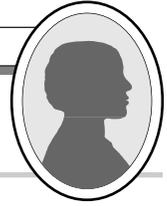


BIOGRAPHY



Thurgood Marshall

As a civil rights lawyer, Thurgood Marshall fought to gain the right to vote and to improve educational and housing opportunities for African Americans. As the first African American justice to sit on the Supreme Court, Marshall was equally dedicated to safeguarding the rights of all citizens under the U.S. Constitution.

As you read, think about how Thurgood Marshall dedicated himself to his cause.

When Thurgood Marshall was growing up, the idea that segregation in any form is unconstitutional was considered a radical concept. Just a few years before his birth in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1908, the Supreme Court had ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that segregation was legal, and worthy of protection by the law. Marshall's father, a Pullman car waiter turned country club steward, motivated his son to find a way to challenge segregation. "My father turned me into a lawyer without ever telling me what he wanted me to be," Marshall later said. "He taught me how to argue, challenged my logic on every point, even if we were discussing the weather."

After being denied admittance to the all-white University of Maryland Law School, Marshall enrolled in Howard University Law School, where he graduated first in his class. In 1933 Marshall became legal counsel for the Baltimore branch of the NAACP. One of his first legal victories was forcing the University of Maryland to admit its first African American student in 1935.

In addition to his work with the NAACP, Marshall maintained a private law practice. Making money, however, was never a priority for him. As one colleague observed, civil rights cases "seldom earned a lawyer anything but respect." Marshall "built up the largest law practice in Baltimore and still couldn't pay his rent."

Marshall spent the next quarter century prosecuting civil rights cases in state courts and before the U.S. Supreme Court. Of the thirty-two cases he argued on behalf of the NAACP before the Supreme Court, he won twenty-nine. His most important victory was the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*, a decision that sounded the death knell for legally protected segregation.

In 1961 President Kennedy nominated Thurgood Marshall to the U.S. Circuit Court. Despite the prestige of the appointment, which also would double his salary, Marshall found it hard to leave the civil rights struggle. "I had to fight it out with myself," he said, "[but] when one has the opportunity to serve his government, he should think twice before passing it up."

Marshall later served his government as U.S. Solicitor General (the nation's chief prosecuting attorney), and then as a Justice of the Supreme Court. He continued to champion the rights of the individual by opposing racial discrimination, capital punishment, and government encroachment on First Amendment rights. Marshall served on the Court until 1991, when poor health forced him to resign. When he died in 1993, President Clinton said of him: "He was a giant in the quest for human rights and equal opportunity in the whole history of our country. Every American should be grateful for the contributions he made as an advocate and as a justice of the United States Supreme Court."

Questions to Think About

1. Why must Marshall's victory for the NAACP in the University of Maryland case have been particularly satisfying to him?
2. **Testing Conclusions** Reread Clinton's assessment of Marshall. What contributions did Marshall make in the struggle for equality and justice for all Americans?