

# Saluting Our History



Rob Buchanan

**N**early a century ago, historian Carter G. Woodson had a grand vision—*celebrate the central role of Black Americans in U.S. history*. He chose February for the annual salute because it included the birthdays of both President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Since its start in 1926, Woodson's vision has grown into what we now know as Black History Month. It took exactly a half century to embed the vision in our national discourse, when in 1976, a Grand Rapids attorney who moved to Washington, D.C.—President Gerald Ford—officially established our nation's observance of Black History Month.

Each year, Black History Month has a different theme, many of which highlight the contributions of Black Americans to various fields: education, business, architecture, engineering, innovation, and pioneering, among others. Unless I'm mistaken, our incredible profession of the law hasn't yet been selected. Any attempt to remedy that within these pages will, of course, fall short. So instead, I'd like to tell you about just a few trailblazing attorneys from our state's history. We know woefully little about

---

The views expressed in the President's Page, as well as other expressions of opinions published in the *Bar Journal* from time to time, do not necessarily state or reflect the official position of the State Bar of Michigan, nor does their publication constitute an endorsement of the views expressed. They are the opinions of the authors and are intended not to end discussion, but to stimulate thought about significant issues affecting the legal profession, the making of laws, and the adjudication of disputes.

---

them, but the failure of history to capture and value their stories should not prevent us from recognizing—and marveling at—their accomplishments.

**John C. McLeod—Michigan's first Black attorney.**<sup>1</sup> In 1870, just five years after the Civil War, McLeod was an attorney in a trial in which every member of the jury was Black. At the time, the *Detroit Free Press* reported the trial as a first and “of extraordinary interest.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Black people weren't acknowledged in books and teachings of American history and the details of McLeod's life have faded. Five decades later, Carter Woodson started the initiative to help remedy the problem.

**Oscar W. Baker—First entering a courtroom as an injured little boy, as an attorney he treated others the way they wanted to be treated.** In 1886, Baker was struck by a train when he was just seven years old; doctors expected him to die from the injuries.<sup>3</sup> He lost a leg and eventually prevailed in a negligence lawsuit appealed all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup> The issue on appeal concerned damages, specifically, “how much worse off in dollars and cents” is the child's father after losing his young son's labor?<sup>5</sup> Likely inspired by the experience, Baker earned his law

degree from the University of Michigan in 1902. He opened his office in his hometown of Bay City and became one of Michigan's best-known attorneys, revered for his ability and integrity.<sup>6</sup> He practiced law for 50 years. While practicing law, Baker volunteered his talents to state and local organizations and earned at least two gubernatorial appointments. His most prominent appointment was president of the Freedmen's Progress Commission in 1915 as it celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. He also served on Michigan's advisory commission on civil rights.<sup>7</sup>



Oscar W. Baker

We know woefully little about them, but the failure of history to capture and value their stories should not prevent us from recognizing—and marveling at—their accomplishments.

## Get Involved! Join SBM for a Conversation About Race and Justice

Michigan attorneys and other stakeholders in the justice system are invited to the next (virtual) meeting of SBM's Race and Justice Forum on Thursday, March 25 at 1 p.m. The forum, which launched in July 2020 amid a nationwide reckoning with racial injustice, offers a way for attorneys to share and learn about resources for improving the justice system for all. Quarterly gatherings of the Race and Justice Forum are designed to bring together interested parties and stimulate conversation, advance knowledge, foster understanding of different perspectives, brainstorm solutions, and showcase opportunities to learn or help. To register, please email Michelle Erskine at [merskine@michbar.org](mailto:merskine@michbar.org).

Social justice is the focus of former SBM President Jennifer Grieco's Black Law Matters podcast, where she is joined by guests from Michigan's legal community. Find it at <https://www.peaklawmovement.org/podcast>.

**Walter H. Stowers—A successful journalist and newspaper entrepreneur who changed careers midstream to become a top attorney.** Stowers started his career as a writer and for a decade, he succeeded as a journalist and political activist, wrote a novel, and co-founded *The Plaindealer*, Detroit's first successful Black newspaper, published from 1883 to 1894.<sup>8</sup> Stowers then switched careers, graduating from the Detroit College of Law in 1895 and founding one of the best-known firms in Michigan with partner Robert C. Barnes.<sup>9</sup> He also held prominent positions in Wayne County, including deputy sheriff and deputy county clerk.<sup>10</sup> Stowers accomplished more in three vocations (journalism, law, and politics) than most people do in one.

