



DIVERSITY in the Legal Profession

History Part 2: Louisiana African-American Lawyers from 1950 Forward

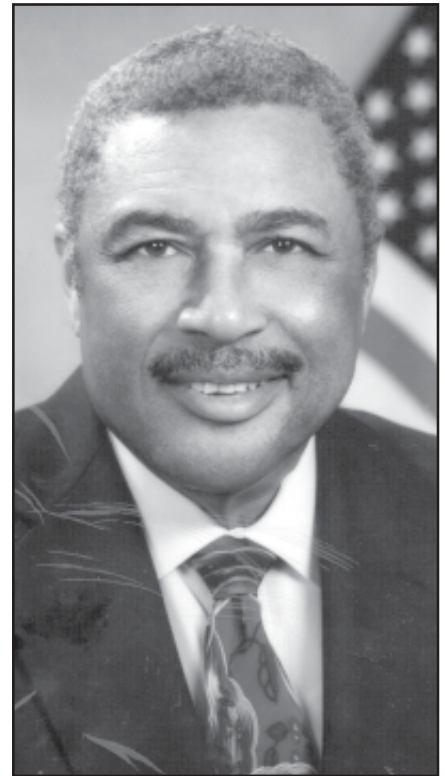
By Darrel J. Papillion

The history of Louisiana African-American lawyers from 1950 forward is one of struggle, survival and success. It is impossible to name here all of the outstanding African-American lawyers who have served the cause of civil rights, who bettered their communities, who became leaders and mentors, and who served and continue to serve as judges on every level in our court system. This article, however, will give an overview of some of the many African-American lawyers who paved the way.

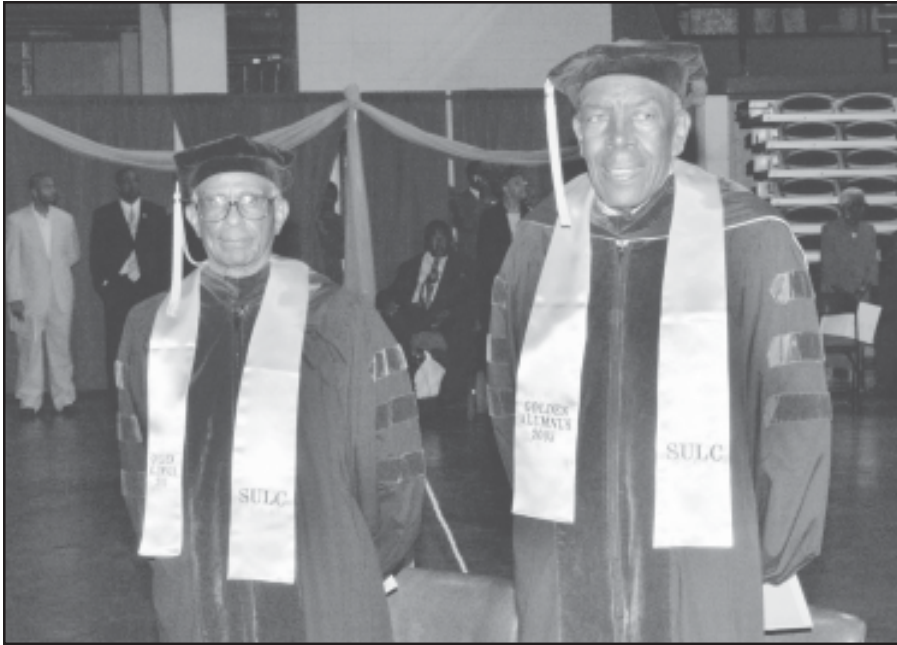
The 1950s

Southern University, established in 1947 to educate black lawyers, graduated its first law school class in 1950. This all-black class formed the nucleus of what would become Louisiana's modern African-American bar. Among the 1950 graduates was Jesse N. Stone, Jr. who would become the first African-American to practice law in Shreveport in 50 years, an *ad hoc* justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court and president of the Southern University System.

Meanwhile, in 1952, James Sharp, Jr., a graduate of Lincoln University in Missouri, who had studied Louisiana law at Southern, established a practice in Monroe where he handled a variety of important civil rights cases and served the legal needs of citizens of Northeast Louisiana for many years. Today, the Monroe City Court building is named in James Sharp's honor, and his sons, Carl V. Sharp and Alvin R. Sharp, are judges on the 4th Judicial District Court bench.



