



Hon. Constance Baker Motley

When she was fifteen, Constance Baker Motley read Abraham Lincoln's declaration that the legal profession was the most challenging of vocations and, filled with ambition, decided she would one day become a lawyer. Her parents and peers mocked these aspirations, telling her that such dreams were ridiculous. But she refused to see [Jane Bolin](#) and [Eunice Hunton Carter](#), two of the rare African American women practicing law at the time, as exceptions and feel defeated. Instead, she revered these women as role models, stood by her convictions, and began a career marked with many firsts, a career that saw several important civil rights victories.

Constance Juanita Baker was born on September 14, 1921 in New Haven, Conn. She was the ninth of twelve brothers and sisters born to West Indian immigrants. From a very young age, she learned the importance of discipline. Her parents taught all of their children that they were to treat others with respect, be on their best behavior at all times, and tend to their studies. They were also encouraged to get involved in their community, a value Baker internalized well.

Growing up in New Haven, Baker had studied in a racially integrated environment, but she had read about the civil rights movement in Sunday school and these readings inspired her community activism. In high school, she served as both the president for New Haven's NAACP youth council and the secretary of the New Haven Adult Community Council.

Baker knew that she wanted to attend college and pursue her dream of becoming a lawyer, but her family could not afford to help her. However, shortly after graduating from high school, she delivered a speech at a local center that captured the attention of Clarence Blakeslee, a white philanthropist who decided to fund her education. She accepted Blakeslee's offer to pay for her schooling and decided to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn. It was in 1941, on her way to Nashville, that she was first confronted with the reality of segregation: in Cincinnati she was forced to change train cars and rode the rest of the trip on a segregated Jim Crow car marked "Colored." She spent a year and a half at Fisk and, in 1942, transferred to New York University where she earned her B.A. in Economics. In 1943, she began her studies at Columbia Law School, graduating in 1946. Upon graduating from law school,

Constance Baker married Joel Wilson Motley Jr. and began working as a law clerk to [Thurgood Marshall](#) at the NAACP's Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Marshall would continue to mentor and support Motley for years to come.

As one of the NAACP's principal trial attorneys, Motley played a role in all of the major school de-segregation cases. She helped write briefs filed in [Brown v. Board of Education](#) (1954) and personally tried cases resulting in the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi and Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Hamilton Holmes to the University of Georgia. In the 1950s and 1960s, she argued ten civil rights cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, winning nine. The tenth was eventually overturned in her favor as well. She also represented such luminaries as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Reverend Ralph Abernathy. Speaking of her time assigned to difficult cases in the South, Motley explained: "Thurgood [Marshall] says that the only people who are safe in the South are the women—white and Negro. I don't know how he's got that figured. But, so far, I've never been subjected to any violence."

In 1964, Motley's civic engagement turned into political engagement, and she became the first African American woman elected to the New York State Senate. The following year, she was elected President of the Borough of Manhattan, becoming the first woman to hold the position. During her tenure, she worked to revitalize under-privileged sections of the city including Harlem and East Harlem. After being forced to withdraw her name from nomination to the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, in 1966 President Lyndon Johnson named Motley to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, making her the first African American woman to serve as a federal judge. Her nomination was approved only after a fierce battle against a group of Southern senators who sought to block her nomination. She became Chief Judge of the court in 1982 and Senior Judge in 1986. Throughout her tenure on the court, she ruled on many cases and never forgot her past civil rights work. Motley often found in favor of welfare recipients, low-income Medicaid patients, prisoners, and others overlooked by the system.

Motley is the author of dozens of articles on legal and civil rights issues, including several personal tributes to Thurgood Marshall. Her autobiography, *Equal Justice Under Law*, was published in 1998. She has received honorary doctorates from Spelman College, Howard University, Princeton, and Brown University, as well as from many Connecticut institutions including Yale University, Trinity College, Albertus Magnus College, the University of Connecticut, and the University of Hartford. In 1993, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. President Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Citizens Medal in 2001, and the NAACP selected her to receive its highest honor, the Springarn Medal, in 2003. Constance Baker Motley died in New York in September 2005.

MISSISSIPPI
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KENNEDY COULD BE A
LIFE MEMBER OF
THE N.A.A.C.P.

IS NOT APPROPRIATE
INSTRUMENT TO PUSH
KENNEDY'S COWARDLY
ACTS OF TYRANNY.
IMPEACHMENT
URGENTLY NEEDED.

Constance
Baker Motley





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Constance Baker Motley

