

By Constance Belton Green

Bessye Warren Bennett, the first African American woman to practice law in Connecticut, was admitted to the bar in 1974—more than a century *after* the first African American female lawyer in the United States.

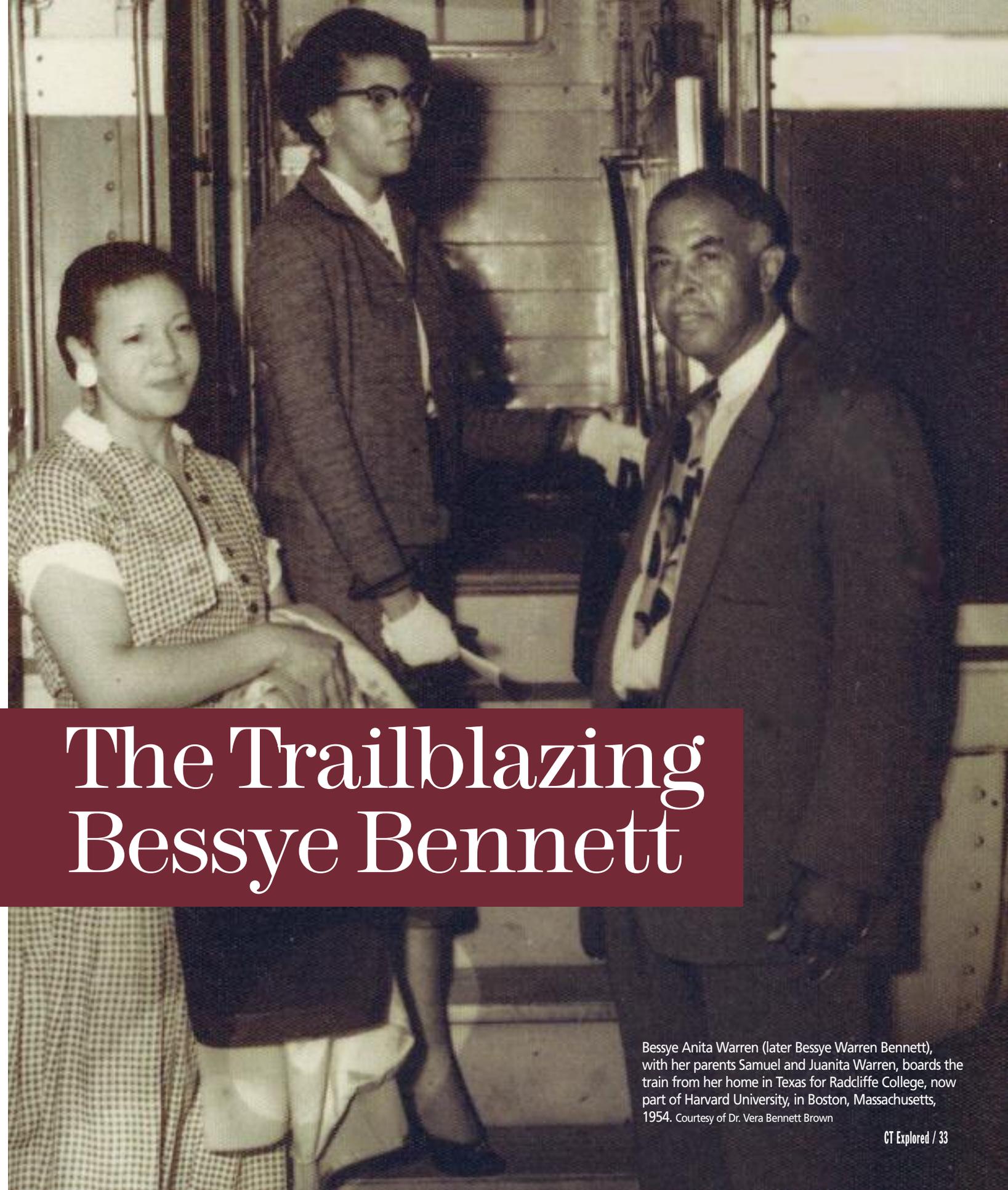
“If you are without a history, then you are without an identity,” wrote J. Clay Smith Jr. in *Rebels in Law: Voices in History of Black Women Lawyers* (University of Michigan Press, 1998). Smith was referring to the little-known stories about trailblazing African American women who practiced law during the 19th and 20th centuries—stories I call hidden historical treasures. These stories include those of women such as Charlotte E. Ray, who in 1872 became the first female African American lawyer in the United States, admitted to practice law in Washington, D.C. During the 19th century four African American women were admitted to the legal profession. In addition to Ray, Mary Ann Camberton Shadd Cary was admitted to practice law in Washington, D.C. in 1883, Ida Platt was admitted to practice law in Chicago in 1894, and Lutie A. Lytle was admitted to practice law in Kansas and Tennessee in 1897.

