



# Jesse White

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## SECRETARY OF STATE

# NEWS

ILLINOIS SECRETARY OF STATE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Illinois State Library Named for Former Poet Laureate Gwendolyn Brooks**

**SPRINGFIELD** — The Illinois State Library was named today in honor of the late Pulitzer Prize winning Illinois poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks during a dedication ceremony held at the library.

Almost 400 persons watched as Nora Brooks Blakely, the poet's daughter, unveiled a plaque commemorating the event. The plaque will be permanently mounted on a marble base located in the front of the library.

The Illinois General Assembly approved a resolution this spring sponsored by Senate President Emil Jones, Jr. and House Speaker Michael J. Madigan urging the State of Illinois to rename the Illinois State Library the Gwendolyn Brooks Illinois State Library. Ms. Brooks, who resided all her life in Chicago and died in 2000, was the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her second published volume of verse, *Annie Allen*. In 1968, Ms. Brooks was named Illinois poet laureate, succeeding Carl Sandburg, and she served as poet laureate until her death.

Secretary of State and State Librarian Jesse White hosted the ceremony. Among the dignitaries honoring Ms. Brooks were Governor Rod Blagojevich; President Jones; Speaker Madigan; and State Representative Lovana Jones.

"Gwendolyn Brooks was a national treasure who enriched the lives of so many," said Secretary White. "We are proud and honored that she spent her life here in Illinois, much of it teaching and bringing poetry to our schools, hospitals and prisons. It is fitting that her name will be permanently attached

to the State Library - a public place for all to come to access knowledge and appreciate the contributions of such a gifted artist."

"Gwendolyn Brooks embodied all that poets can do for their communities," said Governor Blagojevich. "She said for us what we could not say for ourselves. Her poems are about what it's like living in Illinois' many diverse communities."

"Gwendolyn Brooks richly deserves a prominent place in the history books for masterfully articulating the struggles of the African-American community during the 20th century," said President Jones. "She was a passionate poet who illuminated the harsh realities of life on the streets of the south side of Chicago. Gwendolyn was a powerful voice for those of us who grew up in that environment and fought every day to escape poverty and prejudice. Her selection as the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize was an historic event, as was her selection to succeed the great Carl Sandburg as poet laureate for all of the citizens of Illinois. Gwendolyn Brooks was a giant of American literature whose words will resonate with readers for generations to come."

"Gwendolyn Brooks once described herself as 'a plain, ordinary person'. We beg to differ, and we honor her today because her mastery of the written word was stunning, and her life's works were nothing less than extraordinary," said Speaker Madigan. "Another giant of Illinois literature, Richard Wright, said Gwendolyn Brooks 'captured the pathos of petty destinies, the whimper of the wounded, the tiny incidents that plague the lives of the desperately poor, and the problems of common prejudice'. She said her first love was the city of Chicago, and Chicagoans are proud and honored to claim her as one of their own. Today, we forever attach her name to a building that represents all of Illinois, and which houses books representing her remarkable accomplishments as one of our state's greatest authors."

"The poems of Gwendolyn Brooks are some of the greatest works ever written about the trials and tribulations of African-Americans, particularly African-American women," said Representative Jones. "Many of the things she chronicled more than half a century ago in works such as A Street in Bronzeville and Annie Allen still plague our inner cities. But Gwendolyn Brooks also deserves to be remembered for her kindness and compassion, encouraging young black publishers, promoting and praising young authors, reading poems in schools and libraries and using her finances to create awards for student poets. Gwendolyn Brooks deserved all of the countless honors and awards that came her way

during her time on earth, and her greatness and stature is exemplified by the fact that we are still honoring her with ceremonies such as this one today."

The dedication ceremony also featured presentations by the Muntu Dance Theatre, the Chocolate Chips Theatre Company, the Abundant Faith Christian Center Choir of Springfield and a special tribute by Haki Madhubuti, Founder and Publisher of Third World Press and Founder and Director Emeritus of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center at Chicago State University. Allison Payne, anchor and reporter for WGN-TV Chicago, served as master of ceremonies.

Among her other life achievements, Ms. Brooks was awarded the prestigious Frost Medal and National Medal of Arts; was named a "Living Legend" by the Library of Congress; was named Jefferson Lecturer by the National Endowment for the Humanities; was awarded more than seventy-five honorary degrees from colleges and universities; received a lifetime achievement award from the National Endowment for the Arts; and a National Book Foundation Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. She established the Illinois Poet Laureate Awards in 1969 to encourage elementary and high school students to write. She married Henry L. Blakely in 1939, and together they had two children, Nora Brooks Blakely and Henry Blakely Jr.

Established in 1839, the Illinois State Library serves as the library for state government officials and employees and promotes and enhances library and literacy services throughout Illinois. A division of the Secretary of State's office, the Library provides annual financial support to more than 4,000 academic, school, public and special libraries that belong to twelve regional library systems. The Library maintains a collection of more than 5 million documents, with an emphasis on federal and state documents. The Library also maintains a patent and trademark depository, the second largest state library map collection in the United States, an extensive collection of works by Illinois authors, a literacy office and a Talking Book and Braille Service.