

By: Senator(s) Blount, Branning, Frazier,  
Hopson, Horhn, Michel, Norwood, Simmons  
(12th), Simmons (13th), Sparks, Thomas

To: Rules

SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 507

1 A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION MOURNING THE PASSING OF FORMER  
2 MISSISSIPPI FIRST LADY AND COMMUNITY ACTIVIST ELISE VARNER WINTER  
3 AND EXTENDING THE DEEPEST SYMPATHY AND CONDOLENCES OF THE  
4 LEGISLATURE.

5 WHEREAS, it is with sadness that we note the passing of Elise  
6 Varner Winter, the widow of Mississippi Governor William Winter,  
7 on July 17, 2021, in Jackson, at the age of 95; and

8 WHEREAS, Mrs. Winter was an active partner in her husband's  
9 administration, which set a new tone of inclusion and openness to  
10 change and brought about significant reforms in the state's  
11 educational system. Friends said her grace, intelligence and  
12 sense of duty were essential to the success of the administration;  
13 and

14 WHEREAS, throughout her husband's political career, she  
15 campaigned vigorously for his many successful campaigns for many  
16 elective offices in state government, including the Governorship  
17 in 1979. At that time, the Governor could serve only one term,  
18 and as First Lady, Mrs. Winter made a serious commitment to the  
19 people of Mississippi and to the Governor to help him accomplish



20 as many good things for their state as possible during those few  
21 years. It was a job that demanded her careful, thoughtful  
22 attention and unflagging energy every single day; and

23 WHEREAS, Mrs. Winter assumed her role as First Lady at a  
24 transitional time for women, when the roles of traditional  
25 homemaking and progressive feminism were pulling women in opposite  
26 directions, and she was a transitional First Lady. While  
27 possessing the charm and domestic talents of a traditional  
28 southern First "Lady of the House," she also demonstrated a modern  
29 woman's professional and purposeful approach to her job, and  
30 commanded the attention and respect of the Governor and his  
31 all-male staff; and

32 WHEREAS, she played a principal role in the Governor's  
33 efforts to reform the state's educational system. Along with  
34 Governor Winter and his senior aides, the First Lady led a  
35 statewide grassroots campaign to win the support of the public.  
36 She made hundreds of speeches, visited scores of classrooms, and  
37 explained the Governor's plans to thousands of people who attended  
38 nine forums held across the state. Though soft spoken and gentle,  
39 she would directly engage confrontational individuals when  
40 necessary to refute mistaken ideas; and

41 WHEREAS, in a special session, the Legislature overwhelmingly  
42 passed the historic 1982 Educational Reform Act, ensuring the  
43 state a system of kindergartens, compulsory attendance laws, and  
44 other improvements. Governor Winter always said that no one



45 worked harder for this achievement or experienced more joy in its  
46 passage than his wife; and

47 WHEREAS, to showcase the state's cultural achievements, Mrs.  
48 Winter coordinated an ambitious series of events, co-hosting with  
49 the Governor many accomplished Mississippians at the Governor's  
50 Mansion. These occasions featured artists, writers, and business  
51 and political leaders, including such luminaries as Eudora Welty,  
52 Leontyne Price, Walker Percy, Shelby Foote, Margaret Walker  
53 Alexander and Willie Morris; and

54 WHEREAS, in addition to excelling as the Governor's  
55 hostess-wife, she was a conscientious steward of the Governor's  
56 Mansion, designated as a national historic landmark. She  
57 collaborated with state officials and specialists to develop its  
58 collection of antique furnishings and decorative arts. Under her  
59 supervision, Friends of the Mansion was organized, and supporters  
60 contributed generously to acquire historic artifacts for the  
61 Mansion; and

62 WHEREAS, Mrs. Winter took special interest in the State  
63 Penitentiary inmates assigned to the Governor's Mansion on a work  
64 release program. She was committed to teaching them skills they  
65 could use later and was equally dedicated to helping them find  
66 jobs upon their release; and

67 WHEREAS, her compassion for the workers at the Mansion  
68 extended to the prisoners at the State Penitentiary at Parchman.  
69 Left behind are several material results of her work. Her concern



