BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Cynthia R. Mabry*

I. INTRODUCTION

In Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844-1944 ("Emancipation"), Dr. J. Clay Smith, Jr., a law professor and a prolific writer, pens a spellbinding factual narrative of the history of African American lawyers. Dr. Smith identifies hundreds of African American men and women who became lawyers between 1844 and 1944.

The social and legal history chronicled in Emancipation begins with the first African American lawyer, Macon Bolling Allen, who was licensed to practice in Maine in 1844. It ends with Rachel E. Pruden-Herndon, the first African American woman admitted to the Georgia bar in 1943. With meticulous detail, Dr. Smith recounts African American attorneys' relentless efforts to gain admittance to the bar; to earn the respect of white judges, opposing counsel, and jurors who controlled their client's fate; and to emancipate other African Americans. Notable lawyers, like Thurgood Marshall, as well as little-known lawyers, like Lutie Lytle—America's first female law professor—are mentioned.

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II. *Emancipation* is a Comprehensive Study of African American History

In the first chapter of *Emancipation*, Dr. Smith compares African American law students' experiences at predominately white law schools with their experiences at predominately African American law schools. Chapters two through nine are divided into eight regions of the United States: New England, Atlantic, Southeast, South, Southwest, Northeast, Northwest and Pacific.

Dr. Smith further subdivides each regional chapter by state. Thus, Dr. Smith introduces African American attorneys according to where they became licensed and where they practiced law. This organization makes *Emancipation* an easily accessible resource for anyone researching African American lawyers' bar membership and practice in a particular state. The last chapter of *Emancipation* reveals information about African American lawyers' attempts to become members of white bar associations and to establish their own bar groups. At the end of each chapter, Dr. Smith summarizes the contents of the chapter.

In the beginning of the book, Dr. Smith discusses African American students' enrollment at white law schools. This integration occurred decades before the United States Supreme Court ordered school desegregation in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.* As early as 1868, George Lewis Ruffin enrolled at Harvard University School of Law.

In Dr. Smith's opinion, most white law students were cordial, tolerant, and supportive of their African American colleagues. To illustrate, Dr. Smith writes about Philip Werner Amram, a Jewish editor-in-chief of the *Pennsylvania Law Review*. Amram, whose father was a law professor, threatened to resign as editor. Amram was rebelling against the University of Pennsylvania Law School dean's refusal to allow a qualified African American student to become a law review member. The dean had vowed

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Dr. Smith concludes, however, that the majority of African American lawyers were trained at African American law schools like Howard University School of Law. Thus, he gives extensive history about the establishment of each African American law school, its mission, its professors, and its students. Howard University School of Law, the first African American law school in the nation, was established in 1869. *Id.* at 41. Howard professors educated Asian, Hispanic, and white students, too. *Id.* at 56. In fact, Emma Gillett was one white Howard graduate who later founded the Washington College of Law for Women and became the first female dean of a law school. *Id.* at 54, 84 & n.219. Surprisingly, though, under Gillett's tutelage, African Americans were barred from the Washington College of Law for Women. *Id.* at 84 & n.219.
that he would not "break precedent by permitting a black woman membership on the Board."\(^5\)

On the other hand, some law students experienced overt racism from their colleagues. Shortly after he began law school in 1890, William Ashbie Hawkins was forced to leave the University of Maryland Law School when a majority of the students signed an anti-Black petition. Two years later, Hawkins graduated from Howard University School of Law and became a leading civil rights lawyer in Maryland. He was vindicated forty-six years later when Thurgood Marshall and Charles Hamilton Houston won a lawsuit that forced the University of Maryland to reopen its doors to African American law students.\(^6\)

Throughout the book, Dr. Smith explains how African American men and women overcame tremendous obstacles and adversity while systematically dismantling racial barriers. Dr. Smith relates that among other misconceptions, there was a presumption of incompetence against African American lawyers. They were often criticized by white media, judges, and other lawyers.

