

Law

New exhibit highlights Justice Marshall's early career

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Thurgood Marshall — divorce lawyer?

It's difficult to imagine the first black Supreme Court justice and Baltimore native as anything but a civil rights attorney. But [Larry S. Gibson](#) discovered 10 instances where Marshall handled divorce cases, as well as several fender-benders, after he was admitted to the Maryland bar in 1933.

"He did major civil rights cases, but he also tried to keep his private practice," said Gibson, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Law and of counsel at [Shapiro, Sher Guinot & Sandler](#).



Marshall's balancing act is apparent in "Thurgood Marshall's Early Career in Maryland: 1933-1937," an exhibit created by Gibson that will be permanently installed in the Thurgood Marshall Law Library at Maryland this Friday in connection with the school's second [black alumni reunion](#) and symposium.

"We're really Marshall-izing the Marshall Library," Gibson said with a laugh.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Marshall's birth, the 70th anniversary of the graduation of Donald Gaines Murray, Maryland law school's first black student (whose entrance was secured by a Court of Appeals decision argued by Marshall), and the 30th anniversary of the effort to rename the law library after Marshall.

Shaped in Maryland

It was about that time, in 1978, that Gibson began talking to Marshall's friends, family and legal contemporaries about Marshall's early years as a lawyer in Baltimore.

"No one has done a decent job of covering the four years that he practiced here," said Gibson, who also talked with Marshall himself. "It was a very active period, but it was difficult to get at."

So Gibson pored through more than 2,000 documents, including court files, newspaper accounts and Marshall's personal letters to create the nine, three-foot-long panels that will be displayed in the library next to a collection of 18 photographs of Marshall from a boy to shortly before his death in 1993.

Gibson's research showed Marshall developing habits as a young lawyer he would use the rest of his career.

"His attitude about work and his priorities were shaped here in Maryland," said Gibson, who is also writing a book based on his research.

Gibson purposely says "Maryland," not "Baltimore," because Marshall was the first black lawyer to practice in multiple jurisdictions in the state, including Baltimore, Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

"He always had several irons on the fire," Gibson said.

Almost immediately after Marshall was admitted to the bar in 1933, he joined a group of lawyers in delivering a petition, included in the exhibit, to Gov. Albert C. Ritchie demanding anti-lynching legislation after a hanging in Princess Anne, Gibson said.

Feeling the strain

Marshall's penchant for civil rights led to some financial strain as well as a letter, included in the exhibit, from Charles Hamilton Houston, Marshall's friend, mentor and law school dean at Howard University, reminding Marshall not to lose sight of his private practice.

Still, Marshall made time for civil rights cases, most notably on behalf of Murray.

The Court of Appeals, in 1936's *Murray v. Pearson*, affirmed a lower court order to desegregate the law school; a copy of the actual order is part of the exhibit. (Marshall, despite stories to the contrary, never applied to Maryland law school, Gibson said.)

The law school's class of 1950 included 10 black graduates and by the 1970s the school had become a national leader in turning out black lawyers and judges, said Gibson, who has taught there since 1974.

The school held its first black alumni reunion five years ago with lectures, discussions and receptions similar to this weekend's format. For the first reunion, Gibson created an exhibit about the first 100 years of black lawyers in Maryland.

Despite Marshall's civil rights courtroom advocacy, he still had trouble finding office space because of his skin color, according to one letter in the exhibit. He and several black colleagues eventually got space on the sixth floor of the Phoenix Building on the corner of Redwood and Charles streets, Gibson said.

So what was Marshall like as a right-out-of-law-school, practicing attorney? In a little over his head for one thing; Marshall handled a death penalty case in his first year, and his client was found guilty and hanged, said Gibson, who included the death warrant in the exhibit.

But Gibson also described Marshall as a "diplomat" who developed good relationships with opposing attorneys. He sought and was given advice by older lawyers and judges and maintained a "gentlemanly congeniality." His humor shone through in his personal correspondence, a fact Gibson found reassuring because Marshall could be "cantankerous" in his later years.

As Marshall developed his early, personable reputation, however, he never let it affect his inner drive.

"It did not compromise his determination," Gibson said.