Legal historian Barbara Babcock, in “Forward: A Real Revolution” (*University of Kansas Law Review*, vol. 49, 2001), described the particular challenge facing women entering the legal profession: “Of all the professions that women sought to enter, the law was the most intransigent. Women could explain and excuse their presence in other professions by reference to their manly nature. Doctors could treat other women, thus preserving female modesty. Teachers were only extending the role of mothers as moral instructors. Even ministers could build on beliefs about women’s spirituality, but there was no way to sugarcoat the meaning of being a lawyer.” Both Barbara Babcock and Virginia Drachman have written extensively about women who entered the legal profession during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Yet little attention has been given to stories about the lives of trailblazing African American female lawyers who faced the dual jeopardy of discrimination based on race and gender.

By 1922 there were 20 African American women practicing law in the United States. By 1950 there were 83 African American female lawyers in 19 states, primarily clustering in the more populated cities of New York City, Chicago, and the District of Columbia. By 1950 there were 19 African American female lawyers in New York, 10 in the District of Columbia, and 13 in Illinois.

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The Trailblazing Bessye Bennett

Bessye Anita Warren (later Bessye Warren Bennett), with her parents Samuel and Juanita Warren, boards the train from her home in Texas for Radcliffe College, now part of Harvard University, in Boston, Massachusetts, 1954. Courtesy of Dr. Vera Bennett Brown

The Emergence of African American Women Practicing Law in Connecticut

In 1882 Mary Hall became the first woman of any race (she was white) admitted to practice law in Connecticut. Hall passed the licensing examination after studying law as an apprentice and petitioned the court. Based on an 1875 Connecticut statute on licensing that made reference to “persons,” with no specific exclusion of women, she was granted a law license. The judicial decision rendered by Chief Justice John Duane Park of the Connecticut Supreme Court in the case *In re Hall* held that, “We are not to forget that all statutes are to be construed, as far as possible, in favor of equality of rights.” The *In re Hall* judicial decision was one of the first of its kind in the United States to support a woman’s right to practice law based on statutory interpretation.

Two years earlier, in 1880, the first African American male lawyer, Edwin Archer Randolph, a Yale law graduate, was licensed to practice in Connecticut. Randolph was followed in 1881 by Walter Scott, another Yale law graduate. However, both Randolph and Scott relocated to Virginia, where there was a larger and potentially more lucrative black client base. George W. Crawford, also a Yale law graduate, was the first African American to sustain a practice in Connecticut. He established a New Haven law office in 1903. After winning several cases, Crawford was able to attract a racially diverse clientele.

Although there were still no African American female lawyers in Connecticut by 1950, there were two prominent African American women practicing law in New York City who had Connecticut ties. They were Jane Matilda Bolin and Constance Baker Motley.

In 1931, Jane Matilda Bolin, born in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1908, was the first African American woman to graduate from Yale University’s law school.

By her own admission her days as a Yale law student were challenging. Found among her papers at the Schomburg Center for Research and Culture are notations describing one experience she had there: “In law school there were a few who took pleasure in letting the swinging classroom door hit me in the face.”

