

UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT MERCY LAW BLACK ALUMNI: A BRIEF HISTORY

By Terrance A. Keith '84

Preface

In May 2017 a small group of black alumni¹ unanimously endorsed the creation of an alumni association to support University of Detroit Mercy School of Law black law students and alumni. The Association of Black Law Alumni (ABLA) has been chartered and the constitution and by-laws approved creating the school first affiliate alumni association of the law school.² Over the last two years, with the direct assistance of Dean Phyllis L. Crocker, alumni information has been gathered, reviewed and discussed making this brief history possible.³

To fulfill the charge of 2017, as black alumni we must actively record, preserve and share the lessons from our history with those who have and will come behind us. We must also wholly endorse the creation of an endowed scholarship to augment the escalating cost of a legal education that often, not only impedes the decision to enroll in and complete law school, but also burdens alumni in their practice of law. If we do these things, future Detroit Mercy Law black law students and alumni will have what we each wished we had: a viable structured support system that is familiar with our shared experience that is integral with the resources of the law school. In doing so, we will weave our achievements into a tapestry⁴ of achievement enabling all who walk the halls of Detroit Mercy Law to marvel at its fabrication and forever know who we are, from whence we have come and what we have accomplished.

There is no better way to inspire those who come behind us than to enable them to witness the legacy of black alumni affixed to the history of the law school. They can only be part of a legacy if the legacy survives, and it will survive as long as we work to preserve it. As you read this brief history, earnestly consider weaving your thread into the tapestry of our history; become an active member and supporter of the Detroit Mercy Law Association of Black Law Alumni. Preserve the legacy.

Terrance A. Keith '84

Chair, ABLA Committee

The Early Years: 1900s – 1950s

At the dawn of the 1900's, Detroit had emerged as the manufacturing hub of the United States and its population was flourishing. Thousands of people from across the country had come to Detroit in search of factory jobs offering better pay; many were blacks who had journeyed from scattered parts of the southern states. Upon arrival, blacks where often consigned to a few segregated areas of the city,⁵ the largest area was located north and east of downtown known as Black Bottom.⁶

Unbeknownst to those living in Black Bottom, nearly twenty-five years prior to their arrival, and prior to the area to becoming known as Black Bottom, University of Detroit was founded there in 1877. With the city's rapidly swelling population, the school grew quickly and twice relocated along Jefferson Avenue before constructing Dowling Hall at 651 E. East Jefferson, years later to become home of the current law school.⁷ The University Of Detroit School Of Law opened October 1, 1912, with day and evening classes to enable students who were forced to work during the day and unable to attend the day lectures.⁸

Seven years later, in September 1919, Henry Tarrant, recently discharged from the army for service in World War I, came to Detroit to join his family who had migrated from Alabama. Unlike the throngs of people who were part of the great migration to Detroit looking to work in the factories, Tarrant aspired to be something more than a factory worker; he desired to become a lawyer. Shortly after his arrival, he enrolled at the law school for the fall semester.⁹ Taking advantage of the evening classes, throughout his time in school he worked as a clerk at the U.S. Post Office. He graduated in June 1922¹⁰, becoming the school's first known black graduate.¹¹ In the succeeding eight years, we know of seven black graduates who followed:¹² Frank Stoney '22, Jerry Dixon, '23, Harold Bledsoe '25, Hazel Layman (Roxborough) '27, Theodore Spaulding '28, Ralph J. Osborne '29 and Charles Berry '30.

Although there is little known about most of the early graduates, some of Tarrant's history has been documented.¹³ What little has been found regarding Hazel Layman reveals that, although she passed the bar exam, it is believed that she did not practice and for many years and served as a probation officer at Detroit Recorder's Court.¹⁴

Much is known about Harold Bledsoe, however. Bledsoe graduated in June 1925, three months before the September 1925 incident that rocked the city and the nation involving Dr. Ossian Sweet and the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁵ In his more than forty years of practice, he became one of the most revered and celebrated trial attorneys in Detroit. Bledsoe's career was highlighted in fall, 2018 issue of the Docket.¹⁶

Mired in the depression, and later World War II, as had happened with most law schools during those years, enrollment declined. Over the next 20 years, from 1930 - 1950, the law school's

average enrollment, that had averaged near 300 for most of the prior years, had fallen to about 150.¹⁷ In line with the lower enrollment for those years, the number of known black alumni had fallen to four: N Charles Simmons, '34, Jean Cole Harbour, '41, Julian Rodgers '44 and Alfred W. Wilke '45.

Information has been located regarding two. Nearly sixteen years after her graduation, in 1957, Jean Cole Harbour became the first black lawyer appointed as a referee in the Wayne County Probate Court, Juvenile Division. Later, she became a referee for the Michigan Unemployment Security Commission Appeal Board before being selected as chair of the Michigan Security Board of Review.¹⁸ Julian Rodgers served for thirteen years as a judge on the Wayne County Common Pleas Court, later becoming its chief judge. He was also served as President of the Detroit Urban League.

