



HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CIRCUIT

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A CHAMPION OF ACCESS TO JUSTICE: THE ORAL HISTORY OF KATHERINE A. MAZZAFERRI

For thirty-five years, Katherine A. Mazzaferri shaped the D.C. Bar into one of the nation's most comprehensive legal professional organizations—and her newly available oral history offers an intimate account of that transformation. Recorded as part of the D.C. Circuit Historical Society's Oral History Program, this remarkable narrative spans a career devoted to access to justice, gender equity, and service to the client community.



Mazzaferri's path to legal leadership was anything but conventional. A Latin-American Literature major at New York University, she chose law school at George Washington University with a singular purpose: "I really wanted to make a difference in the community." She made good on that promise from her very first days at GW Law, where she helped establish a Women and the Law course and co-founded the Women's Legal Defense Fund, serving as its second president.

Her early career took her through some of the most consequential civil rights venues of the era. As a trial attorney at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, she fought gender and racial discrimination under often harrowing conditions. At the League of Women Voters Education Fund, she won landmark regulations requiring affirmative action for women in the construction industry. Later, at the Federal Trade Commission, she engaged in complex rulemaking to establish new legal standards—gaining hard-won insight into the difficulty of translating policy ideals into enforceable law.

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ANNUAL THOMAS A. FLANNERY LECTURE DRAWS RECORD ATTENDANCE WITH JUSTICE KAVANAUGH AND JUSTICE JACKSON

By Society Board Member Carrie Johnson

A record-breaking audience gathered last month to see a pair of Supreme Court justices deliver the 14th annual Flannery Lecture on the Administration of Justice. A crowd eager to hear from Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Ketanji Brown Jackson – both former Historical Society Board members – filled the ceremonial courtroom and four overflow rooms at the E. Barrett Prettyman Courthouse for a lecture series that honors the late U.S. Attorney and U.S. District Judge Thomas A. Flannery.

“Think of us just like in your living room, just sitting here chatting,” said Senior U.S. District Judge Paul Friedman, who guided the conversation. The justices eased into their remarks by discussing their transition to the Supreme Court and the need for civility as they relate to the same colleagues day in and out, potentially for decades. “It’s a human endeavor and the relationships matter, knowing which buttons to push and not to push,” Justice Kavanaugh said. “People get along well. Conference is very civil. That doesn’t always show up in writing, I realize.” “Collective decision-making is a lot harder than it seems,” Justice Jackson said.

When the subject turned to the high court’s emergency docket, which has ballooned in recent years, the justices clashed. Those emergency appeals help determine whether a president’s policies can take effect while litigation proceeds through the lower courts. “This uptick in the court’s willingness to get involved with cases on the emergency docket is a



real unfortunate problem because I think it is not serving the court or our country well at this point,” Justice Jackson said. She added, when the justices reach into cases underway in the district courts, without a fully developed factual record, it can create “a warped kind of proceeding.” For his part, Justice Kavanaugh said the justices don’t control



how many applications are filed. He also pointed out the Supreme Court had fielded emergency requests from the Biden administration on such issues as access to mifepristone, a drug used to end pregnancies in early stages. Justice Kavanaugh attributed the rise in emergency requests to gridlock in Congress

that encourages presidents to do more to advance their agenda through executive action. “You have to have the same position no matter who is president,” he said. Senior Judge Friedman stepped in to lighten the mood: “I see that neither of you feels strongly about this.”

Judge Friedman went on to ask what could be done in response to a wave of violent threats against judges, including some members of the federal bench in D.C. Justice Jackson said there’s no easy answer, but suggested that civics education and urging members of the bar to speak out could help convey the importance of an independent judiciary. Justice Kavanaugh noted that it’s difficult for judges and justices to defend themselves, so the role of lawyers is especially important. Events such as this one, he said, add “another brick in the wall” holding up the rule of law. «

The centerpiece of the oral history is Mazzaferri's three and a half decades leading the D.C. Bar, first as Executive Director and then as Chief Executive Officer. Under her stewardship, the Bar evolved from a fledgling organization into a model of professional services, legal education, and diversity. Her crowning achievement was building the Bar's Pro Bono Center into a nationally recognized program. Upon her retirement, Bar leaders honored her legacy by

establishing the Katherine A. Mazzaferri Emerging Legal Needs Fund for the Pro Bono Center.

For judges, lawyers, and historians interested in the evolution of the D.C. legal community, bar leadership, and the ongoing struggle for equal access to justice, this oral history is essential reading. It is available through the [D.C. Circuit Historical Society's Oral History collection](#). «

SOCIETY HOSTS 21ST ANNUAL MOCK COURT PROGRAM

On March 6, 2026, Judge Patricia Millett welcomed 155 D.C. high school students and their teachers for the **Twenty-First** Annual Mock Court Program hosted by the Historical Society. The Mock Court Program began in 2006. Over the years, almost 2,500 D.C. high school students have benefited from the generosity of the judges and attorney mentors who are at the heart of the program.