70 for incarcerated women in the overwhelmingly male prison led to  
71 the creation of a separate women's prison in Pearl, Mississippi.  
72 She was responsible for getting a visitors center built for  
73 Parchman inmates' families – finding the financing, planning, and  
74 working closely with the prison staff to have prisoners carry out  
75 the actual construction. These facilities, now expanded, are in  
76 use today; and

77 WHEREAS, like the Governor, Mrs. Winter brought to her  
78 position a deep appreciation for history. As First Lady, she kept  
79 a journal of her daily activities and reflections, intending the  
80 information only as a historical record. She was eventually  
81 persuaded to publish it in 2015. Her book, *Once in a Lifetime:  
82 Reflections of a Mississippi First Lady*, reveals the extraordinary  
83 volume and range of her own activities and puts a human face on  
84 the Winter's work; and

85 WHEREAS, after leaving government service, Elise Winter  
86 became an essential driving force in the mission of Habitat for  
87 Humanity in the Metro-Jackson area – as a founder, major  
88 fundraiser, life member of the board, and hands-on volunteer. She  
89 also served on the Habitat International Board. In 2012, the  
90 Jackson Habitat Chapter awarded her its first Founder's Award in  
91 appreciation for 25 years of service. "Habitat excites and  
92 inspires me in a way nothing else does," she has said. "To see  
93 people whose need is so great and to know that there's something  
94 you can do to help them – it touches your heart"; and



95           WHEREAS, Elise Winter was born May 9, 1926, to Mamie and  
96 William Elliot (John) Varner in Senatobia, Mississippi. Her  
97 father was the town Pharmacist and longtime Mayor of Senatobia,  
98 and her mother was his Bookkeeper and the strong guiding hand of  
99 Elise and her older siblings, Virginia and Joel. They lived with  
100 her maternal grandparents – three generations in a big, old house  
101 at the end of Main Street in Senatobia. After high school, she  
102 attended Northwest Junior College in her hometown and lived at  
103 home, transferring to Ole Miss as a junior; and

104           WHEREAS, at Ole Miss her brother introduced her to his  
105 roommate, William Winter from Grenada, a friendly young Veteran of  
106 World War II and law student. She completed a Bachelor's Degree  
107 in History, and at her mother's insistence earned a teaching  
108 certificate. As she began working toward a Master's degree,  
109 William won his first term in the State Legislature. They were  
110 married in 1950 and enjoyed an exciting first year of married life  
111 in Washington, D.C., where William worked in Mississippi Senator  
112 John Stennis' office. The following year, the couple returned to  
113 Mississippi and never left. William resumed his political career,  
114 and they built a family. Elise took the lead in bringing up their  
115 three daughters; and

116           WHEREAS, Mrs. Winter's death follows that of her husband by  
117 less than a year. She is survived by three daughters: Anne  
118 Winter, Lele Gillespie and Eleanor Winter; five grandchildren:



119 Dr. Winter Williams, Dr. Zach Williams, Ty Gillespie, Caroline  
120 Gillespie and Grace Gillespie; and five great-grandchildren; and

121 WHEREAS, words Mrs. Winter wrote in tribute to a deceased  
122 former Governor's Mansion inmate worker speak poignantly about her  
123 character: "[His service] made me realize again that social  
124 standing or economic status or sectarian creed or race does not  
125 make any difference in the sight of God – that we are his children  
126 and we must continue our miraculous journey together, learning to  
127 love one another as we go forward"; and

128 WHEREAS, we pay tribute and cherish fondly the memory of this  
129 most public-spirited citizen of Mississippi whose enormous civic  
130 energy and volunteer calling is a legacy of leadership and  
131 dedication to the state she loved:

132 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE STATE OF  
133 MISSISSIPPI, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING THEREIN, That  
134 we do hereby mourn the passing of former Mississippi First Lady  
135 and Community Activist Elise Varner Winter and extend the deepest  
136 sympathy and condolences of the Legislature.

137 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED That this resolution be presented to  
138 the surviving family of Elise Winter, forwarded to Habitat for  
139 Humanity Mississippi Capital Area and the Board of Trustees of the  
140 Mississippi Department of Archives and History and be made  
141 available to the Capitol Press Corps.

