

At Hickory Hill (June 1968)

*John Q. Barrett**

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In late 1952, Justice Robert H. Jackson hired E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr., to be his sole law clerk at the Supreme Court of the United States. Prettyman then was a third year law student at the University of Virginia. He also was the son of Barrett, Sr., who Jackson had known since he arrived in Washington to join the Roosevelt administration in 1934.



October 30, 1951: Justice Robert H. Jackson (left), E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr. (right), and other law students, at the University of Virginia.

The senior Prettymans (Barrett, Sr. and his wife Lucy) and the Jacksons (Bob and his wife Irene) became friends. The men had much in common—they were lawyers, sometimes government lawyers, and in time

* Professor of Law, St. John's University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York (www.roberthjackson.org). I emailed an earlier version of this essay to The Jackson List on June 5, 2018.

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each became a federal judge, Jackson on the Supreme Court and Prettyman on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia.

“Young Barrett” Prettyman began his clerkship with Justice Jackson at the Supreme Court in July 1953. Prettyman did excellent work and Jackson liked his company—they got along pretty well. In early 1954, Jackson asked Prettyman to stay on for a second year and he accepted.

During Prettyman’s clerkship, he visited Jackson a number of times at his home, Hickory Hill, in McLean, Virginia. On some weekend occasions, Prettyman would deliver law books, legal briefs, and other materials to Jackson at home. When Prettyman arrived at Hickory Hill, he typically would find Jackson working in the screen porch off the kitchen. They would talk a bit, Prettyman would hand over his deliveries, and then he would leave Jackson to his work.



June 1952: Hickory Hill, McLean, Virginia.

Justice Jackson’s health failed during Prettyman’s clerkship. After a major heart attack in spring 1954, Jackson recovered enough to resume part-time work that summer. In the fall, only a week into the Court’s new term, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

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Barrett Prettyman thus was Justice Jackson's law clerk for a little over a year. In what would have been the remainder of Prettyman's second clerkship year with Jackson, Justice Felix Frankfurter and then Justice John M. Harlan, following his appointment as Jackson's successor, each employed Prettyman as a law clerk. He thus had the distinction of clerking for three Supreme Court justices during a two-year period.

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During his Jackson clerkship, Barrett Prettyman passed the District of Columbia bar examination and was admitted to law practice.

After some years in private practice, Prettyman became a special assistant to U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. As Attorney General, Kennedy was serving in the Cabinet office that had been Robert Jackson's during 1940-41.

Some years earlier, Robert Kennedy, his wife Ethel, and their growing family had become occupants of Bob and Irene Jackson's former home, Hickory Hill. It was Robert Kennedy's home, and famously so, for the rest of his life.

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On June 4, 1968, after winning California's Democratic presidential primary, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was shot at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Gravely wounded, he was taken to a hospital where doctors worked to save his life. It soon was clear that the prognosis was bleak.

Barrett Prettyman was in the Midwestern U.S. when he learned that Senator Kennedy had been shot. Prettyman contacted a colleague in Los Angeles and asked how he could help. He was told to join former astronaut John Glenn, a close Kennedy friend, and others at Hickory Hill, where they were caring for the younger Kennedy children and preparing for horrible news.

Prettyman arrived at Hickory Hill late on Wednesday, June 5, 1968. He talked to Glenn and others. Glenn announced that he was going upstairs to get some sleep, and that Prettyman should wake him when the call came from Los Angeles. Prettyman then wandered around the ground

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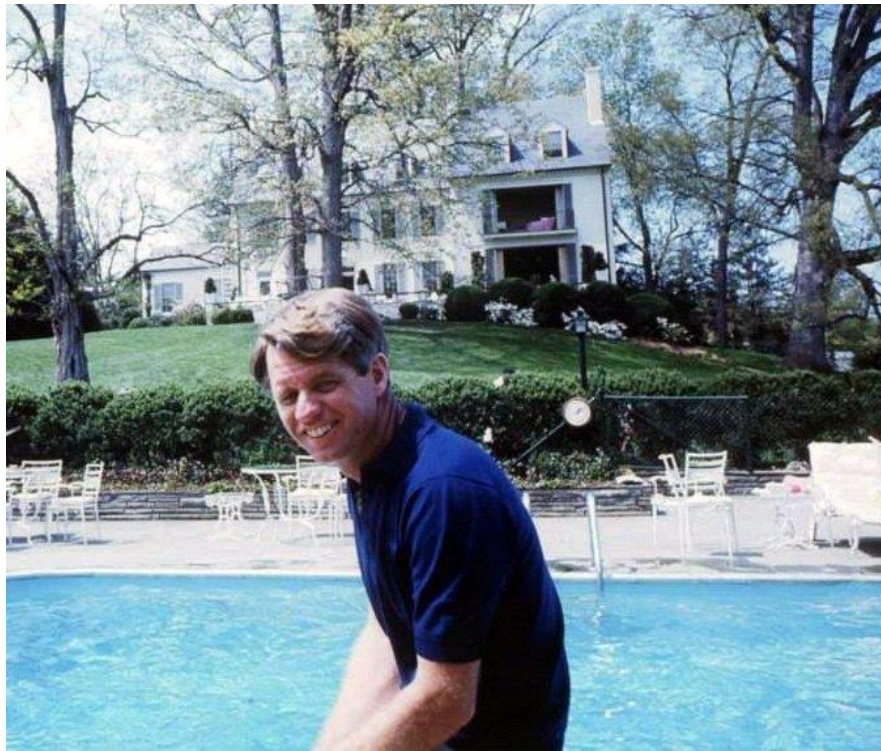
floor of the house. He walked back into the kitchen, turned right, looked out onto the screen porch, recalled happy visits to that place....

Prettyman lay down on the living room sofa and tried to sleep. It did not come. He was awake when the call came, sometime around midnight local time. He then went upstairs, woke John Glenn, and reported that Senator Kennedy was gone.

My friend Barrett Prettyman, who lived on after June 1968 for almost fifty years, shared these memories with me and others. One of his tellings, captured on video, is here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoInV58m7d0.

I saw Barrett choke up every time he recalled and tried to speak about the loss of Robert F. Kennedy. That is, still, the only proper reaction.



May 9, 1968: Senator Robert F. Kennedy at Hickory Hill