

Constance Baker Motley



The 47th stamp in the Black Heritage series, and the 19th featuring a woman, honors Constance Baker Motley (September 14, 1921 – September 28, 2005), the first Black woman known to have argued a case before the United States Supreme Court and the first to serve as a federal judge. The stamp features a portrait of Motley created by Charly Palmer. According to the U. S. Postal Service, the stenciled circular shapes create a subtle crowning effect, and the heavy brushstrokes and scratches add texture to the acrylic-on-canvas work. Stenciled curlicues embellish the lower background and continue onto Motley's black dress. Derry Noyes, an art director for USPS, designed the stamp. The first day of issue for the stamp will be January 31, 2024, in New York City. Constance Baker Motley was an “unsung” hero of the civil rights movement. After graduating from Columbia's Law School in 1946, she became the only female attorney at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and she also was the only woman who argued, tried, and won most of the important desegregation cases in court during much of the civil rights movement. From 1946 through 1964, she was a key litigator and legal strategist for landmark civil rights cases including the Montgomery Bus Boycott and represented Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as other protesters who were arrested and jailed. In 1950, she wrote the original complaint in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. As the first Black woman ever to argue a case before the U. S. Supreme Court, in *Meredith v. Fair*, Motley won James Meredith's effort to be the first Black student to attend the University of Mississippi in 1962. Motley was successful in nine of the ten cases she argued before the Supreme Court. The tenth decision, regarding jury composition, eventually was overturned in her favor. The photograph, taken September 1962, shows James Meredith with attorney Constance Baker Motley at the U. S. Fifth Circuit Court in New Orleans, at the time of his suit against the University of Mississippi. The first Black woman to graduate from Columbia University School of Law in 1946, Motley went on to defend the Freedom Riders of Montgomery. In 1964, she was the first Black American to serve as a New York state senator. In 1965, she was also the first woman to become Manhattan Borough President in New York, and a year later, the first Black American woman to be appointed a federal judge. Motley was nominated by President Lyndon B. Johnson on January 26, 1966, to a seat on the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York vacated by Judge Archie Owen Dawson. Senator James Eastland of Mississippi delayed her confirmation process for seven months. Eastland was in opposition to her past desegregation work including *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Meredith v. Fair*. He used his influence as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee to disrupt Motley's nomination, and went as far as accusing her of being a member of the Communist Party. Despite opposition, she was confirmed by the United States Senate on August 30, 1966, and received her commission the same day, becoming the first Black American female federal judge. In addition to writing briefs in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Constance Baker Motley was trial or appellate counsel in 57 cases in the United States Supreme Court, 82 cases in federal courts of appeals, 48 cases in federal district courts, and numerous cases in state courts. She won cases that ended de jure segregation in White-only restaurants and lunch counters, protected the right of protestors to march, sit-in, freedom ride, and demonstrate in other ways, and secured the right for Blacks to register, vote, and have access to the political power structure.

Notably, Motley handed down a breakthrough decision for women in sports broadcasting in 1978, when she ruled that a female reporter must be allowed into a Major League Baseball (Yankees) locker room. Constance Baker Motley has achieved several honors and awards. In 1993, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. In 2001, Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Citizens Medal. The NAACP awarded her the Spingarn Medal, the organization's highest honor, in 2003. In 2006, Motley posthumously received the Congressional Gold Medal from Congress for all of her accomplishments during her lifetime. Motley was a prominent honorary member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and the fifth honorary member of Links, Inc. Constance Baker married Joel Motley, Jr., a real estate and insurance broker, in 1946 at Saint Lukes Episcopal Church in New Haven, Connecticut. They lived in Harlem, New York City and maintained a second home in Chester, Connecticut, from 1965 until her death. Her funeral was held at the Connecticut church where she had been married; a public memorial service was held at Riverside Church in Manhattan. She left one son, Joel Wilson Motley III, and three grandchildren. In 2022, Civil Rights Queen, an "immersive" biography of Motley, was published. Coincidentally, the first Black female associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, Ketanji Brown Jackson, and Constance Baker Motley share the same birthday, September 14. Both Jackson and U. S. Vice President Kamala Harris have cited Motley as an influence on their own law careers.

By Don Neal