

# Black History, Leaving a Legacy: Judge Constance Baker Motley

By Jessica Summers

Did you know, that the same person -

- Wrote the original complaint in *Brown v. Board of Education*,
- Was the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund's first female attorney,
- Was the first Black woman to serve in the New York State Senate,
- Was the first Black woman to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court, AND
- Was the first Black woman appointed to a federal judgeship?

Do you know her name?

**Constance Baker Motley** was born in 1921, one of twelve children of parents who immigrated to United States from the island of Nevis.

Inspired by the civil rights leaders of the time as well as her mother (who was a community activist and founder of the New Haven NAACP), Judge Motley knew from an early age that she wanted to be a lawyer. However, at the time she graduated high school Judge Motley couldn't immediately afford to go to college so she went to work. Shortly thereafter, Judge Motley gave a speech at a local community center that so impressed the sponsor of the center that he offered to finance her college education. Judge Motley graduated from New York University in 1943. After spending a year working at a wartime agency, she enrolled in Columbia Law School. During her time at Columbia, Judge Motley met Thurgood Marshall, who was then serving as the NAACP's legal director, and he offered her a job as a law clerk. When Judge Motley graduated law school she became the NAACP's first female attorney, ultimately rising to the position of Associate Counsel.

During her 16 years with the NAACP, Judge Motley played a critical role in shaping the organization's legal strategy and was on the frontlines of the fight for desegregation. Despite the threats and dangers, Judge Motley proved herself to be a tireless and skilled attorney traveling throughout the south to advocate on behalf of students, activists and even Martin Luther King, Jr. She was the only female attorney on the NAACP's *Brown v. Board of Education* legal team and prevailed in nine out of the ten cases she argued before the U.S. Supreme Court

In 1964, Judge Motley left the NAACP and was elected to the New York State Senate – the first Black woman to serve in that body. Two years later, President Johnson appointed her to the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. Judge Motley's confirmation was stalled by Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, who opposed Judge Motley's civil rights background. After a delay of seven months, Senator Eastland's efforts were thwarted and Judge Motley was confirmed, becoming the first Black female federal judge. During her time on the bench, Judge Motley presided over a number of notable cases, including the case of *Ludtke v. Kuhn*, in which she ruled that female sports reporters must be permitted access to MLB locker rooms. Judge Motley served as the Chief Judge of the Southern District from 1982 to 1986. She then took senior judge status and remained a senior judge on the court until her death in 2005.

Particularly for those of us in the legal profession, Judge Motley's life and legacy serves as an inspiring reminder of how the dedication and advocacy of one unsung hero can change the trajectory of our society.

Want to know more about Constance Baker Motley?

- Read her 1999 autobiography *Equal Justice Under the Law*

- Watch the short documentary The Trials of Constance Baker Motley – which the NAACP has made available for public streaming at - [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=2797261337178062](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2797261337178062)