After graduating, Bolin returned to Poughkeepsie and worked in her father’s law practice. By 1937 she moved to New York City and was appointed assistant corporation counsel for the City of New York. In 1939 she was appointed a judge in the Domestic Relations Court for the City of New York by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia; she was the first African American woman to serve as a judge in the United States. After her death on January 8, 2007, a *New York Times* obituary (January 10, 2007) referred to her as an “experienced judge” with a combination of legal talent and impeccable style. Jane Bolin’s portrait now hangs at Yale University’s law school.

Constance Baker Motley was born in New Haven, Connecticut on September 14, 1921. She attended Columbia University’s law school from 1943 to 1946 and interned with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 1945. She was hired as a civil rights attorney by Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, in 1946. In her autobiography, *Equal Justice Under Law*, Baker Motley explains, “I was on the ground level of the civil rights movement without even knowing it.” Her autobiography describes her work as a civil rights attorney and legal strategist in the civil rights movement for more than 20 years, including her work on *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which is credited with desegregating public schools. During her tenure as civil rights counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Baker Motley successfully argued nine cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. On January 25, 1966 Baker Motley was nominated by President Lyndon Johnson to serve on the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, becoming the first African American woman to receive a federal judgeship.

The Story of Bessye Anita Warren Bennett

In 1960 there were 142 African American women practicing law in the United States. Yet, when I entered the University of Connecticut’s law school in 1969 there were still no African American women practicing in Connecticut. There were also no other female African American students at the UConn law school. My feelings of isolation are best described by one of my earliest experiences in Connecticut: finding housing in close proximity to the law school. I was from Virginia and unfamiliar with the West Hartford neighborhood where the school was then located. However, the law school provided first-year students with a list of neighboring homes that rented rooms to students—a tradition, I was told. My father and I knocked on several suggested doors, but homeowner after homeowner responded that they had no rooms available or that they were no longer renting rooms to law students. Only with further assistance from the school was I eventually able to find a place to live.

It was a time of great unrest and change, largely due to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. In 1970, during my second year as a law student, I met Bessye Anita Warren Bennett, who was starting her first year at UConn law. Although I was still single, Bessye was already married and had three school-age children. Her impression of UConn law was that “in the tradition of this law school, a lot of men came on the G.I. Bill, and it had been a community law school and primarily for Connecticut residents. So my class ... was the first that had not only more women, more minorities, but also more out-of state students. And I don’t think that faculty was prepared for this influx of so many different types of people. ... It was somehow their mold of their thinking about us that we were such an oddity.” (*Connecticut Law Tribune*, November 27, 1995)



Bessye was born in Prairie View, Texas, on August 16, 1938, the only child of Dr. Samuel F. Warren, a college professor, and Juanita McBroom Warren, a public school teacher and librarian. Like Bessye’s, my parents were also educators. She and I agreed that pursuing college and a profession was expected of us.

The Warrens moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana and then moved again in 1948 when Samuel Warren accepted a faculty position in economics at Texas Southern University. Bessye graduated from Yates High School in Houston in 1954 at age 16; she was the class valedictorian. She decided to leave Texas to attend Radcliffe College in Boston (now part of Harvard University). It was a time when many African Americans were traveling to other parts of this country in search of new opportunities for higher education and employment, a phenomenon described by Isabel Wilkerson in her recent book *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Random House, 2010).

Bessye Bennett, 1995.
photo: Dru Nadler,
Connecticut Law Tribune



Bennett (then Warren) as a high-school student, 1950s.
Courtesy of Dr. Vera Bennett Brown

Bessye graduated from Radcliffe College in 1958 with honors and was accepted at Harvard Law School. If she had gone to Harvard law she would have been among the first African American women to attend. The first was Lila Fenwick in 1956. However, she instead married her college sweetheart, John Bennett, in June 1958. John Bennett continued his studies at Harvard and received a doctorate in applied mathematics in 1962. In our conversations during law school and after graduating, Bessye and I talked about marriage, family, and career. She was figuring out how to balance all three. So why didn't she go to law school right after college? She mentioned that at the time they couldn't afford tuition for both her and John.

