

America@250 and the 100th Anniversary of Black History Month

Black History Month is an appropriate time to learn about efforts by Wisconsin residents and courts to advance equal rights for Black people.

BY HON. MAXINE ALDRIDGE WHITE

The struggle of this nation to “form a more perfect union” has always been tied to Black history. It is no coincidence that this year marks both the 100th anniversary of Black History Month and the 250th anniversary of the United States. Last September, my colleague and friend Derek Mosley, JD, director of the Lubar Center at Marquette University Law School, joined me in highlighting one of the most important cases in our nation’s history, while emphasizing some of Wisconsin’s own contributions to this nation’s culture.

250 years ago, our nation began a monumental journey when, in 1776, it adopted the Declaration of Independence. This document set forth several central ideas. The most remarkable idea declared: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Nearly 180 years later, guided by the legal and moral genius of attorney Thurgood Marshall, this country took a massive step forward when the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* unanimously declared that the doctrine of separate but equal was inherently unconstitutional.

Similarly, in May 1852, Joshua Glover, enslaved on a plantation in Missouri, escaped, traveling the Underground Railroad to Racine, Wis. At that time, the federal Fugitive Slave Act allowed U.S. Marshals to travel anywhere in the U.S. to capture and return freedom seekers to their enslavers. Glover was captured and taken to Milwaukee to await transportation back to Missouri. Wisconsinites led by abolitionist Sherman Booth broke Glover out of jail, and Glover then traveled to Canada. Booth was charged with assisting Glover’s escape. The Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that the Fugitive Slave Act was unconstitutional. This led the Wisconsin Legislature in 1857 to pass a law forbidding the enforcement of the Act – the only state that openly defied federal authority.

In 1865, Ezekiel Gillespie, a Black man, attempted to vote in Wisconsin and was denied

a ballot. In 1866, the Wisconsin Supreme Court unanimously ruled that African American males could vote in Wisconsin. The court also ruled that this right went back to an 1849 referendum, nearly 21 years before the 15th Amendment confirmed the federal voting rights of Black males. Gillespie became the first African American to vote in Wisconsin.

Despite these and other successes in the courts, access to public libraries and other public spaces remained unavailable to Blacks for many years.

Wisconsin’s story shows that Black history is woven into the state’s identity from its earliest days to the present. From the arrival of people of African descent in the 1700s, through slavery, emancipation, and the fight for suffrage, Black history in Wisconsin is not a side note but a central, ongoing force in the development of our nation.

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Black History Month, I am reminded of people who helped me with my own journey, counseled and mentored me, provided a shoulder to lean on, and became the milestones that inspired me to pursue and reach my goals.

Postscript: It is fitting that we acknowledge these victories in the same month that we commemorate and celebrate African American history. It is an important moment not only in our history but also an extremely important moment in American culture, as we strive to continue our journey to live up to the words of America’s founding document. Despite obstacles old and new we continue to push ahead. In this light, I highly recommend the PBS documentary *Becoming Thurgood – America’s Social Architect*, which had an advance screening at Marquette Law School in September 2025 with commentary by Derek Mosley and myself. **WL**



Hon. Maxine Aldridge White, Marquette 1985, has served as chief judge of the 16-member Wisconsin Court of Appeals since 2020. White, the first woman of color to serve on the court of appeals, has announced her retirement, effective April 3, 2026. Previously, White served as chief judge for the Milwaukee County Circuit Court (2015–20), the first African American to serve in that role. In 1992, she was the second Black woman appointed – and later the first elected – to the bench in Milwaukee County and Wisconsin. She was reelected four times.