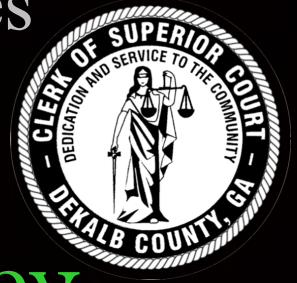


The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry
Clerk of Superior Court
DeKalb County



Constance Baker Motley

(September 14, 1921 – September 28, 2005)

"First African – American Woman Appointed to Federal Judgeship"



Constance Baker Motley was born September 14, 1921 in New Haven, Connecticut. She was the ninth of twelve children born to immigrant parents from the small Caribbean island of Nevis. Her mother was a founder of the New Haven NAACP, which exposed Constance to social justice and activism at an early age. In high school, Constance was the president of the New Haven Negro Youth Council and was secretary of the New Haven Adult Community Council. She graduated High School with honors in 1939, and with no clear financial path to college, she began working for the National Youth Administration continuing her work in community service. It was during this time a local philanthropist heard her speak and offered to pay for her college education.

Constance entered HBCU Fisk University but later transferred to New York University to complete her Bachelors Degree in Economics in 1943. In 1944 she



became the first black woman to be accepted into Columbia Law School. While attending Columbia Law School, she worked as a law clerk for Thurgood Marshall for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. After graduation in 1946 she began working as Associate Counsel - the first female attorney to hold the position. She married the same year.



In her 20 years as associate counsel, she represented Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Freedom Riders and the Birmingham Children Marchers. She visited Martin Luther King, Jr., in jail and stayed with Medgar Evers while under armed guard. In 1954, Constance wrote the first legal brief in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. She was the first African-American woman ever to argue a civil rights case before the U.S. Supreme Court, winning nine of the ten cases. The tenth decision, regarding jury composition, was eventually overturned in her favor. She was a key legal strategist in the civil rights movement, helping to desegregate Southern schools, buses, and lunch counters. She was also the lead council in the case to allow James Meredith to gain admission to the University of Mississippi in 1962.



In 1964, Constance was elected to the New York State Senate and became the first black woman ever elected to the New York State Senate. She devoted much of her time advocating for housing equality for a majority of Black and Latinx low-income tenants. In 1965, she was the first black woman elected as the President of Manhattan Borough. In 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed her as a Federal Judge - the first black woman to hold the position. Although opposed by southern conservatives in the Senate, she was eventually confirmed and later became Chief Judge in 1982 and Senior Judge in 1986, serving in the latter post until her death. On September 14, 2005, Constance Baker Motley died in New York City, New York. She was 84 years old.

