

NEVIS



CONSTANCE BAKER MOTLEY – SEPTEMBER 14, 1921 – SEPTEMBER 28, 2005

Constance Baker Motley was an African American civil rights activist, lawyer, judge, state senator, and President of Manhattan Borough, New York City. She was born in New Haven, Connecticut, the ninth of twelve children. Her parents had migrated from [Nevis](#), in the [Caribbean](#) and her mother was the founder of the New Haven chapter of the NAACP.

CIVIL RIGHTS WORK

In 1950 she wrote the original complaint in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The first African-American woman ever to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Meredith v. Fair* she successfully won James Meredith's effort to be the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi in 1962. Motley was successful in nine of the ten cases she argued before the Supreme Court. The tenth decision, regarding jury composition, was eventually overturned in her favor. She was otherwise a key legal strategist in the civil rights movement, helping to desegregate Southern schools, buses, and lunch counters.

She also played a pivotal role in the litigation that resulted in the admission of Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter to the University of Georgia, Vivian Malone and James Hood to the University of Alabama and Harvey Gantt to Clemson College in South Carolina.

Representative John L. Lewis, remembered her: "In the heart of the American South, during the early days of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 50s and 60s, there were only two lawyers that made white segregationists tremble and gave civil rights workers hope...Constance Baker Motley and Thurgood Marshall." Constance Baker Motley served as Marshall's right-hand woman, progressing from his law clerk to one of the NAACP's top lawyers.

POLITICAL AND JUDICIAL FIRST ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In 1964, Ms. Motley became the first African American woman elected to the New York State Senate. In 1965, she was chosen Manhattan Borough President—the first woman in that position. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson named her a district judge for the United States District Court Southern District of New York, making her the first African American woman federal court judge, a position she held, including a term as chief judge, until her death.

HONORS AND AWARDS

In 1993, she was inducted into National Women's Hall of Fame. In 2001, President Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Citizens Medal. The NAACP awarded her the Spingarn Medal, the organization's highest honor, in 2003. Motley was a prominent honorary member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.