

Jane Bolin “Daughter of the Empire State: A Trailblazing Attorney”

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Biographical information

Jane Matilda Bolin was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, on April 11, 1908, to an interracial couple. She was the youngest of four children born to Gaius C. Bolin, a lawyer and first black graduate of Williams College, and Matilda Ingram Bolin, a white Englishwoman. Her mother had become ill when Bolin was young and died when she was eight years old. As a single parent her father devoted a great deal of time and energy to his children while simultaneously running his own small law practice in Pough-keepsie. It was in her father's office with the rows and rows of law books that Bolin, an avid reader and excellent student, first thought of becoming a lawyer. Her father was an attorney who headed the Dutchess County Bar Association and cared for the family after his wife's illness and death. Jane Bolin was a superb student who graduated from high school in her mid-teens and went on to enroll at Wellesley College. Though facing overt racism and social isolation, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1928 and was officially recognized as one of the top students of her class. She then attended Yale Law School, contending with further social hostilities, yet nonetheless graduating in 1931 and thus becoming the first African-American woman to earn a law degree from the institution. Bolin worked with her family's practice in her home city for a time before marrying attorney Ralph E. Mizelle in 1933 and relocating to New York. As the decade progressed, after campaigning unsuccessfully for a state assembly seat on the Republican ticket, she took on assistant corporate counsel work for New York City, creating another landmark as the first African-American woman to hold that position. Bolin faced personal challenges, as well. Her first husband died in 1943, and she raised

their young son, Yorke, for several years on her own. She remarried in 1950 to Walter P. Offutt Jr.

Achievement/Contribution

On July 22, 1939, a 31-year-old Bolin was called to appear at the World's Fair before Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who—completely unbeknownst to the attorney—had plans to swear her in as a judge. Thus Bolin made history again as the first African-American female judge in the United States. Bolin was a thoughtful, conscientious force on the bench, confronting a range of issues on the domestic front and taking great care when it came to the plight of children. Bolin's efforts to provide a loving family life for her own son and husband were reinforced by her court duties, which gave her deep insight into the social affects of troubled family life. She was assigned to the Domestic Relations Court, which in 1962, became known as the Family Court of the State of New York. Her position gave Bolin a front row seat to virtually every aspect of legal trouble that could engage a New York family from battered spouses and neglected children to paternity suits and, increasingly over her 40-year career, homicides committed by juveniles. "We always had homicides, but not in the numbers we have today," Bolin told Klemesrud of the *New York Times* at the time of her retirement. "I've never seen anything like this, the extent of this violence, never." Adding, "Sometimes, from the bench, I ask the children, 'Why, why, why?,' and I never get a satisfactory answer. They look at you, they stare at you, and they don't say anything." She also changed segregationist policies that had been entrenched in the system, including skin-color based assignments for probation officers. Additionally, Bolin worked with first lady Eleanor Roosevelt in providing support for the Wiltwyck School, a

comprehensive, holistic program to help eradicate juvenile crime among boys. Bolin was reinstated as a judge for three additional terms, 10 years each, after her first, she was also serving on the boards of several organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the New York Urban League. Though she preferred to continue, Bolin was required to retire from the bench at the age of 70, subsequently working as a consultant and school-based volunteer, as well as with the New York State Board of Regents. She died in Long Island City, Queens, New York, on January 8, 2007, at the age of 98.

Conclusion

Jane Bolin was the first black woman to graduate from Yale Law School, the first black woman to work as corporate counsel for the city of New York, the first black woman to be admitted to the Bar Association of the City of New York and most significantly, the first black woman judge in the United States. In addition to her work on the bench, Bolin served on the boards of many agencies and organizations including the Child Welfare League, the National Board of the NAACP, the New York Urban League, the Dalton School, and Wiltwyck School for Boys, which she helped found with Eleanor Roosevelt and others. All activities that paralleled a lifetime of professional work designed to help people, a passion for which she never tired.

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