

The Lawyer - Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993)

Thurgood Marshall was the great-grandson of slaves and son of a dining car waiter and schoolteacher. He was the first African American justice of the Supreme Court. He studied law at Howard University Law School - a school known for its support of civil rights litigation. After graduating first in his class at Howard in 1933, he worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Houston, Texas.

Marshall was devoted to civil rights. While Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a leading public figure who preached nonviolent resistance and love, Marshall worked through the court system to eradicate the legacy of slavery and the racist segregation system of Jim Crow with its lasting effect on race relations in the United States.

Marshall served as council for the NAACP and then director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. He was the mastermind behind the litigation strategy that challenged racial oppression in education, housing, transportation, electoral politics, and criminal justice. His most famous case was in representing Linda Brown and other students in *Oliver L. Brown et. al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, et. al.* (1954). After the crisis at Little Rock Central High School in 1957, a lawsuit filed by the Little Rock School District in federal court asked for a two - and- a- half- year extension on desegregating schools. The NAACP, led by Marshall as counsel, filed an appeal that was known as *Cooper v. Aaron*.

In 1967, President Johnson nominated Marshall as an associate justice of the Supreme Court. He served in this position until 1991 and was a strong advocate for equal protection of the law. Marshall also worked on behalf of African Americans but also supported civil rights for all Americans. As a justice, he helped decide cases upholding equal protection of the law for women, children, prisoners, and the homeless and he held the conviction that only through equal rights could people of all races rise and fall based on their own abilities.

“Thurgood Marshall is the living embodiment of how far we Americans have come on the major concern in our history, race, and how far we’ve got to go,” says Drew Days, professor of law at Yale and former assistant attorney general for civil rights. *“He has been a conscience. In the law he remains our supreme conscience.”*