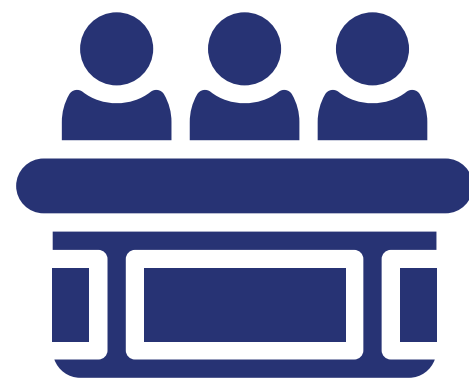
This year, after welcoming remarks by Judge Millett, the students went to assigned courtrooms in the E. Barrett Prettyman Courthouse and the William B. Bryant Annex, to present arguments to participating judges, followed by an opportunity to discuss the law and legal profession with the judges.

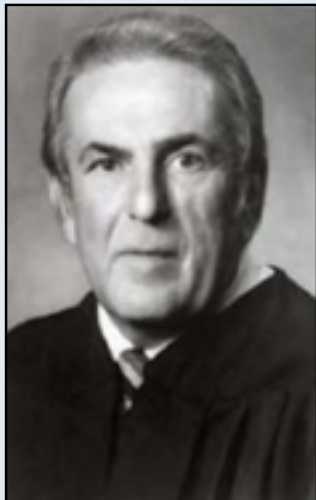
Fourteen judges, six local D.C. high schools, 155 students, and 46 attorney mentors are just the bare statistics for this year's Program. Far more important, the students enjoyed the remarkable opportunity to learn from attorney mentors and teachers about First and Fourth Amendment issues in a school setting, and then formulated arguments based on those issues to present to the judges. Chief Judge Boasberg remarked at the closing session how difficult the issues were and how impressed he was with the arguments presented and the remarkable poise by the students, all of whom were asked tough questions by the Judges.

The 2026 Program included, from the U.S. Court of Appeals, Judges Millett, Pillard and Wilkins, from the U.S. District Court, Chief Judge Boasberg, and Judges Sullivan, Jackson, Cooper, Moss, Mehta, AliKhan, Harvey, Faruqi and Sharbaugh, and Judge William C. Bryson (Federal Circuit), a longtime participant in the program.

Forty-six attorney mentors from various backgrounds and law firms volunteered their time to assist the students in preparing their argument presentations, and helped to provide an outstanding experience.

At the end of the program, 14 Outstanding Advocates were selected, one by each participating judge. And as tradition dictated, everyone enthusiastically joined together in the courthouse Atrium for a pizza lunch! This event is truly exciting, and one that the Society looks forward to hosting every year. «





FROM THE ARCHIVES: A LIFE IN ALL THREE BRANCHES – THE ORAL HISTORY OF HON. ABNER J. MIKVA

Few figures in American legal history can claim experience across all three branches of government as comprehensive as that of Judge Abner Mikva. His career arc – from Illinois state legislator to five-term congressman, to judge and Chief Judge of the D.C. Circuit, to White House Counsel to President Clinton – is the subject of a rich oral history conducted by Stephen J. Pollak across nine interviews between 1996 and 1999.

Born in Milwaukee in 1926 to Ukrainian immigrant parents, Mikva came of age during the Great Depression, which he called the “overwhelming event of my childhood” and which shaped his life-long liberal politics. He enlisted in the Army in 1944, returned to earn a law degree from the University of Chicago – entering without a college diploma, as was then permitted – and thrived, becoming editor-in-chief of the Law Review. His classmates included Robert Bork and Senator Patsy Mink.

After clerking for Justice Sherman Minton alongside William Rehnquist and Newton Minow, Mikva entered private practice in Chicago with Arthur

Goldberg before launching his political career. He served in the Illinois legislature from 1956 to 1966, then won five terms in Congress – a tenure marked by fierce opposition to the Vietnam War and strong support for civil rights.

President Carter appointed Mikva to the D.C. Circuit in 1979 – a nomination the NRA spent \$1 million to defeat – where he served for 15 years, eventually as Chief Judge. His oral history offers candid reflections on his colleagues: warm words for Judge Buckley despite deep ideological differences, admiration for Judge MacKinnon, and memories of Judge Scalia as “very gregarious” and “great fun to be around.” He shares strong views on judicial craft – favoring focused, footnote-free opinions – and his skepticism of Lexis and Westlaw, which he considered “disastrous” for legal discipline.

Mikva closed his public career as White House Counsel in 1994–95, departing just before the Monica Lewinsky scandal consumed the Clinton presidency. He later recalled assuring his successor, Charles Ruff, that Whitewater and Paula Jones were “in the rear-view mirror.”

