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## IN THIS ISSUE

### Oral History at Virginia State Law Library



The Virginia State Law Library recently coordinated an oral history interview of five judges who served on the first Court of Appeals of Virginia, an intermediate appellate court established in 1985. Professor Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Professor of History at Norfolk State University, moderated the conversation among Retired Judge James W. Benton, Jr.,

Senior Judge Sam W. Coleman III, Senior Justice Lawrence L. Koontz, Jr., U.S. Circuit Court Judge Barbara Milano Keenan, and U.S. District Court Senior Judge Norman K. Moon. *(Photo: Hon. Sam W. Coleman, III and Hon. Barbara M. Keenan at WCVE Studios, Richmond.)*

The judges gathered in Richmond to share their reflections on the unique experience of helping create a new court in Virginia and the court's contributions to Virginia's legal system.

"Well I was excited because there was an opportunity for the first time in Virginia to have appeals of right," Judge Benton observed. "A lot of my practice had been on the federal side where we had appeals of right in virtually all cases and this was going to be, in my view, a grand opportunity for Virginia to go along that route."

"From the get-go," Judge Moon recalled, the judges decided that every litigant before the court would get "a written opinion explaining the reasoning behind our decision, I mean no matter whether it was a criminal case, that you had a right to get a written opinion, and we turned out a lot of written opinions. . . . this court was able to develop and add to the law so many precedents that practitioners and judges could rely upon."

[Oral History at Virginia State Law Library](#)

[New Website for The Historical Society of the New York Courts](#)

[About the AASLH Court & Legal History Affinity Group](#)



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While there was some opposition to the new court from circuit court judges who were not accustomed to much review, members of the bar were grateful for the more feedback. "They were excited, I think," Judge Keenan observed, "because the supreme court was such a remote institution. I mean I can say as a practicing lawyer and as a circuit court judge the supreme court was way out there. You just never were in touch with it, you never saw them. . . . So we were all conscious of that, I think, starting as appellate judges. We didn't want to be perceived as insular. We wanted to make it really clear to lawyers that we were going to be learning from them too."

The law library began coordinating oral history interviews in 2007 and now manages a collection of 22 video recordings of retired judges, lawyers, and court administrative staff. The collection includes individual interviews of Justice John Charles Thomas, the first African American judge appointed to the Supreme Court of Virginia; Elizabeth B. Lacy, the first woman appointed to the court, Barbara Milano Keenan, the first woman elected circuit court judge in Virginia and the first woman to serve on an appellate court in Virginia, and Harry L. Carrico, chief justice from 1981 to 2003. The collection also has interviews of Virginia civil rights attorneys William T. Coleman, William T. Mason, and Senator Henry L. Marsh.

Video recordings and transcripts of the interviews are available at the Supreme Court of Virginia Archives, part of the Virginia State Law Library in Richmond.

**Catherine G. O'Brien**, Librarian-Archivist  
[Virginia State Law Library](#)

## New Website for The Historical Society of the New York Courts

The Historical Society of the New York Courts launched a new website in January, 2013. <http://www.nycourts.gov/history/> It serves three functions:

- a public face for our organization through the **About the Society** and **Programs & Publications** dropdowns on the home page
- a curated resource for the legal history of New York State
- a learning resource for teachers and students

A few words about our legal history resources on the website. Under the **New York Legal History** dropdown we have created several sections. In **Legal History by Era** we provide a snapshot of the important figures, events, cases and legal documents broken down into 12 eras beginning with the Dutch influence on jurisprudence in the colony of New Amsterdam before the British. In **The Bench & the Bar** we provide bios of important jurists by court going back to the time of John Jay. We will be developing sections on historic New York legal luminaries, and the histories of New York bar associations and public service organizations (like Legal Aid). Our **Oral Histories** section will make available to the public transcripts of oral histories of judges and lawyers, including 3 Chief Judges (so

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far) of our State. We also plan to use excerpts from the videos in this section and throughout the website. The **Rule of Law** section gives us the opportunity to explore broad avenues of New York legal history, including the role of lawyers, judges, juries, the press and legal documents, as well as scholarship on the concept of “the Rule of Law” itself. Finally, **Courthouse Design** provides us with a way to showcase our beautiful courthouses throughout New York. We have developed a special section there on the figure of Lady Justice appearing in so many courthouses.

Our efforts to reach students at all levels in our State are reflected in the **Academic Center** dropdown on the website. Here we make available curriculum that has been developed through our partnership with Bard High School Early College. There are interesting videos available there too. We also showcase under the **Garfinkel Essay Contest** an annual essay contest on topics of New York legal history that we offer to community college students in New York. All past contest information, resources, and winning essays are included there.

The best way to understand the site is to visit it, and I hope many of you will do just that!

**Marilyn Marcus**, Executive Director  
The Historical Society of the New York Courts  
<http://www.nycourts.gov/history/>



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