In the decade following the end of the war, seventeen alumni emerged in the 1950s, easily surpassing the previous twenty years of decline, and hinting, perhaps, of an impending surge. The alumni: Leroy Daggs, '50; Joseph C. Marshall, '50; Jessie P. Slaton, '50; Benjamin E. Franklin, '52; Marjorie McGowan, '53; Fred Persons, '53; William O. Cain, '53; Hayes G. Dabney, '53; Gerald D. White, '53; and Ester B. LaMarr, '53; Nelson, R. Pye, '54; Charles E. Smith, '55; Emmet S. Long, '55; Leven C. Weiss '55; Andrew W. Foster, '56; Louis Simmons, '56; and Richard A. Shine, '56.

From these alumni, two, [Jessie P. Slaton](#) and Louis Simmons, were appointed to the bench. The story behind Judge Slaton's success is representative of the stories of many women and men who attended law school in the evening and had, what appeared to be, an established career and decided to have a new career as a lawyer. For years she worked as a special education teacher. Later, in 1933 she became the first full time black secretary to work in the Detroit City Hall before graduating from law school in 1950 at the age of forty-three.¹⁹ In 1972, Judge Slaton became the first woman referee in the Detroit Traffic Court. Six years later she was appointed judge of the Common Pleas Court in Detroit.²⁰

Judge Louis Simmons was the first African American president of the Detroit Bar Association and was subsequently appointed to the Wayne County Circuit Court. He served for twenty-three years. Judge Simmons was also very active with the Catholic Bar Association and was recognized for ten years of active support as a board member of the University of Detroit Black Alumni Association.²¹

1960s – 1970s

Any hint of a surge vanished in the following decade. The 1960's saw alumni reduced to almost half the level of the 1950s. There were ten: Joseph Brown, '62; Gregory K. Jackson, '63; Charles H. Brown '65; David W. Grissom, '65; Russell L. Jarrett, '66; Dorothy Cottrell,'67; Joseph Baltimore,'67; Thomas R. Sanchez, '67; Fletcher J. Campbell, '68; and Vera Massey Jones, '69.

Joseph Baltimore became a judge on the 36th District Court, and later its chief judge. Judge Vera Massey Jones was elected to the Wayne County Circuit Court. Joseph Brown became an associate and later a partner in the law firm of Keith, Conyers, Anderson, and Brown & Wahls.²²

The 1970s saw a twofold reversal from the 60s. Juxtaposed to the numbers for the next fifty years, the thirty-five alumni who emerged from the 1970s would turn out to be a first indication of a steady climb in black alumni that would take place over the next five decades, a climb that would average 100 for each decade and 130 over the last three.

From the 1970's three judges emerged. Judge Roy L. Roulhac, '75, served as a Michigan administrative law judge and later as an administrative law judge for the US Social Security Administration ¹. Judge Gregory Holiday, '77, also served a Michigan administrative law judge before serving for nearly ten years as an administrative law judge at the Social Security Administration. In 1991 he became a faculty member of the National Judicial College until retiring from the faculty in 2015. Judge Wendy M. Baxter,'78, was appointed to the 3rd Circuit Court (Civil Division) in Wayne County Circuit Court in 1986. She served there until 2013.

1980s - Present

Early in the 1980s, the law school created what became known as “The Summer Program” to increase black enrollment. Applicants who successfully completed a torts class during the summer semester were eligible for admission. The class and program were originally taught and administered for several years by attorney/professor Larry Gaffney; later by Alvin L. Storrs, '81 and David Williams II, '82 and subsequently by Professor Vincent Verdun. As a result of the program, by the end of the 1980s, there were seventy-three alumni, another twofold increase over the previous decade.

A small sampling of the accomplishments of just a few of the alumni for those years manifests the major contributions and importance of the program. Eleven (15%), became judges, among them the achievements of two are particularly noteworthy: Denise Langford Morris and Gregory Mathis. Judge Denise Langford Morris, '82 was the first African American appointed in 1992 to the Oakland County Circuit Court, and is now the “Dean of the Court” – its first woman dean of the

¹ He also published [Slave Genealogy of the Roulhac Family: French Masters and the Africans They Enslaved \(2013\)](#).

court since 1848. She is also the first and only woman alumni whose portrait is displayed in the atrium of the law school.

Eight years after graduation, Judge Greg Mathis '88, was elected to the 36th District Court, Three years later the syndicated Judge Greg Mathis show was launched across the nation.²³ Of even greater significance is his lifelong personal commitment and contributions to community service in the city of Detroit and the nation through the Mathis Community Center and the Mathis Foundation.