A more comprehensive summary of the oral history by Elizabeth Geise, and the [full oral history](#), are available on the Society’s website. «



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ICYMI - RECENT SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Here are some of the popular posts since our January 2026 Newsletter:

- [Second Amendment On the Supreme Court's Docket Twice This Term](#)
- [Sam Dash's Valentine](#)
- [Supreme Court Revisits Separation of Powers](#)
- [Barbara Babcock Oral History](#)
- [Eric Holder - Legal Pioneer - Black History Month](#)

GALLERY WALK – A LOOK AT A PORTRAIT IN THE COURTS' COLLECTION, ITS SUBJECT, AND THE PAINTER: THE PORTRAIT OF JUDGE BURNITA SHELTON MATTHEWS



In 1949, President Harry Truman appointed Burnita Shelton Matthews to the District Court for the District of Columbia. Judge Matthews was just the second woman appointed as an Article III judge in the United States, and the first appointed as a federal trial judge.¹ That milestone may be more significant than we can now easily comprehend. It was more than a decade before another woman was appointed to an Article III court anywhere in the country. For nineteen years, Judge Matthews was the only woman on either court of our Circuit. The next D.C. appointment went to Hon. June Green, for the very seat Judge Matthews vacated when taking senior status. In her home state of Mississippi, a woman would not serve on the federal court until 58 years after Judge Matthews' appointment.²

In a 1995 address, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg identified Judge Matthews as one of three women who transformed the federal judiciary – pioneers whose example made it “less difficult for the rest of us to gain appointment or election to the judiciary.” Justice Ginsburg described Matthews as “a southern, very gentle woman of bright mind and indomitable spirit” whose “firm hand in managing each case” identified her “more than her fine lace collar and cuffs, her slim size and soft voice.”

Judge Matthews' portrait hangs in the Ceremonial Courtroom of our E. Barrett Prettyman Courthouse, precisely the image Justice Ginsburg described. Accepting it on behalf of the Court, in 1973, Chief Judge John J. Sirica noted that Judge Matthews' appointment was “a monumental departure and, for us on this Court, not only an unusual one but a happy and most beneficial one.” Future generations, he hoped, would see from the portrait what Judge Matthews' presence had meant. As for the portrait, he said, “when others in times yet to be occupy our places, they can see what we had and what they missed.”

The portrait proudly represents a woman who entered rooms that were not prepared for her and transformed them by her presence and her work. In

doing so, it is a testament to the talents of both the subject and the artist.

THE PORTRAIT'S SUBJECT: JUDGE MATTHEWS

Burnita Shelton Matthews (1894–1988) was born in Mississippi, the only daughter among six children. Her father often brought her to the courthouse as a child, yet resisted her determination to pursue the law. She came to the District of Columbia around 1917, knowing it was one of the few places where law schools accepted women. She attended National University Law School (now George Washington University) by night, earned her LL.B. in 1919, and passed the D.C. bar exam. The local bar association returned her membership dues uncashed.

Undaunted, Matthews became deeply engaged with the National Woman's Party, picketing the White House for women's suffrage. After ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, she headed the NWP's Legal Research Department, helped draft the original Equal Rights Amendment, and secured legislative reforms across multiple states advancing women's legal rights. She opened her own law practice. When eminent domain was exercised over the NWP's headquarters for the Supreme Court building, she challenged the valuation and obtained the largest condemnation award the federal government had ever paid.

The oral history collection of the Historical Society of the D.C. Circuit preserves several firsthand assessments of Judge Matthews from those who appeared before her. Judge Oliver Gasch, who encountered her on cases when he served as United States Attorney, recalled that she “never ducked a tough case and she always handled herself in the best traditions of the bench.” Edmund D. Campbell tried one of the most difficult cases of his career before Judge Matthews. He recalled her as “one of our best judges during the period she served,” and emphasized that she ruled with conviction. E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr. recalled how Judge Matthews had ruled for the first

continued...

time in this country that Muslims in prison had the right to practice their religion, to possess the Koran, and to wear religious medals. In 1957, she presided over the Hoffa bribery trial, maintaining control throughout the high-profile proceeding marked by repeated disruption.

THE PORTRAIT'S ARTIST: ROMA C. HARLAN

Throughout her tenure, Judge Matthews hired only women as her law clerks, explaining that she wanted “to show my confidence in women.” Her male colleagues hired no women — and so, as Justice Ginsburg later observed, Matthews attracted clerks of “extraordinary talent.”

That Judge Matthews selected a woman to paint her portrait, then, was entirely in keeping with her convictions.

Roma Christine Harlan (1912–2003) was born in Warsaw, Indiana, into a family already touched by

art: her mother was a portrait painter, and Harlan began painting under her influence at the age of five. She trained at the Art Institute of Chicago and under several prominent portrait artists in that city. Upon completing her studies, she served as the resident portrait artist for the Lake Shore Club of Chicago.