Dr. Jesse N. Stone, Jr.



Johnnie A. Jones, Sr. and Leroy White at the Southern University Law Center Golden Alumni ceremony. Photo by John H. Williams.

Beginning in 1952, Richard B. Millspaugh established a practice in Opelousas, and he, along with Marion Overton White and a handful of others, would serve the legal needs of clients in Acadiana during the civil rights era and beyond.

Over the past 50 years, Baton Rouge has been home to a large African-American bar, due mainly to the influx of students and faculty of the law school at Southern. Johnnie A. Jones, Bruce Bell and Murphy Bell were among the first black lawyers in Baton Rouge to represent litigants in civil rights and criminal cases. Jones, who continues to practice law in Baton Rouge at age 85, would play an instrumental role as legal counsel for the Baton Rouge bus boycott in 1953 and would represent scores of litigants in civil rights and important criminal cases in Baton Rouge and its environs for more than 50 years.

Louisiana State University's law center was desegregated in 1950 when Roy S. Wilson was admitted to LSU law school as a result of a federal court order.¹ While Wilson would not graduate from the LSU law school, Ernest N. Morial, who would later become Louisiana's first African-American legislator since Reconstruc-

tion, its first African-American appellate court judge as well as the first African-American mayor of New Orleans, was one of two African-American men to graduate from Louisiana State University's law school in 1954.

Norman C. Francis, who would eventually become president of Xavier University of Louisiana, graduated from Loyola University Law School in 1955.

No discussion of the 1950s, 1960s or early 1970s would be complete without a mention of the groundbreaking work of A.P. Tureaud; a discussion of his contributions is contained in the article "Black Lawyers in Louisiana Prior to 1950" by Rachel L. Emanuel (beginning on page 104 of this issue).

The 1960s

By the end of the 1960s, because of desegregation lawsuits and other efforts aimed at securing access to legal education for blacks in Louisiana, African-Americans had graduated from all three of Louisiana's predominantly white law schools.

Bernette Joshua Johnson, who would eventually become the first African-

American woman elected to the Louisiana Supreme Court, and Gammie Gray Poindexter, who would go on to have a distinguished career as a lawyer and judge in Virginia, became LSU's first female African-American graduates in 1969.

Michael A. Starks became the first African-American to graduate from Tulane Law School in 1969.

The 1970s and 1980s

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the number of African-American lawyers graduating from Louisiana law schools, and those arriving from other out-of-state law schools, dramatically increased. Yet, although the increase was dramatic, it must be remembered that the pace since the 1950s had been extremely slow. While, on a percentage basis, the increase was large, on a numerical basis, there were still few African-American lawyers practicing in the state, and almost everyone in that tiny group knew one another.

Janice Martin Foster, who is enjoying her 35th year of practice at Jones, Walker in New Orleans, became the first African-American female to graduate from Tulane Law School in 1970. Foster also was the first African-American member of the *Tulane Law Review* and the first African-American member of Tulane's



Louisiana Supreme Court Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson

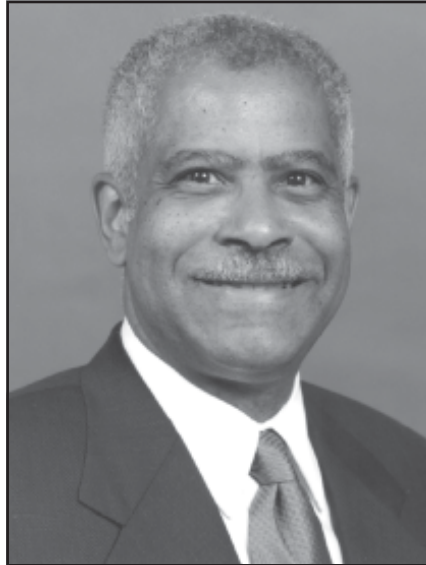
Order of the Coif. Wayne J. Lee, who would become the first African-American president of the Louisiana State Bar Association, and who graduated from Tulane Law School in 1974, would also serve as another early black member of the *Tulane Law Review*.