Similarly, there are at least three other alumni from the 1980's whose achievements are noteworthy and emblematic of the achievements of the many other alumni. Beginning with the manifest brilliance Alvin L. Storrs '81 and David Williams, II '82 who were classmates and best friends. Prior to Alvin Storrs' sudden untimely death in 2011, together they were, and continued to be, revered for their mutual command of tax law. For three years Alvin L. Storrs²⁴ taught courses in business planning and income taxation as an adjunct professor at Detroit Mercy Law. Later, he joined the Detroit College of Law (DCL)²⁵ where he taught income and corporate taxation law for twenty-three years.

David Williams, II went on to become a tenured professor of law at Ohio State and Vanderbilt law schools. He was also the first black athletics director hired in the NCAA South East Conference. He spent his sixteen-year tenure as Vanderbilt's athletics director and vice chancellor for student affairs. During that time, Vanderbilt won four team national championships.²⁶

An equally extraordinary alumni is Faye A. Nelson '80. After a few years of practicing law, she was selected to be serve as president of the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy. Her twenty years of leadership transformed the Detroit riverfront and enabled the development of the Detroit River walk to become one of the six top river walks in the world.²⁷ She later became president of the Detroit Edison Foundation and was instrumental in the development of the Beacon Park by the DTE Foundation. In 2018, she was named Director of Programs for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Over the next thirty years nearly 400 alumni would follow: 132 through the 90s, 136 in the 2000s and 124 from 2011 – 2019.²⁸ All told, beginning with Henry Tarrant in 1922, there have been 570 alumni.²⁹

The purpose of this brief history is not, however, to simply chronicle the number of black alumni over the decades or the number of those who have become judges. It is, rather, a first endeavor to document the history of alumni, and to connect the threads among generations of alumni to weave those threads into a tapestry of achievement that adorns the halls of the law school. In the process, making manifest that the threads providing texture for the tapestry begun from the fiber of a man whose quest to be a lawyer was first spun from a desire to be more than a factory worker.

That man, Henry Tarrant, had no way of knowing the significance of his academic achievement to those who would come behind him; that his success would become the fiber spun into the threads

woven inside the textiles of his classmates, encouraging them to persevere in their studies, and, when interlaced, would help them not only to endure the economic collapse that soon followed graduation, but would provide the fortitude for them to serve their community by supporting the formation of two organizations that, more than 100 years later, continue their fight for justice, diversity and inclusion.³⁰ This brief history seeks, therefore, to instill in the minds of alumni, generations removed from Henry Tarrant and his classmates, that what we do as alumni in service to and for each other and the community, can and does, shape the arc of justice for generations.

While the achievements of those who have become judges have been noted,³¹ the records of those achievements are merely the loom to which our threads are attached. The achievements of Henry Tarrant, David Williams, II and Faye A. Nelson are more illustrative of the 95% of alumni who seized the opportunities inside of and beyond the practice of law whose achievements are known to few alumni.

The full history is the sum of the experience of the 570, that, when woven together, will yield the brilliant color embedded in each fiber creating the tapestry of our history; rich with the earth tones of struggle and disappointment and the magnificent, strikingly vivid, bold tones of achievement; tones that inspire; tones that embolden black students and alumni, not only to confront and overcome the challenges encountered in law school and in practice of law, but also to instill a passion to be part of the textured tapestry displaying the great legacy of achievement by black alumni and the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law.

1 See Detroit Mercy Law Association of Black Law Alumni web page, Background.

<https://lawschool.udmercy.edu/alumni-giving/association-of-black-law-alumni.php>

2 ABLA Charter signed in 2018. <https://lawschool.udmercy.edu/alumni-giving/ABLA%20CHARTER.pdf>

3 Information, research, calculations and conclusions referenced herein are based on my review of information obtained through university and law school and other sources and are not the statements or conclusions of the University or the law school.

4 In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a rich tapestry panel woven with symbolic emblems, mottoes, coats of arms, canopy of state or cloth of state was hung behind and over a throne as a symbol of authority.

5 The Emerging Black Population, THE DETROIT FREE PRESS: THE DETROIT ALMANAC, 300 YEARS OF LIFE IN THE MOTOR CITY 107 (2000 reprinted 2006).

6 Black Bottom was located on Detroit's Near East Side and was bounded by Gratiot Avenue, Brush Street, Vernor Highway, and the Grand Trunk railroad tracks.

7 Prior to moving to 651 E. Jefferson the law school was located on the second floor of the Dinan Building, on the south side of Jefferson near Woodbridge. See Herman J. Muller, SJ, THE UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT, 1877-1977, A CENTENNIAL HISTORY 87(1976).

8 Id. At 88 n. 5.

9 See <https://lawschool.udmercy.edu/alumni-giving/association-of-black-law-alumni.php>, Trailblazers: First Known African American Graduates, Henry Tarrant.

