

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Jane Matilda Bolin

(April 11, 1908 – January 8, 2007)

“First Black Woman to Serve as a Judge in the United States”

Jane Matilda Bolin was born on April 11, 1908, in Poughkeepsie, New York. Her British mother, Matilda, died when Jane was eight years old. Her father, Gaius C. Bolin, was the first black person to graduate from Williams College and was head of the Dutchess County New York Bar Association. Gaius was also a founding member of his local NAACP chapter, and let his daughter read *Crisis* magazine, which chronicled lynchings targeting Black Americans.

Jane was a brilliant student who graduated from high school at the age of 16, and immediately enrolled in Wellesley College. One of only two black female students, she was often ostracized and lonely. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1928, being recognized as a top performing student. When Jane shared her desire to work in the legal field, addressing social problems like poverty and racial discrimination, she was discouraged and told there were not many opportunities for women in law. Jane's father, an attorney, was initially opposed to Jane studying law. He suggested that she should become a school-teacher. Jane was undeterred and enrolled in Yale Law School. She was the only Black woman, and one of the few Black students on campus. In law school, she faced discrimination from her classmates, including Southern students slamming classroom doors in her face. Jane graduated in 1931, becoming the first black woman to earn a Yale law degree.

She passed the bar exam in 1932 and practiced in her father's firm during the first two years of her legal career before marrying attorney Ralph Mizelle and moving to New York in 1933. In 1936, Jane ran, unsuccessfully, for the New York Assembly, but her campaign established her in New York Politics. As a result, she was hired as assistant corporate counsel for New York City, making history again, as the first black woman in that position.

On July 22, 1939, Jane received a strange call requesting her to appear at the World's Fair before Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. Jane and her husband arrived at the World Fair and nervously waited for the mayor to arrive. When Mayor La Guardia arrived, he briefly spoke to her husband and then announced to Jane that he was going to make her a judge. He directed her to raise her right hand and began to issue her oath. Attorney Jane Bolin became Judge Jane Bolin, the first black women judge in the United States.

Judge Bolin was appointed to the Domestic Relations Court, later named Family Court. She heard domestic abuse cases, juvenile homicides, and a multitude of cases involving neglected children. While on the bench, she did not wear her judicial robe because she wanted children to feel comfortable talking to her. She was an outspoken advocate for children and civil rights. Because of her rulings, publicly funded childcare agencies could not reject the admission of Black children. Judge Bolin also stopped the court from assigning probation officers based on race. Judge Bolin's only child, Yorke Bolin Mizelle, was born during her early years on the bench. Her husband Ralph died two years after her son's birth. She was a single parent until she remarried seven years later.

Judge Bolin was the only Black woman judge in the United States for 20 years. She spent 40 years on the bench and received appointments from four different mayors. She served on the National Board of the NAACP, as well as the boards of the National Urban League, the Child Welfare League and the Dalton School. With Eleanor Roosevelt, she helped re-establish the Wiltwyck School for Boys as a non-sectarian and interracial rehabilitative center for juveniles. She received honorary degrees from Morgan State University, Western College for Women, Tuskegee Institute, Hampton University, and Williams College. When she was forced to retire at age 70, she reportedly said “they're kicking me out”. She continued her service by volunteering in public schools and served on the New York State Board of Regents. Defying her father's belief that judges die early from the stress of the job, Judge Jane Matilda Bolin lived to be 98 years old.



Jane Bolin and her father, Gaius C. Bolin.