In the 1970s, William J. Jefferson, who would serve with distinction as a state senator before becoming a U.S. congressman, graduated from Harvard Law School and became one of the first African-American law clerks for a Louisiana federal judge.

African-American Judges in Louisiana

Prior to the early 1990s, hardly any blacks had entered the ranks of Louisiana's judiciary. Isreal Meyer Augustine, Jr., who would later serve as an appellate court judge, became the first African-American district judge in Louisiana's modern era when he was elected as a judge of the Criminal District Court in 1970. In 1972, Ernest N. Morial was the first African-American elected to a Louisiana appellate court. As late as 1988, only a handful of African-Americans served as judges in Louisiana state courts. It was not until Louisiana's system of electing judges changed, as a result of a series of lawsuits brought in the late 1980s and resolved in the early 1990s, that blacks were elected *en masse* to the Louisiana judiciary.²

Before the advances of the early



Wayne J. Lee

1990s, Carl E. Stewart had served as a state district judge in Caddo Parish. Lionel Collins and Paul Lynch had been elected as district court judges in Jefferson Parish. Freddie Pitcher, Jr., who would go on to serve as a judge of the Louisiana 1st Circuit Court of Appeal, as a partner of the Phelps Dunbar firm and as chancellor of Southern University Law Center, had been elected as a district court judge in Baton Rouge, while Revius O. Ortique, Jr., Bernette Joshua Johnson and Yada T. McGee served as judges in the Orleans Parish Civil District Court.

At the dawn of the 21st century, African-Americans have served at every level of Louisiana's judiciary. Revius O. Ortique, Jr., a 1956 graduate of Southern



Freddie Pitcher, Jr.

University Law Center and an active member of the legal profession and in civic affairs in New Orleans before becoming a Civil District Court judge, became the first African-American man to serve on the Louisiana Supreme Court when he was elected to that court in 1992. Felicia Toney Williams, a judge of Louisiana's 2nd Circuit Court of Appeal, who served by appointment in the mid-1990s, became the first African-American woman on the Louisiana Supreme Court. Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson, one of the first African-American women to graduate from the LSU Law Center, was the first African-American female elected to the Louisiana Supreme Court, where she serves today.

In the past 15 years, a number of African-Americans have been elected to Louisiana's intermediate courts of appeal. Freddie Pitcher, Jr. and John Michael Guidry have served on the 1st Circuit. Felicia Toney Williams, Carl E. Stewart and James Edward Stewart, Jr. have served on the 2nd Circuit. Sylvia R. Cooks of Lafayette and Ulyses Gene Thibodeaux of Lake Charles have served on the 3rd Circuit. Among those to have served on the 4th Circuit in recent years include Joan Bernard Armstrong, Charles Robert Jones, Dennis R. Bagneris, Sr., Terri F. Love and Edwin A. Lombard.

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Justice Revius O. Ortique, Jr. (Ret.)

Although the list of African-American judges serving on district court, criminal court, family court, and traffic, parish and municipal courts is far too lengthy to include in an article of this scope, that fact is itself a tribute to the advances made by African-Americans in securing

these positions over the past 15 years.

Beginning in 1978, with President Jimmy Carter's appointment of Robert F. Collins to the federal bench, African-Americans began serving on the federal bench in Louisiana. President Bill Clinton appointed Okla Jones II and Ivan L.R. Lemelle of New Orleans and Ralph E. Tyson of Baton Rouge to the federal district court bench during his presidency and appointed Carl E. Stewart of Shreveport to the United States 5th Circuit.

Conclusion

The history of the contributions of African-American lawyers to Louisiana society, the Bar and the judiciary is continuing to be written. All of us, however, regardless of our race or ethnicity, owe a debt of gratitude to those who were at the forefront of the struggle for recognition first and foremost as lawyers, regardless of the color of their skin.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Wilson v. Board of Supervisors of LSU*, 92 F.Supp. 986 (E.D. La. 1950).
2. See generally *Chisom v. Roemer*, 498 U.S. 1060, 111 S.Ct. 775, 112 L.Ed.2d 838, (1991); *Clark v. Roemer*, 777 F.Supp. 471 (M.D. La. 1991); and their related cases.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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