Timeline of African-American Legal History in Nevada (1861-2011)

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN LEGAL HISTORY IN NEVADA (1861 – 2011)

BY PROF. RACHEL J. ANDERSON

This timeline depicts selected events in the history of African-American lawyers, civil rights, and diversity in Nevada’s bar and on the bench. A more comprehensive version of this timeline is available on the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association website (www.lasvegasnba.org) and in the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association Archive at the Wiener-Rogers Law Library at the UNLV Boyd School of Law.

1800

1861 American Civil War (until 1865)
1861 Nevada organized as a U.S. territory
1861 First Nevada Territorial Legislature criminalizes gambling
1861 First Nevada Territorial Legislature criminalizes interracial marriage (1861 Nev. Terr. Stat., ch. 32, at 93) and prohibits “coloreds,” including blacks, Native Americans and Chinese from appearing as witnesses against white men; blacks publicly object and demand civil rights, right to vote, public education for children, right to bear witness in court and to serve on juries (This timeline uses the term “blacks” until African Americans are granted citizenship under 14th Amendment in 1868.)
1864 Nevada admitted as 36th state of the United States
Mid-1860s Blacks migrate to Virginia City
1865 Slavery abolished except as punishment for a crime (U.S. Const. amend. XIII)
1865 Nevada Executive Committee formed by blacks in Virginia City petitions Nevada Legislature for voting rights
1866 U.S. Congress passes Civil Rights Act of 1866 (ch. 31, 14 Stat. 27 (1866)), granting civil rights to all persons in the United States
1866 Nevada Executive Committee petitions Nevada Legislature for school desegregation and right to testify in civil cases

1861 Nev. Terr. Stat., ch. 32, at 93

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1868  African Americans granted citizenship, right to due process of law and equal protection of law under federal and state governments (U.S. Const. amend. XIV)

1870  African-American men receive voting rights (U.S. Const. amend. XV)

1872  Nevada Supreme Court holds that excluding African Americans from public schools is unconstitutional but approves separate schools segregated by race as constitutional (State ex rel. Stoutmeyer v. Duffy, 7 Nev. 342 (1872)); Virginia City public schools integrate following ruling

1896  U.S. Supreme Court upholds “separate but equal” racial segregation as constitutional (Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896))

1900

1903  City of Reno incorporated

Pre-1905  African Americans settle in Las Vegas Valley

1905  City of Las Vegas founded

1905  African-American workers migrate to Las Vegas; housing and theaters are segregated

1905  McWilliams Townsite established at newly completed railroad connection to Las Vegas, later known as “Westside,” a predominantly African-American neighborhood with substandard infrastructure

1909  Clark County created

1910

1911  City of Las Vegas incorporated

1912  Nevada Legislature expands statutory ban on interracial marriage to prohibit marriages between “any person of the Caucasian or white race” and “any person of Ethiopian or black race, Malay or brown race, Mongolian or yellow race, or American Indian or red race...” (Rev. Laws Nev., §§ 6514-17 (1912))


1914  World War I (until 1918)

1919  Nevada Legislature amends statutory ban on interracial marriage to permit marriages between Caucasians and Native Americans (1919 Nev. Stat., ch. 69, at 109)

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1920  Women, including African-American women, granted right to vote (U.S. Const. amend. XIX)

1924  Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members march on Fremont Street in Las Vegas

1925  KKK burns crosses on Peavine Mountain during initiation of 2,000 men

1925  National Bar Association (NBA) established in Des Moines, Iowa (of the fewer than 1,000 African-American lawyers in the United States, 12 percent belonged to newly founded NBA)

1928  Nevada Legislature establishes State Bar of Nevada

1928  NAACP establishes Las Vegas branch

1928  U.S. Congress authorizes Hoover Dam construction project

1930  Six Companies, Inc. hires 4,000 men to work on Hoover Dam, none are African American; construction starts in 1931

1931  NAACP members found Colored Citizens’ Labor and Protective Association to locate and prepare proper candidates for jobs on dam work crews

1931  Casino gambling legalized in Nevada

1932  Federal government creates and manages Boulder City, a racially segregated town initially excluding African Americans (first Boulder City housing was completed and occupied by fall of 1931)

1932  Six Companies, Inc., responding to pressure by federal officials, hires first 10 African-American workers for Hoover Dam project, employing only 44 African Americans out of 20,000 workers during entire construction period

Mid-1930s  At least one Las Vegas newspaper begins anti-African American reporting, a shift from a seemingly race-neutral tone to negative coverage

Late 1930s  Las Vegas city officials force African-American-owned businesses to relocate to Westside as precondition to obtaining licenses

1939  World War II (until 1945)
1939  Nevada Assembly rejects Assembly Bill 88, which, if successful, would have mandated equal rights in Nevada

