

# Harry A. Cole--A Piece of Maryland History

Harry A. Cole, the first black judge to sit on the Court of Appeals of Maryland and the first black senator in Maryland history, retired from his judicial post on January 1, 1991.

As Judge Cole looks back on his life, it appears that a ping pong game may have determined his fate. As a young boy growing up in Baltimore, he enjoyed quibbling about the fine points of the game with one of his favorite opponents, W.A.C. Hughes, Jr., the renowned lawyer who represented the NAACP in those days.

"During arguments, I would get out the rule book and Mr. Hughes would say that I was sure to have a career in the law," the judge said.

Cole was the youngest of five children who says he knew he wanted to become a lawyer as early as age 10. His mother, widowed when Cole was very young, worked as a cook to support her children. Money wasn't available for college, so Cole did what he could to earn money for his education.

After high school, he shined shoes for a year, earning \$60, which in those days bought him one semester at Morgan State College, the principal college in Maryland to admit blacks at the time. He eventually won a full scholarship.

To earn extra money, he was a summer employee at the Eastern Rolling Mill as a machinist's helper. After learning to operate the manufacturing equipment during lunch breaks, Cole applied to become a machinist. He was denied; the company would not hire a black machinist.

"I knew I could do the job better than (my boss) could, but I was told 'no'. I didn't like being told no," said Cole. "I think that is what has challenged me in life. I wanted to do something about it, but first, I knew I had to finish my education."

Cole excelled in collegiate activities--president of the student council, the debating society, and his junior class; business manager for the dramatic society; a member of the Alpha Kappa Mu National Honor Society; a contender on the tennis team; and founder and editor-in-chief of the college newspaper, *The Spokesman*.

While still in college, Cole helped organize the 1942 "March On Annapolis," a protest movement, held at the state house by nearly 2,000 citizens demanding repeal of the Jim Crow laws.

He graduated magna cum laude from Morgan in 1943, and enlisted in the Army the same year. Cole became a first lieutenant and served overseas in Europe and Asia. After his discharge from the service, he attended the University of Maryland School of Law.

He graduated in 1949, and became associated with the law firm of Brown, Allen and Watts, of which his lifelong friend and colleague, former Supreme Bench Judge Robert B. Watts was a principal.

"We had a hope, a prayer and a G.I. Bill. What we needed was clients," said Cole. "But in those days, lawyers couldn't advertise. We needed publicity, so I decided to run for public office."

At 29, Cole campaigned for a slot in the Maryland House of Delegates, but lost. The next year, he ran for a seat on the Baltimore City Council. Again, he lost the race, but learned how to win the next one.

He spent the next three years campaigning to loosen the tight control political bosses had maintained on local elections in the Fourth District. According to Cole, ghost voting was a problem in this jurisdiction where blacks resided but whites ruled the politics.

Cole and his supporters formed the Ballot League, which canvassed neighborhoods to find out who the

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voters were, their party affiliations and whether they had voted. They cleared the rolls of ineligible and dead voters, and registered eligible voters on the spot.

In 1953, an appointment as an assistant attorney general made Cole the first black person to hold this office in Maryland. The next year, he was ready to take a shot at the Senate. He won the hotly contested election by 37 votes and became the first black man to serve in the General Assembly.

"That changed the format for elections all over the state," said Cole. "It also broke down the psychological barrier that political bosses had instilled in people for years: Why vote for a black candidate when he can't win anyway?"



Photo courtesy of Afro-American Newspaper

Once on the Senate floor, Cole was warned to steer clear of civil rights legislation. But during his four-year term, the tenacious

term on the Supreme Bench in the 1970 election. In 1977, he was appointed to the Court of Appeals of Maryland, becoming the fourth black judge in the nation to hold such an honor.

Judge Cole owes his respect for hard work and discipline to his mother, whose philosophy according to the judge was: "When you wake up, you get up; when you get up, you do something."

He attributes his dedication to excellence to the advice of civil rights activist Charles Houston, one of the architects of the successful Supreme Court challenge to school segregation. Cole met Houston as a law student when Houston visited the school in the late '40s.

"He was a role model for young lawyers and law students. And we sat at his feet as he outlined the plan for us," said Cole. "He was the embodiment of qualification, ...but he believed in simplifying what he was talking about in order to reach the masses."

Cole is known for his meticulousness, a trait he says his wife, Doris, refers to as a nuisance. The judge's calm reply:

"It doesn't hurt to reach out for excellence. A man's

reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

At his 1977 swearing-in ceremony, he said that he wanted to make his term as a judge "meaningful." Now he can look back on his career and know that he has.

"A judge must ensure that a person gets a fair trial, not necessarily the relief he seeks," Cole explains. "I believe I have done the job I was called upon to do."

Cole recalls a case which took place many years ago when he was on the Supreme Bench. A man on trial for rape and murder had asked that his case be transferred to Baltimore City in hopes of appearing before Judge Cole. He also prayed a court trial. When the man came to trial, Judge Cole excluded a confession and certain admissions, and tried the defendant on the remaining evidence. Judge Cole found the defendant guilty on both counts and sentenced him to two life terms in prison.

"[The defendant] asked to address the court," Cole recalls. "I granted his request. And he thanked me for giving him a fair trial."

Thank goodness Harry Cole learned to play ping pong. ☐