**Grace G. Costavas Murphy—Michigan's first Black female attorney.** Murphy graduated in 1923 from the Detroit College of Law. Unfortunately, the significance of her achievement wasn't appreciated during her life, so we know little else about her.<sup>11</sup> Both my grandfather, William "Bill" D. Buchanan, and his older brother, G. Cameron Buchanan, graduated from the Detroit College of Law in the 1920s, just like Murphy. I wonder if they ever crossed paths and, if they did, whether my relatives knew the historic significance of Murphy's accomplishments.

Though the history books have largely failed people like Murphy and McLeod, there are certainly lessons we can learn here. For example, the importance of recognizing and celebrating our colleagues today—because even in 2021, there is still history to be made. Just last month, the Michigan Judicial Tenure Commission elected Judge Karen Fort Hood its chairperson, making her the first Black woman to lead the commission. Similarly, in August, former State Bar of Michigan President Reginald "Reggie" Turner will take the reins of the American Bar Association, the largest legal association in the world, as its 145th president, but only its fourth president of color. Nearly two decades ago in 2003, Dennis W. Archer, another former SBM president, made history as the ABA's first Black president.

Acknowledging the contributions and experiences of Black Americans cannot be confined to a single month. As president, I invite you to join the State Bar of Michigan in its ongoing work to promote dialogue about inequities in our justice system—inequities that largely affect Black people—and work toward solutions. ■

**Author's note:** *This column highlighted just a few examples of Black attorneys with a central role in Michigan's rich history. For a richer appreciation, I recommend you*

*read the publications mentioned in the footnotes, notably Michigan Manual of Freedman's Progress published during Oscar Baker's presidency; the June 1985 Michigan Bar Journal; Ed Littlejohn's article "African-American Lawyers in Nineteenth Century Michigan" and his book, "Black Lawyers, Law Practice, and Bar Associations—1844 to 1970: A Michigan History"; the May 2015 Michigan Bar Journal; and the December 2017 Michigan Bar Journal.*

*Thank you to Carrie Sharlow of the State Bar of Michigan for her guidance and excellent research.*

## ENDNOTES

- Wayne Law Professor Edward J. Littlejohn, "African-American Lawyers in Nineteenth Century Michigan," 73 Mich B J (March 1994), p 292.
- The Law's Equality: The First Colored Jury in Michigan*, Detroit Free Press (April 6, 1870), p 1.
- Two Accidents Reported—One Probably Fatal*, Detroit Free Press (November 6, 1886), p 4. And *Verdict for \$1,500: In Favor of James H. Baker for Injuries Received by His Son*, Saginaw News (July 9, 1890), p 7.
- See *Baker v. Flint & PMR Co* (91 Mich 298).
- See *Baker v. Flint & PMR Co* (91 Mich 298).
- Well Known Negro Lawyers Dies at 73*, Battle Creek Enquirer (December 18, 1952), p 7.
- See Warren, "Afro-Americans Engaged in Professional Pursuits," *Michigan Manual of Freedman's Progress* (Authorized By Act 47, Public Acts 1915), p 45. And *Well Known Negro Lawyers Dies at 73*, Battle Creek Enquirer (December 18, 1952), p 7.
- Littlejohn, *African-American Lawyers in Nineteenth Century Michigan*, 73 Mich B J (March 1994), p 295. Wright, *Plaindealer Legacy Now on the Record*, Detroit Free Press (October 16, 2020), p A4. And *Well Known Negro Lawyers Dies at 73*, Battle Creek Enquirer (December 18, 1952), p 7.
- See Warren, "Afro-Americans Engaged in Professional Pursuits," *Michigan Manual of Freedman's Progress* (Authorized By Act 47, Public Acts 1915), p 47.
- See Warren, "Afro-Americans Engaged in Professional Pursuits," *Michigan Manual of Freedman's Progress* (Authorized By Act 47, Public Acts 1915), p 49.
- Kristina Bilowus & Nicole Smithson, *A Trailblazing Journey: From Sarah Kilgore Wertman to Today*, 97 Mich B J 25 (May 2018).