1940  Circa 1940  Veterans Administration Hospital in Reno integrates after Alfred Smith, an African-American World War I veteran, is refused service several times

1941  President Franklin D. Roosevelt issues Executive Order 8802, prohibiting racial discrimination in federal government and defense industry hiring practices

1942  African Americans start migrating to Nevada from small southern towns

1942  Operating permit for Shamrock Hotel, proposed by Horace Heidt Corp. as first interracial hotel in downtown Las Vegas, denied due to protests by nearby whites and Las Vegas’s emerging Jim Crow policy

1943  City of Henderson founded

1943  200 African-American men strike Basic Magnesium Incorporated (BMI) Las Vegas for better working conditions

1943  Carver Park, a segregated section of Henderson comprised of a 324-unit project for BMI’s African-American employees, opens

Living conditions in racially segregated, predominantly African-American “Westside” Las Vegas  
(Source: Nevada State Museum, photo taken in 1942)
1947 Assembly Bill No. 5, outlawing racial discrimination in public accommodations, referred to Committee on Social Welfare where it dies.

1950

Korean War (until 1953)

City of Henderson incorporated

U.S. Supreme Court overtures Plessy v. Ferguson, holding “separate but equal” segregation unconstitutional (Brown v. Bd. of Educ., 347 U.S. 483 (1954))

United States official involvement in Vietnam War (until 1973)

Moulin Rouge opens, making it first integrated hotel and casino

Hotel casinos again allow African-American entertainers to stay at hotels where they perform

NAACP forms Mineral County Branch in Hawthorne

Nevada Legislature fails to pass civil rights bill

Governor Grant Sawyer proclaims February 8-15 Negro History Week (Proclamation by Governor Grant Sawyer declaring “February 8-15 as Negro History Week,” 4 Proclamations 326 (Feb. 6, 1959))

Charles L. Kellar, an African-American attorney admitted to practice in New York, relocates to Nevada at request of Thurgood Marshall, head of NAACP Bar Representation Program

Nevada Legislature repeals ban on interracial marriage (1959 Nev. Stat., ch. 193, at 216) after Harry Bridges and Noriko Sawada successfully challenge a court clerk’s denial of a marriage license in Reno on grounds that it violated the state’s ban on interracial marriage.

Nevada Legislature passes bill prohibiting discrimination in procurement (1959 Nev. Stat., ch. 126, at 137)

State Advisory Committee to U.S. Commission on Civil Rights finds general discrimination against minority groups in public accommodations in Las Vegas and Reno.

1960

Reno activists and community leaders use visibility of Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley ski resort to apply pressure to reform racially discriminatory policies and practices in northern Nevada.

NAACP members picket F.W. Woolworth Co. in Reno as part of national protest

NAACP threatens massive march if Las Vegas Strip not desegregated

Moulin Rouge Verbal Agreement between NAACP leaders, Las Vegas Mayor Oran Gragson and Hank Greenspun results in integration of Las Vegas Strip.

1961

Civil Rights Protest at the Capitol in Carson City

(Petition of Kellar, 79 Nev. 28 (1963))

Charles L. Kellar receives a passing score on Nevada bar exam, making him first African American to pass State Bar Exam, but State Bar of Nevada denies him admission to practice law.

1959 Nev. Stat., ch. 193, at 216

Assembly Bill No. 10—Committee on Judiciary

CHAPTER 193

An Act to repeal NRS sections 122.245 and 122.246 relating to unlawful discriminatory practices and providing procedures for persons establishing a prima facie case of discrimination.

1959 Nev. Stat., ch. 126, at 137

State Advisory Committee to U.S. Commission on Civil Rights finds general discrimination against minority groups in public accommodations in Las Vegas and Reno.

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1961 Over 200 African Americans picket and march in Carson City (reported to be first time protesters picket and march in state capitol)

1961 Civil rights advocates demonstrate in downtown Reno (protest has economic, not political focus)

1961 Sit-in at Overland Café in Reno


1961 U.S. Department of Justice requested to investigate Nevada’s civil rights violations

1961 Nevada Gaming Commission adopts non-discriminatory policy for licenses

1963 Nevada Gaming Commission revokes non-discriminatory policy

1963 Nevada Legislature fails to pass bill to give Nevada Commission on Equal Rights of Citizens more power; prompts picketing

1963 Nevada Supreme Court denies motion to disclose Board of Bar Examiners confidential written reports concerning Charles L. Kellar (Petition of Kellar, 79 Nev. 28 (1963), rehearing denied)

1964 U.S. Congress passes Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination in employment and public places, conferring jurisdiction upon district courts to...
provide injunctive relief against discrimination, authorizing Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, and preventing discrimination in federally assisted programs, among other things (Pub. L. No. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241 (1964)).

