



# A Tribute to Firsts

## Black Female Lawyers in Michigan

By Jehan Crump-Gibson

**I**nsidious racism and sexism have plagued black female lawyers since the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Those practicing today walk a path paved for them by many “firsts.” To truly appreciate the resolve and tenacity of this fearless group of leaders, let us pause and look back.

In 1872, Charlotte E. Ray became the first black woman admitted to practice law in the United States after graduating from Howard University School of Law.<sup>2</sup> Despite her legal acumen, Ray was unable to attract black or white clients, so she ultimately gave up law practice and returned to a career in teaching.<sup>3</sup>

It was not until nearly 50 years later that black women entered the legal profession in Michigan. In 1923, Grace Costavas Murphy became Michigan’s first black female lawyer admitted to practice.<sup>4</sup> While Murphy was first in a long line of pioneers, Michigan did not see a substantial surge of black female lawyers until the late 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their legal educations, these women faced tremendous professional obstacles because of their race and gender. Jeanne Cole-Harbour, who passed the Michigan bar exam in 1941, told a horrific story about the response she received when she contacted her congressman regarding a legal job with the federal government: “He wrote back that there were

no jobs for women lawyers, and he also enclosed a copy of a cookbook.”<sup>6</sup>

In the face of pervasive racial and gender discrimination, black female lawyers in Michigan nevertheless broke down barriers in private practice, government, and on the bench. They have been integral in shaping the legal landscape in a culture where they were generally undervalued and often unwelcome.

Continuing the string of firsts, Geraldine Bledsoe Ford was elected to the Detroit Recorder’s Court in 1966, becoming the first black woman elected judge in the United States. She was also the first black female to serve as a U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan.<sup>7</sup>



Lucille Watts was the first black woman elected judge of the Wayne County Circuit Court in 1980.<sup>8</sup> Watts’s ascension to the bench followed a career in activism. In a 2016 interview by Giancarlo Stefanutti and Hannah Sabal, she recalled her involvement with the events of the July 1967 rebellion in Detroit:

I realized that I had an obligation to do something more than stay home with my head covered up... so basically I joined

### 1972

Mary Stallings Coleman becomes the first female Michigan Supreme Court justice

### 1973

Judge Theresa Doss is elected first African-American president of WLAM

### 1976

Dorothy Comstock Riley becomes the first woman to sit on the Michigan Court of Appeals

with other black lawyers in the community to try to get folks out of jail because they were picking up black men in the street for reasons and no reasons.<sup>9</sup>

Watts also described the emblematic landscape of the legal profession at the time, saying, “[W]hen I went to law school, there wasn’t a whole lot of women going to law school. In fact, there were only two at DCL in the daytime when I was there. One of them washed out.”<sup>10</sup>

Black women in America have experienced the constant struggle to reconcile their identities as black *and* female in a patriarchal society. This struggle is intensified in the legal profession. Nevertheless, black female lawyers were relentless in serving their clients, the community, and the law.



Anna Diggs Taylor was the first black woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan.<sup>11</sup> She served as chief judge in 1997, ultimately paving the way for current Chief Judge Denise Page Hood.<sup>12</sup>

In 2002, Karen Fort Hood was the first black woman elected to the Michigan Court of Appeals; Judge Hood currently serves on that bench along with another black female, Cynthia Diane Stephens.<sup>13</sup>

Black female lawyers in leadership roles were not confined to the bench. Victoria A. Roberts of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan served as the first black female president of the State Bar of Michigan in 1996–1997.<sup>14</sup>

Although today’s black female lawyers have opportunities that were virtually unthinkable when Charlotte E. Ray entered the profession, much work remains to address the underrepresentation of black female lawyers in equity and leadership positions in law firms and corporations.

At a 2014 book signing held by the Wolverine Bar Association, the revered Damon J. Keith told the audience that we were walking through doors we did not open, and on floors we did not scrub. He reminded us to scrub floors and open doors for those behind us.<sup>15</sup> Following this direction, the charge to future generations of black female lawyers is clear. ■

## 1979

Justice Mary Stallings Coleman is named first female chief justice of the Michigan Supreme Court

Anna Diggs Taylor is the first African-American woman appointed to a federal judgeship in Michigan (Eastern District)

## At a Glance

Geraldine Bledsoe Ford was elected to the Detroit Recorder’s Court in 1966, becoming the first black woman elected judge in the United States. She was also the first black female to serve as a U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan.

Anna Diggs Taylor was the first black woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. She served as chief judge in 1997, ultimately paving the way for current Chief Judge Denise Page Hood.



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## ENDNOTES

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5. *Black Lawyers, Law Practice*, p 1673.
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11. US District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, *Judge Anna Diggs Taylor, 1932–2017* <<https://www.mied.uscourts.gov/PDFFiles/ADT.pdf>>.
12. Lee, *Local judge to receive major honor*, Atlanta Daily World (January 2016) <<https://atlantadailyworld.com/2016/01/26/local-judge-to-receive-major-honor/>>.
13. Michigan Courts, *Current Judges, First District Judges* <<http://courts.mi.gov/courts/coa/judges/pages/biosd1.aspx>>.
14. US District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, *Judge Victoria A. Roberts* <<https://www.mied.uscourts.gov/index.cfm?pagefunction=chambers&judgeid=19>>.
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## 1982

Martha W. Griffiths is the first woman elected lieutenant governor of Michigan

## 1985

Justice Dorothy Comstock Riley becomes the first Latina elected to a state supreme court