

John Ray Jennings

John Ray Jennings should be inducted into the NCGOP Hall of Fame because of his lifelong dedication to the citizens of Alexander County and the Republican Party in North Carolina.

John Ray Jennings was born in rural Wilkes on November 8, 1908. Political involvement at Wake Forest College in the late 1920's solidified his interest in politics and a desire to study law. He went on to law school at Wake Forest and passed the bar exam after only one and one half years. He then returned to his home town of Taylorsville and opened his law office. Practically upon his arrival in Taylorsville, he became active in town and county politics. He was named Republican County Chairman in 1935 and elected mayor of Taylorsville in 1939. He held that office for twenty-two years before he was forced to resign for health reasons. In 1945 he was elected Chairman of the State Young Republican Club and reelected to that office in 1947.

In the 1948 Republican National Convention, candidate Robert Taft sought unsuccessfully the support of Ray Jennings for his nomination as the US Presidential candidate at the national convention. He was unsuccessful in this attempt because Ray Jennings had declared his support for Thomas E. Dewey, who eventually became the Republican Party candidate in the Presidential election. As a result of this support for Thomas Dewey, Ray Jennings was instrumental in getting Thomas E. Dewey to make a campaign visit to Taylorsville at the Alexander County Courthouse.

Another contender that year was Earl Warren, whom Ray Jennings met and conferred with but did not support. This meeting took place during the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia to which Ray Jennings was a delegate.

Ray Jennings was a delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1952 and in 1956 at the Republican National convention in San Francisco Ray Jennings was Chairman of the NC delegation. National news network cameras spot-lighted Ray Jennings on the convention floor and the commentator remarked on his resemblance to President Eisenhower. Among Ray Jennings papers are signed letters from Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States, Presidential Candidate Thomas E. Dewey, Harold Stassen, Claire Boothe Luce and United States Speaker of the House, Joseph Martin.

Ray Jennings continued to serve the Republican Party by being elected Chairman of the North Carolina Republican Party in 1954 and again in 1956.

As the young people were leaving the farms of Alexander County, seeking jobs elsewhere, it became a priority for Ray Jennings while serving as Mayor of Taylorsville, to attract industries to Alexander County. This would offer better paying jobs which would entice the people to stay in the county in order to make Alexander County grow and prosper. He spent much of his personal time, at his own expense, traveling to various locations in order to meet prospective businesses for the county. Through his

campaigning for industry, he was successful in persuading Schneider Mills, Lewittes Furniture, Broyhill Furniture, Blue Bell and others to location facilities in Alexander County. These industries resulted in the employment of approximately 2,000 people and contributed greatly to the economy of Alexander County.

Ray Jennings was deeply committed to saving the Alexander County Railroad which links with other railroads in Statesville. He saw the railroad as the life line for the newly acquired industries. He led the group of individuals that acquired the railroad from Southern Railroad.

He also worked diligently to help Alexander County build the first community hospital and the hospital became a reality in May of 1950.

Ray Jennings suffered a heart attack at the Inauguration of President Richard M. Nixon in January of 1969, and died of a second heart attack on April 19, 1970. Shortly before his death in 1970, some 35 leading business and civic leaders paid a surprise visit to his law office and presented him with a plaque citing his many contributions to the Town of Taylorsville and Alexander County.

John Ray Jennings' Description

John Ray Jennings was a lifelong activist and supporter of the ideals of the Republican Party. He was active in local, state and national Republican organizations and through his tireless dedication and determination was able to greatly contribute to the growth and success of the Republican Party. He was also dedicated to his community as evidenced by his many unselfish efforts to support the economic and social growth of Taylorsville and Alexander County.