Unfortunately, the courtroom was no haven from discriminatory degradation. Certain judges either refused to recognize African American lawyers in the courtroom or insisted that they present their cases from the gallery. Both judges and opposing counsel engaged in vile name-calling in the presence of the jury and the African American lawyer's client.\(^7\)

Between 1844 and 1944, the United States Supreme Court was a doctrinal cornerstone for official racism.\(^8\) In 1871, the Court upheld a Kentucky law which barred "[N]egroes" and "Indians" from testifying for or against white people in any case.\(^9\) In 1896, the Court ruled that separate facilities for different racial groups were acceptable as long as the facilities, if they existed at all, were substantially equal.\(^10\)

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5. Id. at 39.

6. Pearson v. Murray, 182 A. 590, 594 (Md. 1936) (ordering University of Maryland to admit African American students to the only state law school). This was also a sweet victory for Thurgood Marshall. University of Maryland administrators also rejected Marshall's application solely because he was African American. Wendy Brown-Scott, Justice Thurgood Marshall And the Integrative Ideal, 26 ARIZ. ST. L.J. 535, n. 87 (Summer 1994); Vance Knapp & Bonnie Grover, Can the Corporate Law Firm Achieve Diversity, NBA MAG., March/April 1994, at 8. See also Missouri ex. rel. Gaines v. Canada, 305 U.S. 337 (1938) (forbidding alternative arrangements for African American students to attend out-of-state schools to avoid providing facilities for them in state schools); Juan Williams, Eyes On The Prize 11 (1987) (indicating the procedural history of the Pearson lawsuit) [hereinafter Williams]; Emancipation, supra note 5, at 145.

7. See, e.g., Emancipation, supra note 5, at 271, 295, 334.


But of course, times, views, and values change. In a 1989 speech, Justice Thurgood Marshall announced that "[f]or many years, no institution of American government has been as close a friend to civil rights as the United States Supreme Court." Annual Judicial Conference Second Judicial Circuit of the United States, 130 F.R.D. 161, 166 (1990). Justice Marshall conceded, however, that the Court's position with respect to civil rights issues had changed "markedly" over the years. Id. at 166.


Conversely, while some African American attorneys futilely endeavored to acquire clients and respect, Dr. Smith tells about others who excelled during the same century. They were politicians, businesspersons, judges, magistrates, government attorneys, professors, deans, and successful private practitioners.

Some African American barristers received praise for their litigation skills. They were so outstanding that white corporate officials and judges—who found themselves on the wrong side of the bench—sought their advice. However, this kind of response did not appear to be the normal reaction to African American lawyers. The typical response, as previously described, was negative.

According to Dr. Smith, African American attorneys' "central objective" was "the emancipation of their people." His vivid portrayal reveals myriad victories that African American lawyers won for their African American clientele.

Dr. Smith's review of seminal cases provides insight regarding the extent of racial injustices African Americans suffered during the one-hundred-year period covered in Emanicipation. These pioneers of social change challenged and won repeal or amendment of discriminatory laws and practices. They made it possible for African Americans to register and vote, purchase property free of restrictive covenants, serve on grand juries, and gain access to railroad trains, streetcars, restaurants, and theaters. Moreover, as a consequence of African American lawyers' tenacity, New Jersey public schools, the Indiana state militia, and New...
Jersey swimming pools\textsuperscript{21} were desegregated. African American advocates also secured other remedies for African Americans: payment of damages for civil rights violations,\textsuperscript{22} equal salaries for teachers,\textsuperscript{23} employment,\textsuperscript{24} and acquittals for those charged with sundry crimes such as rape.\textsuperscript{25}

Nevertheless, it is important to note that these advocates’ contributions benefitted society as a whole.\textsuperscript{26} As Dr. Smith reports, African American attorneys also represented Caucasian, Asian, West Indian, Jewish, and Italian clients in a wide variety of lawsuits.\textsuperscript{27}

In Emancipation, Dr. Smith also identifies white politicians, judges, lawyers, and professors who mentored African American women and men. Dr. Smith unveils details of some supporters’ civic-minded acts. Philanthropists sponsored African American apprentices in their law offices, financed their education, recommended them for admission to the bar, litigated cases with them, and assisted them to find employment.

Dr. Smith names several generous benefactors, including Samuel Clemens (popularly known as Mark Twain). Apparently, without these white philanthropists’ support, many African Americans would not have become lawyers.

In the last chapter of Emancipation, Dr. Smith writes about African American lawyers’ ostracism from bar associations. Several white bar members vehemently opposed such segregation and joined African American lawyers in a five-year battle for desegregation. Consequently, the American Bar Association was formally integrated in 1943, almost one hundred years after the first African American lawyer was licensed.

III. DISCUSSION

There is a dearth of publications about African American lawyers.\textsuperscript{28} Generally, African American history is not an integral part of any child’s

\textsuperscript{21} Patterson v. Board of Educ., 11 N.J. 179, aff’d, 164 A. 892 (1933) (permitting African American and white high school students to take swimming lessons together in New Jersey).

\textsuperscript{22} In 1890, Attorney Thomas McCants Stewart represented a newspaper editor whom a saloon proprietor refused to serve and forcibly ejected the editor from the saloon. Twelve white jurors awarded the editor $1,016. Emancipation, supra note 5, at 395-96 & n.256.

\textsuperscript{23} Alston v. School Bd., 112 F.2d 992, 996 (4th Cir. 1940); Mills v. Board of Educ., 30 F. Supp. 245 (D. Md. 1939) (securing injunction against salary differentials in Maryland public schools).

\textsuperscript{24} For instance, five African American attorneys successfully represented another African American lawyer when the chief judge of a municipal court refused to recognize the lawyer’s appointment for a judgeship. People ex rel. Prescott v. Scheffler, 45 N.E.2d 36, 38 (Ill. 1942).

\textsuperscript{25} See, e.g., Legions v. Commonwealth, 23 S.E.2d 764, 765 (Va. 1943) (Charles Hamilton Houston and Oliver Hill defending a young African American man accused of raping a white woman).

\textsuperscript{26} William L. Taylor, In Memory of Thurgood Marshall, 68 N.Y.U. L. Rev. 211 (1993) (“All Americans are in Thurgood’s debt, whether they know it or not.”). “[I]t would be a mistake to remember Justice Marshall [solely for his work toward racial equality], for he was driven by a commitment to justice, equality, and opportunity for all of the powerless members of American society: racial minorities, the poor, criminal defendants, the aged, and immigrants . . . rock music fans, students, people with long hair . . . .” Thurgood Marshall and His Legacy: A Tribute, 2 Temp. Pol. & Civ. Rts. L. Rev. 163 (1993).

\textsuperscript{27} See, e.g., Emancipation, supra note 5, at 155, 400, 511.

or adult's education. Thus, Dr. Smith’s book fills a vacuum of knowledge about African American social history.

Dr. Smith utilizes voluminous materials to piece together sparsely recorded information and enlightens his readers about African American lawyers. He combed law review articles, journals, charts, photographs, books, letters, newspapers, magazines, and school bulletins for tidbits. In addition, he conducted personal interviews. To supplement all of the historical facts memorialized in the text, Emancipation contains hundreds of detailed footnotes, a bibliography, and a table of cases litigated by, or on behalf of, African Americans. Subsequently, Dr. Smith composed the most comprehensive study ever written about African American lawyers.29 It is no wonder that it took twenty-five years for him to complete Emancipation.30

Dr. Smith’s descriptive narrative is uplifting. It tells how African American lawyers excelled during a period when many states prohibited African Americans from working in professional, and most unprofessional, positions.

During “Jim Crow” days, institutionalized segregation pervaded all critical aspects of African American life. Schools, transportation vehicles, and all public and private facilities were segregated.31 Poll taxes prevented African Americans from voting.32 Yet, Dr. Smith’s inspirational book shows readers that this was a time when African American lawyers made substantial progress toward emancipating African American people.

On the other hand, many of these lawyers were struggling to make a living, too. Only a few white clients sought their counsel. To add insult to injury, some African Americans, such as those in the NAACP, who should have sought the representation of African American attorneys, did not. Moreover, African American lawyers were disadvantaged because they lacked adequate resources. They did not have legal reporters, access to rules of procedure, sample briefs, or adequate facilities to prepare oral arguments.33

As an African American lawyer, it was unsettling for me to read some of the history in Emancipation. It was troubling because many of the difficulties African American law students and lawyers withstood over fifty-one years ago still exist today.

Racism still abounds.34 “Credentialed black professionals who have achieved levels of success superior to many of their white counterparts


29. Dr. Smith wrote that he intended for Emancipation “to be the first definitive effort to identify and to portray collectively all that is available about black lawyers.” Emancipation, supra note 5, at xiv. He has expertly accomplished his goal.

30. Interview with Dr. J. Clay Smith, Jr., at Howard University School of Law (Mar. 18, 1994).


33. Williams, supra note 7, at 5 (quoting James Nabrit).

must in every new setting nevertheless continually rebut a presumption of incompetence.”

Prejudice and stereotypes hinder African American lawyers’ advancement as law school students, law professors, lawyers, and judges. In the 1990s, only a very small number of African American lawyers are employed at large law firms. The movement to eliminate such biases is still gaining ground. In August 1995, the American Bar Association’s House of Delegates passed a resolution condemning the exercise of bias in professional activities and law firm operations.

Yet, there is still much ground to cover. In 1991, Justice Marshall painted a grim picture of African Americans’ social status in the United States. He stated that “progress has slowed down . . . indeed, it might have stopped.”

As in the period before 1944, current African American college and graduate students are financially unable to finance an expensive legal education. The scarce financial aid that is available may be revoked. Until last year, the University of Maryland provided a merit scholarship, set aside especially for African American students. The United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit enjoined consideration of a student’s African American heritage as a qualification for that scholarship.

Likewise, state and federal policy changes are effecting a decrease in the number of African American students admitted to institutions of higher learning. This year, Governor Pete Wilson of California, along with the Regents of the University of California, recanted affirmative action policies that included consideration of race and sex for University of California admissions decisions.

Those African American students who are admitted to college and law school may not have a positive social experience. Today, racial tension and polarization persists on predominately white college and graduate school


36. Decades after Pearson, the decision had no apparent impact on several law schools’ admission policies. Racial prejudice still prevented African Americans from enrolling at the law school of their choice. See, e.g., Benjamin J. Cardozo, Racial Discrimination in Legal Education, 1950 to 1963, 43 J. LEGAL EDUC. 79-84 (1993) (espousing the American Association of Law School’s efforts in 1950 to establish a policy against racial discrimination at member law schools); Peter Applebome, A Hot Summer of Bloodshed and Change, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 6, 1994, § L at 30 (noting that the University of Mississippi Law School denied Medgar Evers’ application). See also CYNTHIA F. EPSTEIN, WOMEN IN THE LAW 15, 83 (1981) (citing “common cultural attitude[ ] that African Americans . . . were incapacitated for professional work” as a reason for failing to recruit them for law school).


38. The ABA denounced racial bias “unless such words or conduct are otherwise permissible as legitimate advocacy.” ABA House Backs Affirmative Action, A.B.A. J., October 1995, at 18.


campuses. Reported racist incidents include overt use of racial epithets and circulation of racially derogatory materials.42

African American students and law professors are still victims of physical and verbal racial attacks. In 1995, one hundred and five years after William Ashbie Hawkins was ejected from the University of Maryland, a student threw a chair from a fraternity house window. He aimed the chair at an African American law professor who was photographing the "Sambo" statue on the University of Arkansas fraternity house lawn.43

Seventy years after students at the University of Maryland made William Ashbie Hawkins feel unwelcome, James Meredith needed federal marshals to escort him into the University of Mississippi.44 Now, Louis Westerfield is the first African American dean of the University of Mississippi Law School. Dean Westerfield sadly admits that without his business suit he "become[s] just another Black man in Oxford, Mississippi . . . . To a certain extent, that changes [his] status. That’s a shame, but that’s a reality."45 Some change has occurred since 1944, but there is so much more to be done.

III. Conclusion

Emancipation is a book that should be placed on a shelf in every library. It is recommended reading for lawyers and prospective lawyers of all races. It is also recommended for anyone who is interested in United States history. Perhaps Justice Thurgood Marshall, the author of the Foreword to Emancipation, described the book best: “One cannot read it without being inspired by the legal acumen, creativity, and resiliency these pioneering lawyers displayed . . . . It should be read by everyone interested in understanding the road African Americans have travelled and the challenges that lie ahead.”46


44. Black Law Dean Ushers in a New Day at Ole Miss, EBONY, Aug. 1995, at 128.

45. Id.

46. EMANCIPATION, supra note 5, at xii.