



BLACK HISTORY MONTH

"A CENTURY OF BLACK HISTORY COMMEMORATIONS"

February 2026 marks the 100th year of formally celebrating Black history in the United States. For members of the legal profession, Black History Month offers not only an opportunity to reflect on history, but also to consider the law's role in shaping—and responding to—the ongoing pursuit of justice, equity and civil rights.

What began as a weeklong observance has grown into a monthlong recognition that encourages deeper understanding of Black history, identity and the continuing struggle for equal protection under the law. Each year, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) selects a theme to guide Black History Month observances. In honor of this historic milestone, the 2026 theme is "A Century of Black History Commemorations."

"A Century of Black History Commemorations"

This theme marks 100 years since historian Carter G. Woodson established Black History Week in 1926. That effort eventually evolved into Black History Month, now observed nationwide. For the legal community, the theme invites reflection on how a century of recognizing Black history has intersected with the development of civil rights law, access to justice, and the profession's responsibility to uphold fairness and equality.

Black History and Culture in Louisville

A Historic Crossroads

Louisville holds a unique place in African American history—and in the legal history of the Commonwealth. Positioned on the Ohio River, a symbolic boundary between North and South, Louisville was shaped by the legacies of enslavement, emancipation, segregation and migration. These forces influenced not only the city's neighborhoods and institutions, but also its courts, laws and civic life.

Black Louisvillians have long been central to the city's cultural, economic and political vitality. Despite enduring discriminatory laws, segregation and systemic barriers, they built strong communities, professional networks, churches, schools and advocacy organizations—often using the law itself as a tool for progress and protection.

In the Spring of 1961, a group of Black high school students "sat in" at the basement lunch counter of Stewart's Dry Goods, then Louisville's largest department store. They were protesting the store's refusal to serve them food. From there, the demonstrations spread to movie theaters, the Blue Boar cafeterias and Fontaine Ferry Park, a popular amusement park west of downtown. The demonstrations lasted until Summer and also included an economic boycott of downtown businesses, known by participants as the "Nothing New for Easter" campaign.

City police arrested the demonstrators, although most were minors. Eventually the juvenile court docket became so crowded that officials were forced to dismiss the charges. In an effort to resolve the problems, the mayor appointed a committee of civic and business leaders to try to negotiate a voluntary end to segregation in downtown Louisville. It was not until a new mayor and slate of alderman were elected in the fall of 1961, however, that real progress was made. In March 1962, an ordinance creating the Louisville Human Rights Commission was enacted; and finally in May 1963, a public accommodations ordinance was passed, the first such city law in the South.

Muhammad Ali: Louisville's Most Famous Son

No discussion of Black history in Louisville is complete without recognizing Muhammad Ali. Born Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. in Louisville in 1942, Ali became one of the most iconic athletes—and activists—of the 20th century. Beyond his athletic achievements, Ali's refusal to be drafted during the Vietnam War placed him at the center of a defining legal and constitutional battle.

Ali's case ultimately reached the U.S. Supreme Court, underscoring the intersection of conscience, religious freedom and the rule of law. His legacy reminds legal professionals that the courts can serve as both instruments of injustice and powerful venues for protecting individual rights. Louisville honors his life and impact through the Muhammad Ali Center, which promotes dialogue around justice, respect and global citizenship.

Educational, Legal and Cultural Institutions

Louisville is home to institutions that preserve Black history while advancing education and opportunity—values closely aligned with the legal profession. Some of which include:

- The Louisville Urban League has worked for decades

to promote economic empowerment, education, workforce development and civil rights advocacy.

- The Kentucky Center for African American Heritage and Roots 101 African American Museum document and elevate local Black history, providing critical context for understanding present-day disparities and legal challenges.
- Simmons College of Kentucky, a historically Black college founded in Louisville, has educated generations of leaders committed to service, ethics and community advancement.

Together, these organizations—alongside libraries, schools, faith communities and cultural groups—extend learning beyond February, ensuring that Black history remains a living, shared community resource.

Arts, Culture and the Law

Louisville's Black community has long used art, music and storytelling as tools of expression and resistance. Jazz, blues, literature and visual art have documented lived experiences often excluded from official records.

For attorneys and judges, these cultural narratives offer valuable perspective, reminding us that behind every case file and statute are human stories shaped by history, identity and community.

Why Black History Month Matters to the Legal Profession

Black History Month is not merely a retrospective—it is a professional and ethical touchstone for those who work within the legal system:

- **Education and Equity:** Understanding Black history strengthens legal analysis by providing context for civil rights law, criminal justice reform, housing policy and educational equity.
- **Access to Justice:** Acknowledging historical barriers helps the profession confront ongoing disparities in representation, outcomes and trust in the legal system.
- **Professional Responsibility:** Lawyers play a critical role in safeguarding constitutional rights, challenging discrimination and ensuring the fair administration of justice.

In Louisville and across the nation, engaging with Black history encourages the legal community to reflect on its influence—and its obligations.

Conclusion

Black History Month underscores a fundamental truth: the history of African Americans is inseparable from the history of American law. From landmark Supreme Court cases and civil rights legislation to the daily work of local attorneys and judges, progress has been shaped by individuals willing to challenge injustice through legal means.

As Louisville observes this centennial year of commemoration, Black History Month offers an opportunity to recommit—to learning, to service and to the principles of justice and equality that define the profession. By honoring the past, we strengthen our capacity to serve the future. ■