



The Office of Court Administration oversees the administration and operation of the statewide court system, with 3,600 judges and 15,000 nonjudicial employees.

WOMEN AND MINORITIES IN THE COURTS

BY A. GAIL PRUDENTI

THE NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL has been such a vital part of the professional lives of New York lawyers and judges, including my own, that I am honored and pleased to join in anniversary congratulations and to contribute to this special issue.

I know that I speak for many of my colleagues when I say that the Law Journal, with its quality reporting, breaking updates and wide range of insights on critical legal issues, has long been required daily reading.

When thinking about this 125th anniversary, I could not help wondering what a reader of the early issues of the Law Journal would think if he (and back then it was very likely to have been “he”) entered one of New York’s courthouses today. Many outward changes, like technology, would be visible even in our oldest courthouses, but one of the most significant changes would be the gender, racial and ethnic characteristics of the judges and court staff.

By the time the Law Journal began publishing in 1888, the New York State Bar had already admitted its first black member, a man named George Boyer Vashon in 1848, and its first woman, Kate

Stoneman in 1886. (The admission of the first black woman, Anna Jones Robinson, would occur much later, in 1923.) No one imagines that they and those who followed had an easy time pursuing their careers. For example, it was not until the Law Journal was more than 40 years old that blacks and women would enter the judiciary.

In 1930, the first black men—two in fact—won election to the municipal court: James S. Watson and Charles E. Toney. In 1935, the first female judge, Justine Wise

By the time the Law Journal began publishing, the New York State Bar had already admitted its first black member and its first woman.

Polier, was appointed by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia to the Domestic Relations Court, which later became Family Court. Four years later, La Guardia appointed Judge Jane M. Bolin to that court, the first black woman to serve as a judge not only in New York but also in the entire United States.

These early elections and appointments were the critical first steps to opening up our court system up to the immeasurable values of diversity.



An elective judgeship soon followed for a woman, when in 1940, Birdie Amsterdam became the first woman elected to municipal court.

That was the start of a career of many firsts for Amsterdam: the first female appointed acting justice of the City Court in 1954, the first to win election to the City Court a year later, and the first to be elected to the New York County Supreme Court in 1958.

As women and minorities were beginning to secure judgeships in the trial courts, their presence on the high court, the Court of Appeals, would take decades more. Although Judge Harold A. Stevens was the first black named to the Court of Appeals in 1974, his was a brief, interim appointment.

Later, Governor Mario Cuomo would make history with three of his appointments: in 1983, he appointed the first woman to the Court of Appeals, Judith S. Kaye; in 1985, the first black to a full 14-year

A. GAIL PRUDENTI is the chief administrative judge of the state of New York.