



**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402**

CONSTANCE BAKER MOTLEY – A LAWYER’S LAWYER

February is Black History Month. It is designed to honor and recognize “the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans,” as stated by President Gerald Ford in 1976. We devote this article to one such Black American’s accomplishments.

“When I was 15, I decided I wanted to be a lawyer. No one thought this was a good idea.” So said Constance Baker Motley, who went on to become a veritable giant in the law. She wrote the original complaint in the monumental Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. She litigated the case that resulted in the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi. She was the first Black woman to argue a case before the United States Supreme Court, ultimately arguing ten such cases and winning nine of them. She was the first Black woman appointed to the federal bench. Her amazing career proved wrong all those who thought her desire to become a lawyer a mistake.

Motley was born on September 14, 1921, in New Haven, Connecticut, to working-class parents who had immigrated from Nevis in the British West Indies. Neither of her parents had advanced past a secondary education. Despite her humble roots, she excelled academically in New Haven. Doubts about her desire to become a lawyer thus did not arise from her intellect, but rather from her race and gender. She graduated with honors from high school but did not have the financial means to enter college. Fortuitously, she so impressed a New Haven businessman and philanthropist who heard her speaking at a community center that he offered to finance her education.

She enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, but only attended for one year. Her stint travelling to and living in Nashville exposed her to the racism and segregation prevalent in the South. She described her experience with racism and Jim Crow laws in her memoir. On reaching Cincinnati during her travel to Fisk, she was ordered to leave the train car in which she had traveled from New Haven and enter an aging, rusty car marked “COLORED.” She wrote of the experience: “Although I had known this would happen, I was both frightened and humiliated. All I knew for sure was that I could do nothing about this new reality.” After beginning her studies at Fisk, she transferred to a school closer to home, New York University (“NYU”). Three years later, in 1943, she graduated from NYU with a degree in economics. From NYU she went to Columbia Law School, where she received her law degree in 1946.

While in law school, Motley met Thurgood Marshall, who was then general counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“NAACP”) Legal Defense and Education Fund (“LDF”). Marshall hired her to work as a law clerk for the LDF before she had completed her legal education, and she became the LDF’s only female associate attorney after her graduation.

During her two decades at the LDF, Motley was instrumental in some of the crucial cases facing the nation, executing the LDF’s legal strategy attacking the separate-but-equal doctrine. She worked with and represented some of the most important civil rights figures of the century. In 1950, she wrote the original complaint in *Brown v. Board of Education*. She represented the Little Rock Nine and Freedom Riders. She represented the Birmingham Children Marchers, overturning their wrongful expulsion from school for engaging in nonviolent demonstrations. She represented Martin Luther King for the first time when he was incarcerated in Albany, Georgia, in 1962. She stayed in the family home of NAACP Mississippi field secretary/director Medgar Evers while he was under armed guard due to threats against his life.



Motley with James Meredith, right, and an unidentified colleague in 1962. Four years later, she became the nation’s first Black female federal judge. Getty Images

Most famously, Motley represented James Meredith throughout his efforts to integrate and attend the University of Mississippi, from the district court all the way to the Supreme Court. Both the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit and the Supreme Court ruled in her favor and ordered the University to admit Meredith.

Motley once explained that the LDF gave her difficult cases in the South because Marshall believed that only a woman would be safe there. She commented, “I don’t know how he’s got that figured. But, so far, I’ve never been subjected to any violence.” She did, however, have to contend with rudeness, condescension, and hostility from white male lawyers and judges time and again, while responding with poise and professionalism.

Motley was thus one of the crucial players in the LDF’s legal attack on *de jure* segregation. Her litigation helped to desegregate Southern buses, restaurants, and schools—including in Tennessee, where she first attended college.

In recognition of her outstanding legal experience and abilities, President Lyndon B. Johnson nominated Motley for a United States District Court seat in New York on January 26, 1966. She faced opposition and delay in the Senate from Southern segregationists, but upon her confirmation seven months later, she became the first Black female United States judge. She later served as chief judge of the Southern District of New York. She was known for mentoring numerous female lawyers and judges during her time on the bench.

This remarkable “lawyer’s lawyer” died in New York City on September 28, 2005.

Curtis L. Collier
United States District Judge
Chair, Eastern District of Tennessee Civics and Outreach Committee

Carrie Brown Stefaniak
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier
Past President, Chattanooga Chapter of the Federal Bar Association

Karen L. Sheng
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier