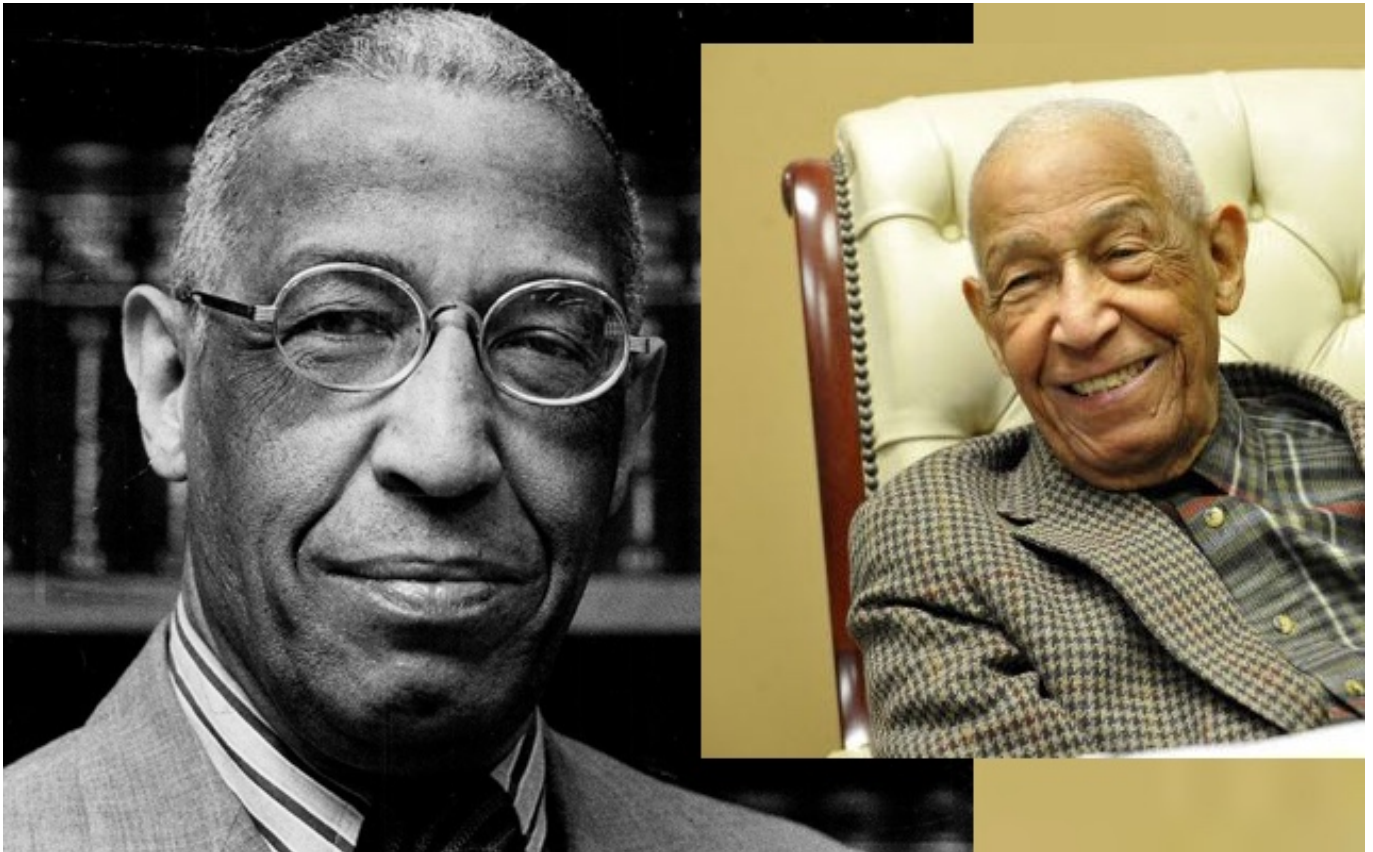


George Leighton, legendary Chicago judge and courthouse namesake, dies at 105



George Leighton, legendary Chicago judge and courthouse namesake, dies at 105



Legendary Chicago jurist George N. Leighton — a longtime county and federal judge, the first African-American to sit on the Illinois Appellate Court and the namesake of the criminal courthouse at 26th and California — has died at age 105.

He died Wednesday afternoon at a veterans hospital in Brockton, Massachusetts, following a weeklong bout with pneumonia, according to Langdon Neal, the managing member of Neal & Leroy where Leighton worked for more than two decades after retiring from the bench.

“He will go down as one of this nation’s greatest civil rights lawyers,” Neal said. “Not just in advancement of racial equality, but fighting for everyone to ensure the Constitution protected all individuals.”

Leighton grew up near New Bedford, Mass., picking cranberries and blueberries with his

parents, immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands off Africa's coast. He didn't learn much English early on, never finished school and never went to high school. Instead, he got a job in a ship's kitchen until he was thrown off in a mutiny. He talked his way into Howard University.

He did so well at Howard that he was able to talk his way into Harvard Law School, again on a scholarship, working odd jobs to support himself. But when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Leighton took a break from Harvard to spend four years as a second lieutenant in places such as Guadalcanal.

His Harvard law degree did not open any law firm doors in a segregated Chicago in 1946, but Leighton made a name for himself defending those who couldn't pay, going all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court with cases.

"I join the legal community in mourning the passing of our friend and my former law professor, George N. Leighton. He served the public in many ways as a Circuit Judge, an Illinois Appellate Justice and a U.S. District Court Judge," Cook County Circuit Court Chief Judge Timothy Evans said in a statement.

It was a time "when an African-American man could neither rent an office downtown nor hail a taxi in the Loop," Evans said in a statement.

"He made a name for himself as an attorney who fought for voting rights, integrated schools, fair housing and equal access to jury service," he said.

Leighton worked out of a two-man law office in the shadows of the old Comiskey Park on the South Side during 18 years as a defense attorney.

"I did a lot of volunteering, and I did have my share of death penalty cases — in those days it was a lot quicker from [trial] to sentencing," Leighton said in a 2012 interview with the Chicago Sun-Times.

In 1951, Leighton was indicted for provoking a race riot in Cicero because he had told his clients, an African-American family, that it was OK to move there. Represented by Thurgood Marshall — who would go on to become the first African-American U.S. Supreme Court justice — Leighton was eventually cleared.

Evans cited that "courage" as a reason county officials moved to name the criminal courts building after Leighton in 2012.

"That day, he said, 'I practiced law. That's all I did.' Well, we all know it was so much more," Evans said. "And we will always remember the man who made it his mission to make sure that the law was equally applied to all."

After the Cicero case, Leighton received a call “unsolicited” from Mayor Richard J. Daley asking him to be a candidate for Cook County judge, Leighton recalled in 2012. Following such a call in those days, the election was a formality, and later he was elevated to the state appellate court — the first African-American on that panel.

Then, Republican Sen. Charles Percy called. “Even though I was a Democratic Party liberal, he said President Gerald Ford wanted to nominate me to the federal bench,” Leighton said.

Neal recalled his first encounter with Leighton, appearing before him in U.S. District Court in 1983.

“I was a little bit awestruck. His courtroom demeanor and his use of the English language, his firmness and yet compassion,” Neal said.

He served there until retirement in 1989, when he joined Langdon Neal at the firm started by his father Earl Neal, an old friend of Leighton.

“He could have worked anywhere he wanted because of his background, but it was important to him to work for a minority-owned firm,” Neal said.

He worked there until he was 99.

“Other than playing chess, he really didn’t have any hobbies,” Neal said. “Practicing law was not only what he did for a living, but it was who he was as a person.”

Leighton is survived by two adult daughters, five grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. Services are being planned.

Mitchell Armentrout

from chicago.suntimes.com