



## Obituaries

Dovey Johnson Roundtree, defense lawyer and civil rights warrior, dies at 104

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By [Harrison Smith](#) May 21 at 9:48 PM [✉Email the author](#)

Dovey Johnson Roundtree, a Washington criminal-defense lawyer and courtroom warrior for civil rights who played a critical early role in the desegregation of interstate bus travel and mentored several generations of black lawyers, died May 21 at an assisted-living facility in Charlotte. She was 104.

The cause was complications from Alzheimer's disease, said Jerry L. Hunter, her cousin and law partner.

In a career that spanned nearly half a century, Ms. Roundtree defended predominantly poor African American clients — as well as black churches, community groups and the occasional politician. She was, former Fisk University president Walter J.

Leonard once [told The Washington Post](#), “a legal-aid clinic before there were legal-aid clinics.”

Her best-known case involved the black day laborer accused in the 1964 killing of Georgetown socialite and painter Mary Pinchot Meyer, who reportedly had an affair with President John F. Kennedy. She won him an acquittal despite what initially appeared to be damning witness testimony.

Ms. Roundtree's handling of the high-profile legal matter was later praised by Robert S. Bennett, who observed the proceedings as a clerk for the judge and decades later represented President Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Ms. Roundtree, Bennett recalled in his memoir “[In the Ring](#)” (2008), “had a motherly warmth” and a “low-key, casual style” that appealed “not only to the mind but also the heart and soul of the jurors.”

“It was as if she was pleading for her own son,” Bennett added, “. . . not a guilty defendant.”

Interviewed for a book about the trial, “[A Very Private Woman](#)” (1998), by political reporter Nina Burleigh, Ms. Roundtree explained that the case had additional significance for her because the defendant, Raymond Crump Jr., was a black man who was accused of murdering a white woman.

“I think in the black community there was a feeling that even if Crump was innocent, he was a dead duck,” she said. “Even if he didn't do it, he's guilty. I took that as a personal challenge. I was caught up in civil rights, heart, body, and soul, but I felt law was one vehicle that would bring remedy.”

Bennett and Burleigh were among those convinced that Crump — a penniless alcoholic whom Ms. Roundtree described in her autobiography as “incapable” of “clear communication” or “complex thought” — was wrongly freed. He was later convicted of assault and arson, and the Meyer case remains unsolved.

In the early 1970s, Mayor Walter E. Washington appointed Ms. Roundtree to the D.C. board of higher education, and his successor, Marion Barry, considered her a trusted adviser, going so far as to [call her](#) one of his “Washington mothers.”

In addition, she mentored younger black lawyers — including Charles J. Ogletree Jr., who later became a professor at Harvard Law School — and preached at Southeast Washington's Allen Chapel AME Church, where she worked as a minister for 35 years before retiring to Charlotte in 1996.

In a phone interview, Katie McCabe, a Washington journalist who co-wrote Ms. Roundtree's 2009 autobiography, “[Justice Older Than the Law](#),” said Ms. Roundtree “transformed the legal canvas in Washington” by demonstrating that a black lawyer could win major cases before white judges and predominantly white juries.

### Dismantling segregation

When Ms. Roundtree and her first legal partner, Julius Winfield Robertson, began taking cases in the early 1950s, there were few black lawyers in Washington and even fewer black female lawyers.

Those who did practice were banned from using the cafeteria, restrooms or law library at the district courthouse in Washington, and legal organizations such as the Women's Bar Association of D.C. — which Ms. Roundtree integrated in 1962 — had whites-only policies.

African American clients who brought personal injury or negligence suits were euphemistically “referred uptown” — directed to white lawyers who had a better chance of winning over judges. The “uptown” lawyers then paid black lawyers a fee for referring their clients.

But Ms. Roundtree and Robertson kept clients in their office, regardless of the case. “We worked for eggs and collard greens,” Ms. Roundtree once quipped, noting that she and her partner often accepted clients who couldn’t pay legal fees. For a time, they held second jobs to supplement their incomes.

In 1952, soon after they began their practice, the duo was introduced to a Women’s Army Corps private named Sarah Keys. Earlier that year, Keys had been traveling home to North Carolina, in uniform and on furlough, when she refused a bus driver’s orders to give up her seat to a white Marine.

Incensed, the driver moved all of the passengers but Keys to a new bus in Roanoke Rapids, N.C. When Keys asked why she was not allowed on board, she was arrested by two police officers, jailed for 13 hours and fined \$25 for disorderly conduct. Ms. Roundtree and Robertson tried the case unsuccessfully at the U.S. District Court in Washington, which threw it out on jurisdictional grounds, before filing a complaint with the now-defunct Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC).

The 11-member commission had acquired a reputation as “the Supreme Court of the Confederacy” for consistently ruling in favor of segregation.

