michigan Legislature passed Senate Bill 365 renaming the Treasury Building the Richard H. Austin State Office Building. Governor Jennifer M. Granholm signed the bill into law on November 17, 2005, as Public Act 209.

The Richard H. Austin State Office Building was dedicated on May 11, 2006.