In 1964 the Bennetts moved to Hartford, Connecticut with their three young children: Vera, born in 1959, John Jr., born in 1960, and Margaret, born in 1962. John held several successive positions in Hartford at United Technologies, eventually becoming director of data processing. Bessye set up her family's household, joined the League of Women Voters, and taught in the Hartford public school system. She worked outside the home, combining career and family as her mother before her had done.



above: John and Bessye Bennett. John received his Ph.D. in applied mathematics from Harvard in 1962; he began a career at United Technologies, prompting a move to Hartford.
Courtesy of Dr. Vera Bennett Brown



Bennett, shown with her two daughters, received a master's degree in education from Trinity College in 1967. She received her law degree from UConn in 1973. Courtesy of Dr. Vera Bennett Brown

She also enrolled in a master's in education program at Trinity College, receiving her degree in 1967. Her husband John noted in my interview with him (August 2007) that even while she was teaching, Bessye always dreamed of becoming a lawyer.

I graduated from UConn Law in 1972 and Bessye in 1973; she was admitted to practice law in Connecticut in 1974 and was the first African American woman to be licensed to practice law in Connecticut. I followed Bessye's lead and was admitted to practice law in Connecticut in 1975, as I also learned to balance marriage, family, and career.

By 1980 there were 4,272 female African American lawyers in the nation, according to U.S. census data, only 16 of them in Connecticut. Included in the list of the first African American women to be licensed to practice law in Connecticut between 1974 and 1979 besides Bessye and myself were Patricia Lilly Harleston, Linda Kelly, Johnese White Howard, Sheridan Moore, Curtissa Coffield, Cheryl Brown Watley, Marilyn Ward Ford, and Vanessa Bryant. As "firsts," we felt a need to nurture a sense that justice should be equitably applied. Many of us continued to work in areas related to justice and equity throughout our careers.

Bessye was a woman of many firsts. In 1974 she became the first African American woman to be hired to a corporate legal position in Hartford. "In the summer I got a job at one of the banks . . . so that when I graduated from law school for the first time that bank (Society for Savings) had decided to open in-house counsel offices, one of the first banks to have in-house legal counsel. So I was asked if I wanted to stay on..." she explained in an interview published in the *Connecticut Law Tribune* on November 27, 1995. At Society for Savings she rose from affirmative action officer to associate counsel and assistant vice president. "At the time you really had to work so hard to get your point across, and



Bennett served on the board of Connecticut Natural Gas in the 1990s. Connecticut Natural Gas Corporation

it really always didn't seem fair," she said in her 1999 oral history (Oral History Project, Connecticut Bar Foundation).

In 1985 she established a solo private practice. She was the first African American woman appointed deputy town counsel for the Town of Bloomfield and the first to serve on the board of Connecticut Natural Gas. Throughout her legal career she also accepted *pro bono* legal cases and continued serving on the boards of such organizations as Connecticut Public Television, the Commission on Victim Services, the Knox Foundation, and Hartford College for Women.

In the words of activist and law professor Mari Matsuda, African American women live a "multiple consciousness" that allows them to operate within the mainstream and within their community, aware of their race, gender, and professional and private roles. Although many women live multiple lives, Matsuda's point was to highlight the unique status of African American women who confront discrimination of race and gender and still maintain a balance between their professional and private lives. Bessye Warren Bennett was one of those trailblazing women, one who followed her dream of becoming a lawyer while still caring for family and community. "I had to confront my inner self, my inner dreams; not whine, not cry, but to keep going," she said in her oral history. She died on May 16, 2000.

In 2002 I attended a ceremony at the University of Connecticut School of Law establishing the Bessye W. Bennett '73 Memorial Scholarship Fund. Her husband John spoke about her life, noting that Bessye loved her work and she loved her family. In my August 2007 interview with him, he said of himself and his wife, "We had a partnership." ◀