Yet the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, gave Ms. Roundtree hope, as well as a legal framework upon which to build her case.

An ICC examiner initially found that the *Brown* decision “did not preclude segregation in a private business.” But Ms. Roundtree succeeded in applying pressure on the commission through an influential Harlem congressman, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. (D), who urged the ICC’s chairman to give the case a full hearing.

Ruling on Nov. 7, 1955, the commission agreed that “assignment of seats in interstate buses, so designed as to imply the inferiority of a traveler solely because of race or color, [was] unjust discrimination” and violated the Interstate Commerce Act. The ICC gave states and bus companies six weeks to desegregate buses as well as bus station waiting rooms and restrooms. (Station restaurants, the commission said, were not essentially connected to travel and could remain segregated.) In a companion case filed separately by the NAACP, the commission made a similar decision for interstate train travel.

But under a new segregationist chairman who had dissented in the Keys case, the ICC refused to enforce its own desegregation ruling: That took six years, not six weeks, until television broadcasts showed activists known as Freedom Riders being beaten and attacked by Ku Klux Klan-led mobs in Alabama as they tried to integrate interstate bus travel in the South. Following a [formal petition](#) from Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, the ICC finally issued a desegregation order in September 1961 mandating that states enforce the Keys decision.

## **Raised in Jim Crow South**

Dovey Mae Johnson was born April 17, 1914, in Charlotte, where she recalled once hiding under the kitchen table while the Klan thundered past in the night on horseback. Her mother was a seamstress. Her father, a printer for the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, died in the influenza pandemic of 1919.

After his death, the family lived with Ms. Roundtree’s maternal grandparents in a church parsonage near the AME Zion church where her grandfather worked as a minister.

Soon after her 1938 graduation from historically black Spelman College in Atlanta, she moved to Washington to work as a research assistant for Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women.

After her service in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, Ms. Roundtree enrolled at Howard University’s law school on the G.I. Bill. A brief marriage about that time to William Roundtree ended in divorce.

At Howard, she assisted NAACP lawyers [Thurgood Marshall](#) and [James M. Nabrit Jr.](#) in their preparations for *Brown v. Board* and other court cases that challenged segregation. She graduated in 1950 and a year later started her law practice with Robertson. He died in 1961.

The Keys case aside, Ms. Roundtree was involved in few court cases that dealt explicitly with civil rights. Instead, she employed her ministerial courtroom style — which mixed a strategic deference to judges with scholarly references to Scripture and Shakespeare — primarily on criminal cases, taking clients whom other lawyers ignored.

One was Crump, who allegedly had been spotted standing over Meyer's body. Crump told police officers that he had been fishing and "almost got shot myself."

Meyer, who had been shot twice while walking along the C&O Canal towpath in Georgetown, was the ex-wife of Cord Meyer, a top CIA official; the niece of Gifford Pinchot, a Pennsylvania governor and conservationist; and the sister-in-law of future Post editor [Benjamin Bradlee](#).

Ms. Roundtree agreed to take Crump's case for \$1. She soon discovered that Crump had been jailed without a preliminary hearing, that police had not checked the body for fingerprints and that a coroner's report was never filed.

Crump was acquitted after Ms. Roundtree called large swaths of circumstantial evidence into question — noting in particular that Crump was about five inches and 50 pounds smaller than the man whom witnesses described and that a murder weapon had never been found.

In 1977 she helped [win an acquittal](#) for John Wesley Griffin, who was accused of joining other members of the Nation of Islam in the slaying of seven members of a rival group, the Hanafi Muslims. The murders helped spur the March 1977 takeover of several downtown Washington buildings by 12 Hanafis, who demanded that the convicted killers be turned over to them for further punishment.

Griffin was cleared after Ms. Roundtree produced an alibi that placed him in Philadelphia at the time of the murders. "That was so simple," she later said, reflecting on the case. "You don't have to go to law school to do that."

Nevertheless, Griffin returned to prison, where he was already serving a life sentence for the 1974 prison cell murder of another defendant in the Hanafi case.

Ms. Roundtree co-founded the law firm Roundtree, Knox, Hunter and Parker in 1970, and three decades later the American Bar Association honored her for advancing female lawyers in the profession.

Over the decades, Ms. Roundtree shifted the focus of her work from criminal to family law. She had no children but over the course of her life cared for many children in her home, including a goddaughter, Charlene Pritchett-Stevenson, whom she considered a daughter. She also admitted that she sometimes approached her clients in a motherly manner.

"People do poorly by and for themselves," Ms. Roundtree told The Post in 1995, acknowledging that many of her clients were less than perfect.

Still, she added, "I make my clients my children. I can see stars where there's nothing but a bunch of clay."

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 **37 Comments**

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

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5/22/2018

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