

Quest for Justice: L.A. Bedford's Career & Strive for Equal Rights

By **Paul K. Stafford** June 30, 2009

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Quest for Justice: Louis A. Bedford, Jr. and the Struggle for Equal Rights in Texas is as much a biography about Hon. Louis A. Bedford as it is a tutorial on the advent of African-American attorneys in the nation, the state, and particularly Dallas.

This project began several years ago under the guidance of Hon. Elizabeth Lang-Miers, justice of the Court of Appeals for the Fifth District of Texas, and was made possible largely by a grant from the Dallas Bar Foundation. The extensive work and research of author and SMU Professor Emeritus Darwin Payne were reviewed by a DBF editorial committee, of which I and several others served as members.

Quest speaks of Macon Bolling Allen, the nation's earliest known black attorney (admitted to practice law in Maine in 1844), as well as John Mercer Langston, the first black applicant to an American law school. It provides well-researched speculation as to the identity of the first African-American to practice law in Texas, Allen W. Wilder, as well as the first two African-Americans to practice law in Dallas – Sam H. Scott and Joseph E. Wiley.

In Quest, Mr. Payne explains the historical connection between these African-American legal trailblazers and other subsequent legal pioneers such as John L. Turner Sr., D.M. Mason, William J. Durham, Crawford B. Bunkley Jr., John L. Turner Jr., and Louis A. Bedford Jr.

Quest chronicles the ancestry of Judge Bedford – from its humble Texas roots in the 1800s to the evolution of descendant Louis A. Bedford Jr. into one of the most respected and prominent attorneys the profession has ever known.

The harsh realities of city life in the segregated Dallas of the first-half of the 20th century are discussed in informative detail – as well as the vibrancy of Dallas's African-American enclaves, particularly the Thomas-Hall-State area where young Louis A. Bedford Jr. was reared. From this period grew prominent names and dynamic personalities that elicit recollections not only of familiar Dallas street names and landmarks, but also conjure images of men and women committed to just causes – armed with conviction, steadied by courage, and committed to change.

This environment – and the personalities and experiences that constituted it – had a lasting influence upon young Louis. As Quest states, “[A]s he grew older and learned more about the community around him, Bedford became aware of the discrimination awaiting him as an adult.” This discrimination was particularly evident in the Dallas

justice system, which, as Quest accurately recounts, was the source of many injustices against African-American litigants, attorneys, and even citizens called upon to be potential jurors. The brutal attack upon educator George F. Porter, resulting in his eventual blindness, is an especially captivating portion of Quest and a painful reminder of Dallas's not-so-distant past.

Quest provides interesting details of Judge Bedford's college days at Prairie View College – from his early days as a 16-year-old freshman, slightly immature and unfocused, to a more seasoned college senior, tempered by World War II and preparing for eventual admission to law school.

He was active in a variety of activities on the Prairie View campus, but upon graduation in 1946, Judge Bedford was ready to pursue his law degree. He knew that the prospect of pursuing a law degree would entail leaving the state, as Texas did not offer graduate school admission to blacks, nor was there a law school established specifically for blacks to attend. At first, he applied to only two law schools, but eventually his friends persuaded him to apply to Brooklyn Law School, where he ultimately enrolled. Quest vividly describes Judge Bedford's law school days and his desire to return to Texas, be admitted to the bar, and become a well-respected attorney.

Upon his admission to the bar in 1951 and the opening of his office at his home on Thomas Avenue, he began a legal odyssey that has spanned nearly 60 years. Throughout the years, his work address may have changed, but his commitment to excellence within the profession, and justice for all, was unwavering.

In addition, Quest conveys the history of integration within the American Bar Association and the Dallas Bar Association and the formation of the Barristers Club in 1952, the precursor to what is today known as the J.L. Turner Legal Association. Judge Bedford was a founder of the Barristers Club, serving as its secretary, and in later years as the historian of the JLTLA.

Quest explains the many legal challenges to segregation in Dallas and in Texas – including *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) and *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) – originating through the efforts of key Texas attorneys like W. J. Durham (one of Judge Bedford's role models) and other prominent attorneys from the NAACP, including Thurgood Marshall.

Professor Payne's book also characterizes the 1960s as time for sit-in demonstrations, pickets and peaceful protests to effectuate change, and L.A. Bedford was an integral component of this movement toward equality. Then, as now, he was active in his community, well-known and well-regarded.

The commitment of Judge Bedford and others, however, was often over-shadowed by the inherent danger of following one's conscience for the purpose of social justice. As Quest quotes young Mattie Mae Etta Johnson, who was arrested and jailed in the aftermath of the 1960 Marshall, Texas, sit-in demonstrations, "...I have lifted a burden from my heart because of my stand. In God's name we are going to get our freedom."

Following an unsuccessful run for a seat in the Texas Legislature in 1964, and after contemplating another run for the Legislature in 1966, Louis A. Bedford Jr. was appointed a Dallas associate municipal and corporate judge. Upon taking the oath of office on July 19, 1966, he became the first African-American judge in Dallas County history, holding the position of municipal judge until 1980, when he resigned for an unsuccessful run for Dallas City Council.

Quest recounts the thoughtful and thought-provoking article that Judge Bedford wrote for DBA Headnotes in November 1990 entitled "When I Become an Old Lawyer and Can No Longer Stand Before the Bar," in which he said he would someday "walk slowly away, my sun setting, but in my heart, I will be watching the sun rise as I see young African American lawyers taking my place before the Bar." As a role model and mentor to countless attorneys, minority and non-minority alike, Louis A. Bedford Jr. can rest assured that when he does walk away, the sun of inspired generations will continue to rise.

Editor's Note: To purchase a copy of Quest for Justice, contact Elizabeth Philipp, executive director of the Dallas Bar Foundation, at Elizabeth Philipp or 214-220-7487. Each copy is \$24.35, including tax (plus \$5 for postage and handling). Or books can be purchased by visiting the second-floor offices of the Dallas Bar Association at the Belo Mansion, 2101 Ross Avenue, Dallas, TX 75201.