

The Civil Rights Queen

BY DON NEAL



CONSTANCE BAKER MOTLEY (1921-2005) attended the Columbia University School of law and following graduation, became the first woman lawyer for the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF). In this capacity, she served alongside legal giants Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall, and in 1950, she drafted the original complaint that would lead to the seminal *Brown vs. Board of Education* case that eventually helped end legal Jim Crow segregation. Known for her courtroom feats, she was the first Black woman ever to argue a case before the U. S. Supreme Court. By 1964, having argued ten cases (and won nine) in the U. S. Supreme Court, Constance Baker Motley was dubbed "The Civil Rights Queen" by the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, one of the most respected and widely distributed Black American newspapers in the country.

Charles Hamilton Houston (1895-1950) was a lawyer and the dean of Howard University Law School and NAACP first special counsel. A graduate of Amherst College and Harvard Law School, he played a significant role in dismantling Jim Crow laws, especially attacking segregation in schools and racial housing covenants. Houston also is well known for having trained and mentored a generation of Black attorneys, including Thurgood Marshall, future founder and director of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the first Black Supreme Court Justice.



In October 1945, during her second year at Columbia Law School, future United States Supreme Court Associate Justice Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993) hired Motley as a law clerk. She was assigned to work on court martial cases that were filed after World War II. The trailblazing protégée of Marshall, Motley had spent many years as the only woman lawyer at the LDF. The Marshall-Motley Scholars Program, named in honor of the legendary civil rights attorney and LDF founder and the iconic civil rights litigator, is a groundbreaking commitment to train, develop, and support the next wave of civil rights lawyers in the South, where the majority of Black Americans live, providing legal advocacy of unparalleled excellence on behalf of Black communities in the South seeking racial justice and equity.



Motley became Associate Counsel to the LDF, making her a lead trial attorney in a number of early and significant civil rights cases including representing Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) whom she visited while he was behind bars in Alabama where he composed his well-known manifesto to "Letter From Birmingham Jail." King often would call attention to Motley's vital role as the movement's lawyer. In a 1965 column in New York's *Amsterdam News*, King cited Motley among the great American litigators who had made strides for social change, alongside Clarence Darrow, Wendell Willkie, Charles Hamilton Houston, et al.



One night, while staying with civil rights leader Medgar Evers (1925-1963), Motley encouraged Evers to cut down a hedge surrounding his house. Not long after that conversation, White supremacists hid behind the hedge to shoot and kill Evers.



Motley was nominated by President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973) on January 26, 1966, to a seat on the U. S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. Despite opposition, she was confirmed by the U. S. Senate on August 30, 1966, and received her commission the same day, becoming the first Black female federal judge.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1933-2020) eulogized Motley in the American Bar Association's *Human Rights* magazine in 2005. "I count it my great good fortune to be among the legions whose lives Judge Motley touched," wrote Ginsburg. "She taught me and others of my generation that law and courts could become positive forces in achieving our nation's high aspiration — as carved above the entrance to the U. S. Supreme Court — Equal Justice Under Law."