Earle W. White, Jr. (1933-2005) and Robert L. Reid were admitted to practice law, making them the first African-American attorneys admitted in Nevada. Nevada Supreme Court orders admission of Charles L. Kellar to practice law (Application of Kellar, 81 Nev. 240 (1965)); Kellar subsequently admitted to State Bar of Nevada.

Nevada Legislature passes Nevada Civil Rights Act, prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations and employment by race, color, religion or national origin (1965 Nev. Stat., ch. 332, at 689).

Las Vegas City Commission appoints Robert L. Reid Alternate Municipal Court Judge, making him the first African-American judge in Nevada.


Las Vegas NAACP files complaint with National Labor Relations Board against Las Vegas Culinary and Teamsters unions as well as 18 Las Vegas hotels.

Clark County Public Defender’s Office hires Earle W. White, Jr.; believed to be the first African-American Deputy Public Defender.

U.S. Supreme Court holds prohibition on race-based discrimination in housing is valid exercise of Congressional power under 13th Amendment (Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co., 392 U.S. 409 (1968)).

Robert “Moon” Mullen elected to Las Vegas Municipal Court, Dept. 2, making him the first African-American elected to Nevada judiciary (non-attorney judge).

Earle W. White, Jr. goes into private practice in Las Vegas; believed to be the first African-American lawyer in private practice in Nevada.

Clark County School District holds elections.

Consent Decree, U.S. District Court, Nevada, filed June 4, 1971. United States of America v. Nevada Resort Association, et al. requires desegregation of gaming industry, mandates 12 percent minority on council. The court held that school boards had been operated in an unconstitutional manner.

U.S. Supreme Court holds school segregation is a violation of the 14th Amendment.

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of all jobs in casino industry at all industry levels to qualified African Americans in 16 named hotel casinos and several labor unions, training programs and reporting (Consent Decree is still in effect but most casinos no longer send out semianual reports required under Decree).  

1971  

1971  
U.S. Supreme Court holds bussing is legitimate means for achieving integration of public schools (Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, 402 U.S. 1 (1971)).

1971  
Sixth Grade Center Plan of Integration adopted by Clark County School District; white children bussed to African-American schools in Westside for sixth grade and African-American children bussed to white schools for other 11 years (plan remains in place for 20 years)  

1972  
U.S. Court of Appeals for Ninth Circuit holds against Clark County School District in class action alleging violations of 5th and 14th Amendments under 42 U.S.C. §§1981 and 1983 (1964); almost total racial segregation of students and teachers in racially mixed school district is violation of substantive constitutional rights and District Court has power to remedy constitutional violation by court-ordered integration (Kelly v. Guinn, 456 F.2d 100 (9th Cir. 1972), argued by Frank A. Schreck)
1980

Johnnie B. Rawlinson and Viveca Monet Woods admitted to practice law in Nevada, making them the first two African-American women admitted to the State Bar of Nevada; Woods later becomes the first African-American woman Assistant U.S. Attorney in Nevada.

1980

REECo promotes Arthur L. Williams, Jr. to General Counsel and Second Vice-President, making him the first African-American to become General Counsel in Nevada, an executive level position; as making him the first African-American District Court Judge in Nevada.

1976

Nevada Supreme Court reverses and remands case in which Washoe County Court grants sole custody to African-American father and denies custody to white mother based on review of children’s “Negroid” characteristics in a photo holding that strict scrutiny also must be applied to state judicial officers’ actions which classify persons according to race (Beazley v. Davis, 92 Nev. 81 (1976)).

1977

Arthur L. Williams, Jr. becomes the first African-American attorney in legal office of Reynolds Electrical & Engineering Co., Inc. (REECo), prime contractor operating Nevada Test Site, making him the first African-American attorney employed at a major corporation in Nevada.

1977

Nevada Supreme Court holds that 60-day limitation period in employment discrimination law does not apply to judicial review and enforcement of administrative determinations by Nevada Equal Rights Commission; case involves denial of promotion to an African-American woman because of her race (State Comm. for Equal Rights of Citizens v. City of N. Las Vegas, 93 Nev. 446 (1977)).

1979

U.S. District Court, Nevada, holds that seniority expectations of white employees are outweighed by benefits to be achieved by affirmative action under a collective bargaining agreement’s seniority override provision in favor of minority employees to insure minority representation in employer’s work force and “eliminate a manifest racial imbalance” pursuant to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Tangren v. Wackenhut Servs., Inc., 480 F. Supp. 539 (D. Nev. 1979)).
Second Vice-President he is company’s first African-American officer and first and only one at this time of a major corporation in Nevada (REECo was a wholly owned subsidiary of Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier, Inc. (EG&G), a Fortune 500 corporation; EG&G has no other African-American executives holding similar positions at this time.)

