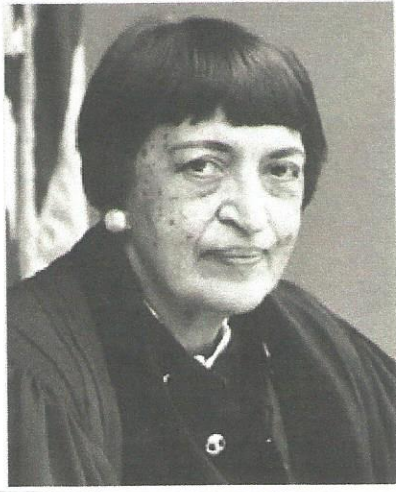


The Honorable Jane M. Bolin

Jane Bolin, whose appointment as a family court judge by Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia in 1939 made her the first black woman in the United States to become a judge, died on Monday, January 6, 2007 in Queens. She was 98 and lived in Long Island City, New York. She was buried in the family plot not far from the waterfall at the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery. She is survived by a son, a granddaughter and a great granddaughter.



Judge Jane Bolin in 1978

Judge Bolin was the first black woman to graduate from Yale School, the first to join the New York City Bar Association and the first to work in the office of the New York City Corporation Council, the city's legal department.

In January, 1979, when Judge Bolin had reluctantly retired after 40 years as a judge, Constance Baker Motley, a black woman and a federal judge, called her a role model. In her speech, Judge Motley said "When I thereafter met you, I then knew how a lady judge should comport herself".

The "lady judge" was frequently in the news at the time of her appointment with accounts of her regal bearing, fashionable hats and pearls, but her achievements transcended being a shining example. As a family court judge she ended the assignment of probation officers on the basis of race and the placement of children in child care agencies on the basis of ethnic background.

Jane Matilda Bolin was born on April 11, 1908 in Poughkeepsie, New York. Her father, Gaius C. Bolin, was the son of an American Indian woman and an African-American man. Her mother, the former Matilda Emery, was a white Englishwoman. Mr. Bolin, who was the first black graduate of Williams College, had his own legal practice and was President of the Dutchess County Bar Association. His daughter grew up enamored of shelves of leather bound books on the law. But her comfortable girlhood was profoundly shaken by articles and pictures of lynchings in Crisis magazine, the official publication of the NAACP.

Judge Bolin attended Wellesley College where she was one of two black freshmen. They were assigned to the same room in a family's apartment off campus, the first incident of many episodes of discrimination she said she encountered. At her graduation in 1928

she was named a Wellesley Scholar, a distinction given to the top 20 students of the class.

When discussing the subject of a law career with a Wellesley guidance counselor, she was told that black women had little chance. Her father also discouraged her at first saying that lawyers had to deal with “the most unpleasant and sometimes the grossest kind of human behavior”. Her father did not know that she had already been admitted to Yale Law School and he eventually agreed to her career choice.

At Yale, Ms. Bolin was one of three women in her class and the only black person. In an interview with the New York Times in 1993, she said that a few southerners at the law school had taken pleasure in letting the swinging doors hit her in the face.

After graduation she practiced for a short time with her father in Poughkeepsie. She then married a lawyer, Ralph E. Mizelle and the two practiced in New York. Her son Yorke Bolin Mizelle was born in 1941. Her husband died in 1943. In 1950 she married Walter P. Offutt, a minister. He died in 1974.

In 1937, six years after her graduation from Yale, she applied for a position in the New York City corporation counsel’s office. An assistant there was initially dismissive, but the counsel, Paul Windells, walked into the office and hired her on the spot. On July 22, 1939 she was told that Mayor LaGuardia wanted to see her at the New York City building at the World’s Fair which had just opened. She worried that she was going to be reprimanded. Instead, she was sworn in as a judge. The ceremony made news around the world. She was assigned to Domestic Relations Court which was renamed Family Court in 1962. In an interview with The New York World – Telegram the next day she said she hoped to show “a broad sympathy for human suffering” adding “I’ll see enough of it”. She chose not to wear judicial robes in order to make the children feel more comfortable in her courtroom.

She was reappointed to 10-year terms by Mayors William O’Dwyer, Robert F. Wagner Jr. and John V. Lindsey. She resigned in December, 1978 because she had reached the mandatory retirement age of 70 and complained “They’re kicking me out’. After retirement she was a volunteer reading instructor in New York City public schools for two years and was appointed to the Regents Review Committee of the State Board of Regents.

It is a rare thing indeed, to lead a life so satisfying and fulfilling. She has contributed tirelessly and profoundly to our society...breaking tremendous barriers in the process. The Honorable Jane M. Bolin transcends the designation of an African-American and of a woman’s hero. She has become an American hero, and a model for all of us to emulate – regardless of race, gender or creed. Source: Jane Bolin Profile – American Bar Association