

Judge Perry B. Jackson

First Black Judge in Ohio

The Ohio Black Judges Association led by Judges' Emanuella Groves and Cassandra Collier-Williams gathered in the lobby of the Justice Center on Tuesday, February 22 to present a Black History Month moment at the statue commemorating Judge Perry B. Jackson, the first black judge in the state of Ohio. Several dozen judges and magistrates attended and heard remarks from Retired Cleveland Municipal Judge Ronald Adrine and Cleveland Municipal Court Judge Lauren Moore.

The following is what Judge Moore told the crowd:

Judge Perry Jackson was a true renaissance man. He was born in Zanesville in 1896, the same year that the Plessy "Separate but Equal" case was decided by the Supreme Court. During a time when it was extremely rare for African-Americans to have educational opportunities, he managed to graduate from college magna cum laude and law school from the institution now known as Case Western Reserve University.

He earned his law degree in 1922, the same year that the Supreme Court did see fit in the case *Leser v. Garnett*, to rule that the 19th Amendment that allowed women to vote had been constitutionally established. Unfortunately, the law school dean told him that no large firm would hire him, and that turned out to be true. So, with barely a dollar in his pocket, he went into business for himself and made a name for himself. He was an advocate for civil rights and also worked as an editor for the *Cleveland Call* which eventually became the *Call and Post*.

A Lincoln Republican, he served in the Ohio legislature where, among other credits, he successfully spearheaded the adoption of voter registration forms that eliminated any reference to color or race. He also served as the chief prosecutor for the city of Cleveland and secretary to the director of public utilities for Cleveland.

In 1942, the same year that President Joseph Biden was born, Jackson was appointed by Governor Bricker to an uninspired term on the Cleveland Municipal Court. He became the first black judge in Ohio and was only one of a handful of other black judges across the country. Although he lost the election to retain his seat, his tenacious nature led him to run again and he was elected three more times in 1945, 1951 and 1957. He won a spot in Domestic Relations in 1960 and in the Common Pleas court in 1964. Age limits made him retire in 1973 when he was 77, but he returned as a visiting judge almost until he died in 1986 at the age of 90.

Some interesting highlights in Judge Jackson's life included a time in 1935. To put things in perspective, the Supreme Court ruled in *Grovey v. Townsend*, that white-only political primaries were perfectly constitutional because political parties are private

actors. In 1935, Judge Jackson attended a bar association committee meeting in the dining room of the Hollenden Hotel on E.6h and Superior. The head waiter told him that there was a policy to not serve “Negroes” and he was therefore denied service. Judge Jackson sued them and received \$350 in damages and the bar association found another venue.

In 1953, President Eisenhower offered him a seat on the United States Supreme Court. However, Judge Jackson declined, citing the concern that he did not want to be away from his ailing parents.

Judge Jackson played piano, was a member of the nation’s most prestigious honor society, Phi Beta Kappa. He was also a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and was a 33rd degree Mason and Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons.

This beautifully detailed and lifelike bronze statue was sculpted by Judge Jackson’s niece, Ms. Shirley McWhorter Moss, who stated that she wanted to capture her uncle as fair, wise and impartial, someone who appreciated the spirit of the law, not just the letter of the law. She said that that was the vibe she wanted visitors to the Justice Center to feel as opposed to a judge who seemed stern and authoritative. Judge Jackson married Fern Payne and they had no children.

This statue was dedicated and unveiled in October of 2020 in the midst of the pandemic and the Cleveland Bar Association did a wonderful virtual ceremony that featured some of Judge Jackson’s family members and others who spoke highly of the man and his legacy. So now, the Ohio Black Judges Association would like to present it to everyone who missed the moving tribute and may have been walking by this pillar of greatness and brilliance without knowing who he is and what he represents.

He paved the way for other pioneering judicial luminaries like Judge Leo Jackson who sat on the 8th District Court of Appeals, Judge Jean Murrell Capers, Judge Lillian Burke, Judge Theodore Williams and Judge Sarah Harper who all served on the Cleveland Municipal Court.

But today, we celebrate Judge Perry Jackson, a man of amazing distinction. May we all follow his example of fairmindedness, altruism and excellence.

Judge Perry B. Jackson

1896 - 1986

Cleveland Muni Court 1942 - 1943, 1945 - 1960

Domestic Relations 1961 - 1964

Common Pleas Court 1964 - 1973

Visiting Judge 1973 - 1986