

Breaking Barriers at the Bar

Honoring Kentucky's Black Legal Pioneers

February is Black History Month, making this a perfect time to reflect on the Black lawyers and judges whose courage, talent and perseverance helped shape Kentucky's legal community.

The first Black person admitted to the Kentucky Bar was **Nathaniel R. Harper**. Harper grew up in Indianapolis in the Civil War era and was informally educated by Dr. Willis Revels, whose brother, Hiram Revels, was the first Black United States senator (elected to the Senate from Mississippi in 1870). Harper moved to Louisville in 1871 and was admitted to the Bar shortly thereafter; according to a contemporary newspaper, his admission "created considerable of a sensation at the time." Harper's life and contributions are simply extraordinary—he was a member of the State Industrial Bureau and worked to encourage Black integration into Kentucky industry, he was the first Black judge in Kentucky, he founded a law school out of his Main Street office (which later became part of Central College), he founded a newspaper (the *Louisville Weekly Planet*), founded a traveling dramatic company (Tallaboo Dramatic Company) and helped found the St. James A.M.E. Church—where he also played organ.

Alberta Odell Jones broke barriers as one of the first Black women to pass the Kentucky Bar Exam and the first woman appointed to the Louisville City Attorney's Office. At a time when the profession offered few opportunities to women and even fewer to women of color, she distinguished herself as a skilled lawyer and committed public servant. She was deeply engaged in civil rights work, including voter registration efforts in Louisville's Black neighborhoods, and she assisted a young Cassius Clay. Her life was tragically cut short in 1965, but her commitment to justice continues to resonate throughout our community.

That legacy is being increasingly and appropriately recognized. A park bearing Jones' name opened in Louisville's California neighborhood. Last year, a portrait of Jones was unveiled at the Kentucky Capitol to commemorate Women's History Month. And the **Finer Pearls Foundation**, working with Jefferson County Attorney **Mike O'Connell**, have successfully raised more than \$125,000 to commission a statue honoring Alberta Jones, to be placed in front of the Hall of Justice. O'Connell expects the statute to be installed and dedicated in late spring, 2026.

Justice William E. McAnulty Jr.'s life was a string of firsts. He was one of the first Black judges in Jefferson County and

the Commonwealth's first Black cabinet-level official; he was appointed by John Y. Brown as state justice secretary in 1980 but left the post after a month so he could spend more time with his family. Justice McAnulty went on to an exceptionally distinguished judicial career, serving as a District Court judge, Circuit Court Judge, Chief Judge of Jefferson Circuit Court, Court of Appeals Judge and Kentucky Supreme Court Justice.

Justice McAnulty was a long-time, prominent supporter of equal access to the law. In 1991, as chair of the Metro United Way, he advocated for funds to establish a program for those living with HIV/AIDS, leading to the formation of the HIV/AIDS Legal Project. Late in his tenure on the Kentucky Supreme Court, Justice McAnulty voted to increase funding to Legal Aid from the IOLTA fund. And shortly before his death in 2007, he spoke at the dedication of the Legal Aid Society of Louisville's then-new office.

The LBA, of course, gives an annual award in Justice McAnulty's honor. Past recipients include many eminent lawyers and judges who have worked to foster equity in Louisville. The 2026 McAnulty Award winner will be announced this month.

It is quite humbling to reflect on the lives of Alberta Jones, Justice McAnulty and Nathaniel Harper, and to consider what they accomplished in times of segregation, prejudice and unequal opportunity.

Looking forward, mark your calendar for the LBA's **35th Annual Skaggs Slyn Revell Domestic Relations Law Update**, featuring Lynch, Cox, Gilman & Goodman attorneys Emily T. Ceconi, Nathan R. Hardymon and Elizabeth M. Howell and John H. Helmers Jr., Helmers + Associates. That program will review key decisions issued by the Kentucky Supreme Court and Kentucky Court of Appeals during the 2025 calendar year, followed by a panel discussion offering practitioners a practical overview of recent developments in domestic relations law.



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Samuel W. Wardle
LBA President