10 For the school year 1921-1922, law school enrollment was 303 of whom 140 were freshman. See A CENTENNIAL HISTORY at 137.

11 The 1920 graduate portraits include a photo of F.J.I. Staff. University and law school records indicate, however, that Staff did not graduate.

12 The law school graduation portraits suggest F.J.I. Staff (1920) and Edyth Cogman (1923) to be among the graduates. Unfortunately, neither graduated. Records do indicate that Cogman failed to complete her final semester. Decades later, however, the law school located her family and bestowed a certificate of special recognition to her family.

13 See <https://lawschool.udmercy.edu/alumni-giving/association-of-black-law-alumni.php>, Trailblazers: First Known African American Graduates, Henry Tarrant.

14 Edward J. Littlejohn and Judge Donald I. Hobson, Black Lawyers, Law Practice and the Bar Associations - 1844 to 1970: A Michigan History, 49-51 (Wolverine Bar Assoc. reprint of 33 WAYNE L. REV. 1625 (1987)).

15 Although a consortium of local black lawyers and the NAACP assisted lead attorney Clarence Darrow, there is no record of Bledsoe actively participating in the trial that took place in November 1925. See also Kevin Boyle, ARC OF JUSTICE: A SAGA OF RACE, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND MURDER IN THE JAZZ AGE (2004)

16 Fall 2018 DOCKET. https://lawschool.udmercy.edu/_files/pdf/alumni-friends/Docket2018.pdf

17 See A Centennial History at 193.

18 See Littlejohn and Hobson at 49.

19 See Littlejohn and Hobson at 51.

20 Id.

21 A 1992 edition of the Docket includes a photo of Judge Louis Simmons '56 and refers to a University of Detroit Mercy Black Alumni Association. The article also states from 1991 – 1992 Judge Simmons was president of the Law Alumni Board. While the existence of a UD Mercy Black Alumni Association has been confirmed, little information has been located about its

function or when it dissolved. University documents show, however, that among its stated goals was the establishment of the Jessie Pharr Slaton Room in the Kresge Law Library and to create a \$1,000,000 scholarship fund in her honor.

22 Two of the partners, Myron H. Wahls and Damon J. Keith, were later appointed judges: Wahls to the Wayne County Circuit Court and later the Michigan Court of Appeals and Keith to the United States District Court and later to the United States Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit. Joseph Brown would become the first black senior partner at the Bodman Longley law firm in Detroit.

23 In 2018 his show was crowned the winner of the Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Legal/Courtroom Program.

24 He was also a tax manager at Ernst & Whinney in Detroit and an acknowledged scholar on a variety of complex tax laws. From 1994–95, he returned to Detroit Mercy Law as a Visiting Professor of Law.

25 Now known as Michigan State University College of Law.

26 Vanderbilt also won 19 league titles, and the football team advanced to six bowl games. The four team national championships: two in bowling, one in baseball and one in women's tennis.

27 “The Guardian, the London-based publication, “named the city’s revived stretch along the river as among the six best city walks in the world.” Detroit News, August 17, 2016.

28 The graduation numbers are based on 2019 university and law school review of records dating back to 1915.

29 Of the 570, 392 (69%) have graduated since 1990.

30 See <https://lawschool.udmercy.edu/alumni-giving/association-of-black-law-alumni.php>, Trailblazers: First Known African American Graduates, Henry Tarrant. Mr. Tarrant was an early member of the Harlan Law Club, the precursor of the Wolverine Bar Association, and the National Bar Association which is still strong today.

31 For decades, due to the large number of Detroit Mercy Law alumni who had become judges, Detroit Mercy Law was known as “the law school for judges”. In that sense it should be noted that of the 570 known black alumni:

- 23 (4.0%) became judges, with at least 3 becoming chief judges.
- Of the 23 judges:
 - 11 graduated from the 1980s,
 - 3 from the 1990s and 1970s,
 - 2 from the 1950s and the 1960s,

- 1 from the 1940s and the 2010s.
- The judges are:
 - Julian Rodgers '44
 - Jessie P. Slaton '50
 - Louis Simmons '56
 - Joseph Baltimore '67
 - Vera Massey Jones '69
 - Roy Roulhac '75
 - Gregory Holiday '77
 - Wendy M. Baxter '78
 - Marilyn E. Atkins '80
 - Maggie W. Drake '81
 - Leo Bowman '81
 - David Braxton '82
 - Denise K. Langford Morris '82
 - Leslie Kim Hogland (Smith) '83
 - Terrance A. Keith '84
 - Brenda K. Sanders '84
 - Donald Coleman '86
 - Gregory E. Mathis '88
 - Marsha K. Nettles '88
 - Wanda A. Evans '93
 - Latrice Westbrooks '97
 - Shannon A. Holmes '98
 - Kristina (Robinson) Garrett '10