1980 Clark County District Attorney’s Office hires Johnnie B. Rawlinson, making her first African-American woman Deputy District Attorney in Nevada

1981 Robert Archie, Andras F. Barbero, B. Jeanne Banks, Marcus Cooper, James Davidson, Michael Allen Davis, David Dean, Booker T. Evans, Judge Addeliar D. Guy, III, James O. Porter, Johnnie B. Rawlinson, Dan Winder, Arthur L. Williams, Jr., Justice of the Peace Earlie W. White, Jr. founded Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association (LVNBA)

1982 U.S. District Court, Nevada, holds that failure of hiring officer at State Division of Personnel to investigate African-American applicant’s job performance for four year period prior to applying, supports finding that decision not to consider seriously African-American applicant was based on intentional racial discrimination (Cooper v. Dep’t of Admin., State of Nevada, 558 F. Supp. 244 (D. Nev. 1982))

1983 Liz R. Hatcher opens law firm in Las Vegas, making her first African-American woman to open a solo practice in Nevada

1987 District Court Judge Earle W. White, Jr. elected Chief District Court Judge, making him first African-American Chief District Court Judge in Nevada

1987 Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association holds first Scholarship Banquet at Alexis Park Resort


1993 Nevada Attorney General’s Office hires Karl Armstrong, making him first African-American Deputy Attorney General in Nevada

1995 Johnnie B. Rawlinson becomes Chief Deputy District Attorney, making her first African-American woman Chief Deputy District Attorney

1995 U.S. Supreme Court holds affirmative action programs constitutional if they fulfill a “compelling governmental interest” and are “narrowly tailored” to fit particular situation (Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Pena, 515 U.S. 200 (1995))

1997 Nevada Supreme Court upholds University and Community College System of Nevada’s narrowly tailored affirmative action plan which uses race as one of several factors as constitutional based on a demonstrated
compelling interest in fostering culturally and ethnically diverse faculty (Univ. and Cmty. College Sys. of Nevada v. Farmer, 113 Nev. 90 (1997))

1997 Las Vegas Veterans Affairs Facility names Addeliar D. Guy, III Ambulatory Care Center after Judge Guy, a decorated veteran of WWII and Korea

1998 Reno City Council appoints Kenneth Howard to Reno Municipal Court by making him first and only African-American judge to sit on Reno Municipal Court

1998 President William J. Clinton appoints Johnnie B. Rawlinson to U.S. District Court, Nevada, making her first African-American woman judge on U.S. District Court in Nevada

2000 President William J. Clinton appoints U.S. District Court Judge Johnnie B. Rawlinson to U.S. Court of Appeals for Ninth Circuit, making her first African-American woman judge on Ninth Circuit

2001 Nevada Trial Lawyers Association (now Nevada Justice Association) elects Timothy C. Williams

2002 EEOC settles race discrimination lawsuit against Mirage Hotel and Casino (Case No. CV S-02-1554 RLH - LRL, in U.S. District Court, Nevada) U.S. Supreme Court holds race can be one of many factors considered by colleges when selecting students because it furthers “a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body” (Grutter v. Bolinger, 539 U.S. 306 (2003))

2003 Governor Kenny Guinn appoints Judge Michael L. Douglas to Nevada Supreme Court, making him first African-American justice on Nevada Supreme Court

2006 Kevin Williams (1959-2010) appointed Clark County District Court Hearing Master, making him first criminal arraignment hearing master in Nevada

2006 Professor Kay Kindred appointed as Commissioner on National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, making her first African-American woman to represent Nevada in that organization
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2007  John Valery White becomes second dean of UNLV Boyd School of Law
2008  Washoe County Public Defender’s Office hires Christine Jones Brady, making her first African-American Deputy Public Defender in that office; Brady is daughter of Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co. (1968) plaintiffs Joseph Lee and Barbara Jones
2009  Barack H. Obama sworn in as President of the United States

2010  EEOC files lawsuit against Henderson car dealerships for race discrimination (Case No. 2:10-cv-01692-KJD-RJJ)

2011  Justice Michael L. Douglas selected as Chief Justice of Nevada Supreme Court, making him first African-American Chief Justice of Nevada Supreme Court

2011  Brotherhood of Klans Knights of KKK remains active in Nevada
2011  Henderson City Attorney’s Office hires F. Travis Buchanan as Assistant City Attorney for City of Henderson, making him first African-American lawyer in that office
2011  Berna Rhodes-Ford opens law firm of Rhodes-Ford & Associates, believed to be first African-American-owned firm in Henderson
2011  Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association establishes Archive at Wiener-Rogers Law Library, UNLV Boyd School of Law

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