Harlan later relocated to Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art archives identify her as assistant to H. Lester Cooke, who served as the Gallery's Curator of Painting from 1961 to 1973. Harlan also built a substantial career as a portraitist of political and military figures. Her work is held in collections throughout the United States, including the United States Senate.

In 1973, Harlan was in attendance at the dedication ceremony for Judge Matthews portrait, the first portrait of a woman to join the Courts' collection. «

¹ The first woman appointed was Judge Florence Allen, appointed in 1934 by President Roosevelt to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.

² Sources for this article include: Transcript, *Presentation of Portrait of The Hon. Burnita Shelton Matthews*, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, Feb. 1, 1973 (dcchs.org); Ruth Bader Ginsburg & Laura W. Brill, *Women in the Federal Judiciary: Three Way Pavers and the Exhilarating Change President Carter Wrought*, 64 Fordham L. Rev. 281 (1995); Jeffrey Brandon Morris, *Calmly To Poise The Scales of Justice*, Carolina Academic Press (2001); Kathanne W. Greene, *Burnita Shelton Matthews: Suffragist, Feminist, and Judicial Pioneer*, Mississippi History Now (Aug. 2017); Linda Greenhouse, *Burnita S. Matthews Dies at 93; First Woman on U.S. Trial Courts*, N.Y. Times, Apr. 28, 1988; *Judge Burnita Shelton Matthews: Leader of Women's Rights Movement Recalls Suffrage Fight and Appointment to Bench*, 17 Third Branch 1 (Mar. 1985); Allen Cope, *Copiah County Native Honored as Nation's First Female Federal Trial Judge*, Jackson Free Press, Oct. 7, 2019; National Gallery of Art Archives, *Press Releases Finding Aid* (NGA.014.A); NGA Archives, *Hereward Lester Cooke Papers*, Finding Aid SC.008; U.S. Senate, Art & Artifacts, Paintings Catalog (Wherry portrait entry); *Roma Harlan obituary*, San Diego Union-Tribune, Nov. 16, 2003; Federal Judicial Center, *Biographical Directory of Article III Federal Judges*, 1789–present (fjc.gov); *Oral Histories of Judge Oliver Gasch, E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr. and Edmund D. Campbell*, Historical Society of the D.C. Circuit, dcchs.org.

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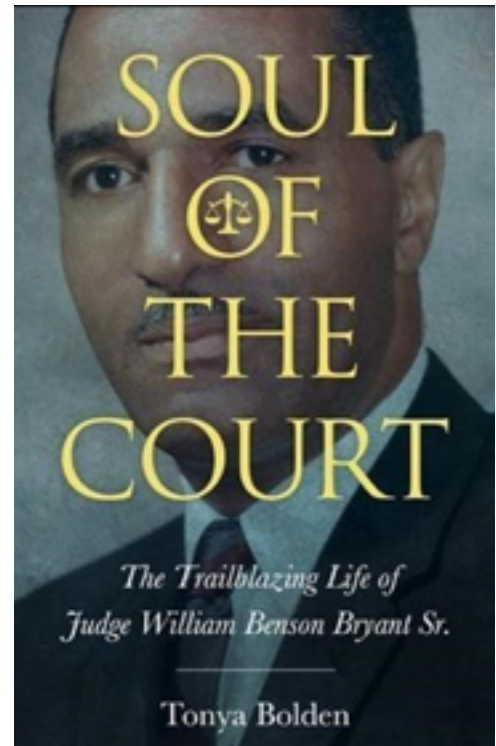
Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit

JUDGE BRYANT BIOGRAPHY AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE

Initiated and sponsored by the Historical Society, the first full-length biography of trailblazing D.C. attorney and judge, William Benson Bryant, *Soul of the Court: The Trailblazing Life of Judge William Benson Bryant Sr.* is now available for purchase. Orders can be made by going to [Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org). The book can also be ordered at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and [Barnesandnoble.com](https://www.barnesandnoble.com).

Written by award-winning author Tonya Bolden, this biography narrates the story of a life of compassion, unparalleled integrity, and unwavering belief in the dignity of every human being.

More information about *Soul of the Court: The Trailblazing Life of Judge William Benson Bryant Sr.*, can be found at www.upress.state.ms.us/Books/S/Soul-of-the-Court. «



CHRONICLING THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA U.S. ATTORNEYS

A book by former Society Board member K. Chris Todd and his colleague Jim Thunder, chronicling the lives of the first forty-nine U.S. Attorneys for the District of Columbia, is nearing completion.

The Society looks forward to its publication, and it will be available for ordering on our website very soon. Visit our website for a past article on one of the book's fascinating chapters focused on [Francis Scott Key](#). «