

Michigan Lawyers in History

Jessie Pharr Slaton

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

On January 1, 1979, as the Lansing area recovered from an ice storm, Governor William G. Milliken was sworn in for his third term by Judge Jessie P. Slaton.¹ Attendance was “below expectations,” perhaps due to the weather or perhaps because Slaton was not a traditional state Supreme Court justice.² People noticed that sort of thing.

Jessie Belle Pharr was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 27, 1908. Her father, Enus Paul Pharr, worked as a laborer at the freight depot and her mother, Mabel Freeman, took in laundry.³ The family also rented rooms to boarders to make ends meet. In 1917, when Jessie was eight, the family recognized that the South might not offer the best opportunities for their daughter, so they moved to Detroit.⁴ Enus found work in the auto industry and Mabel worked from their home, which was large enough to host more than six renters.⁵ Best of all, Jessie obtained an excellent education.

After high school, Jessie was admitted to the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago as the school’s first African-American female student. And, as would so often happen in her life, people took notice of her abilities: her peers elected her class president, and the following year, school leaders “recommended [her] for a

scholarship to the University of Chicago,” the only one of her class so honored.⁶ Attending the prestigious school would have opened a number of doors for her, but outside forces intervened; Jessie returned home to be with her mother after her father died prematurely at age 47 in the summer of 1933.

Jessie settled in Detroit once again, working as an office assistant at the YMCA⁷ and a local church. Eventually, she was hired to be a secretary at Detroit City Hall—the first African-American woman in that role.⁸ Unfortunately, people focused on the color of her skin and not her qualifications or performance. But that had never stopped Jessie before.⁹ She worked hard, and people noticed.

Around that same time, Jessie married George Slaton. A city employee and the director of boxing at Central Community Center,¹⁰ George was involved in the early training of eventual world heavyweight champion Joe Louis.¹¹ George’s reputation in the boxing world made what happened in 1935 particularly irksome. Jessie and two companions were noticed at a boxing match and, despite purchasing reserved seats, were told to sit in the assigned Negro seats.¹² The three refused and were removed from the event. The NAACP took note of the incident and shortly after, gained the assurance that the promoter

would “never permit such race discrimination at future boxing shows.”¹³

It wasn’t Jessie’s last interaction with civil rights matters. Seven years later, she was back in the news, this time for protesting the Sojourner Truth Housing Project matter. During the onset of World War II, the federal government approved the 200-unit housing project for African-American defense workers, but white neighbors opposed it. Much like at the boxing match, critics of the project argued that there were assigned Negro neighborhoods.¹⁴

Workers protested and demonstrated for the right to move into the housing project that had been planned for them,¹⁵ and the white residents fought to keep them from moving in. On April 12, 1942, “three thousand Negroes rallied in Cadillac Square . . . to pay homage to their emancipation idol, Sojourner Truth, and demand occupancy of the housing project named in her honor,” while Jessie “laid a wreath on the Soldiers and Sailors Monument at the entrance of the square.”¹⁶ The Michigan National Guard was eventually mobilized to allow the tenants to move in. Jessie, meanwhile, decided to go to law school.¹⁷

In six years, Jessie had earned three degrees: a bachelor’s in education in 1944, a master’s degree in 1946, and finally, her law degree—all while working as a special education instructor at Norvell



William G. Milliken Papers, 1961–1982 Photographs, Box 1451, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

Judge Jessie P. Slaton (back to the camera) swearing in Governor William G. Milliken on January 1, 1979. Although a photo showing Judge Slaton's face wasn't available for publication, the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society includes a head shot and brief bio at <http://www.micourthistory.org/women-and-the-law/jessie-pharr-slaton>.

Elementary School and serving on Detroit's "Board of Education list for psychological clinic and remedial reading and tutoring."¹⁸ It was a full schedule, and she managed it well.

People noticed. Some of Jessie's former City Hall colleagues remembered the extremely qualified secretary who was gaining a reputation as an excellent attorney.¹⁹ Mayor Albert Cobo—a former city treasurer—appointed Jessie to the City Planning Commission, where she worked for seven years.²⁰ Given Cobo's reputation and the ongoing racial redlining of Detroit neighborhoods, this was a remarkable appointment.

Jessie later ran for political office, though not entirely successfully. She ran for Wayne County probate judge,²¹ Detroit City Common Council,²² and the United States Congress.²³ In some cases, she was the only woman running or the only African American on the ballot.²⁴ She was heralded as the "matriarch of the city" and generally considered the best-educated candidate.²⁵

She was endorsed by local newspapers impressed with the "outstandingly qualified woman."²⁶ She was "one of the best-known women attorneys in Detroit," if not the state, by then.

Eventually, Jessie was appointed referee in the Detroit Traffic Court, the first woman to hold that position.²⁷ People still tended to focus on things other than her excellent service and intelligence. There was the time she dressed up as Santa Claus and played Christmas music on December 23 in her courtroom. The chief judge put a stop to that, but not before Jessie garnered some national press.²⁸

Finally, in 1978, she was appointed to the "Wayne County Common Pleas Court by [Governor] Milliken."²⁹ Shortly after, she was given the honor of swearing in the governor for the term that would make him Michigan's longest-serving executive.

When Slaton retired from the bench, she was appointed "Chairman of the State's Crime Victims Compensation Board."³⁰ It was the job she held until September 1, 1983, when she died as a passenger on Korean Airlines Flight No. 007 after it was shot down by a Soviet missile; there were no survivors.³¹

Jessie Pharr Slaton was remembered as "an attorney at a time when it was pretty tough for women and even tougher for black women."³² She was inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in 1984. ■

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ENDNOTES

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