

Nevada African American Attorney “Firsts”

BY BRYAN K. SCOTT, ESQ.

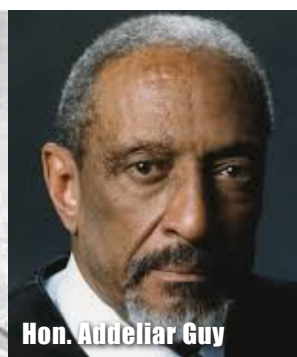
At a sad point in its colorful history, **Las Vegas was known as the “Mississippi of the West.”** Between 1930 and 1960, African Americans in Las Vegas were subjected to restrictions that rivaled the worst conditions in the deep south. Racial segregation (Jim Crow laws) was prevalent. While African American performers could work and entertain in casinos, they could not stay or gamble in those establishments or anywhere on the Las Vegas Strip. Likewise, workers toiled away at menial service jobs on the Strip, but dared not stay or gamble there. As a result, casinos such as the Moulin Rouge, the New Town Tavern and other gaming enterprises were established on the city’s west side—10 square blocks on the city’s west flank. The area was separated from white communities by railroad tracks and a pedestrian underpass on Bonanza Avenue that was referred to by African Americans back then as the “Iron Curtain.”

Similarly, in the legal profession, several racial impediments were put into place to prevent African Americans, women and other racial minorities from practicing law in the state. Residency requirements, biased character and fitness exams and outright discriminatory measures were routinely employed to prevent African Americans from becoming attorneys.

It wasn’t until 1961 in *Petition of Kellar*, 79 Nev. 28 (1963), that some of those impediments were removed. Charles Kellar (an accomplished attorney already practicing law in New York City) sued the State Bar of Nevada for denying him admission after he received a passing score on the bar exam. The Board of Bar Examiners alleged that Kellar failed to meet the character standards for admission to the Nevada bar. The Nevada Supreme Court found those character and fitness allegations to be without merit and Kellar was finally admitted to the State Bar of Nevada in 1965, four years after passing the bar exam.



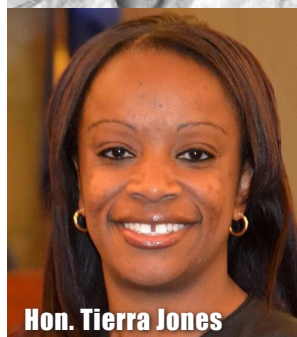
Charles Kellar



Hon. Addelmar Guy



Hon. Johnnie Rawlinson



Hon. Tierra Jones



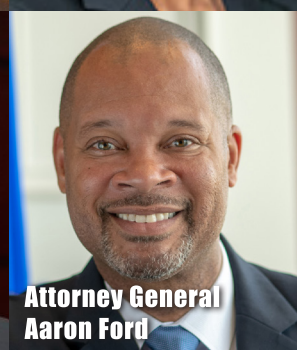
Hon. Jasmin Lilly-Spells



Hon. Dee Smart Butler



Sandra Douglass Morgan



Attorney General Aaron Ford



Brittanie Watkins

In honor of Black History Month, we recognize those African-American lawyer “firsts” who paved the way for the rest of us to prosper and shatter those glass ceilings.

First African American Attorneys:

- **Charles Kellar, Esq. (1961):** First African American man to pass the Nevada bar exam after initially being denied the right to practice law.
- **Earle W. White Jr., Esq., and Robert L. Reid, Esq. (1964):** First African American lawyers in Nevada.



First African American Judges:

- **Judge Robert L. Reid (1964):** First African American judge in Nevada (1966); first African American to serve as a deputy district attorney in Nevada (1966).
- **Judge Addeliar Dell Guy (1957):** First African American district court judge in Nevada (1975); first African American to serve as a deputy district attorney in Nevada (1966).

Since the time that these pioneers blazed the trail, there have been several notable African American “firsts” in Nevada, including the author of this article. These “firsts” include:

First African American Female Attorneys:

First of two African-American women to pass the Nevada State Bar Exam:

- **Judge Johnnie Rawlinson and Viveca Monet Woods, Esq.**

First African American Federal Judge and First Assistant U.S. Attorney:

- **Judge Johnnie Rawlinson:** First African American appointed to the federal district court; first African American woman appointed to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals; first African American appointed to the State Bar of

Nevada Board of Bar Examiners; first African American woman to be appointed to serve on the State Bar Board of Governors; first African American assistant district attorney; first African American and first female Article III judge.

- **Viveca Monet Woods, Esq.:** First female African American deputy district attorney and the first female African American assistant U.S. attorney.

First Justice and Additional Judicial Firsts:

- **Justice Michael Douglas:** First African American elected to the Nevada Supreme Court.
- **Judge Karen Bennett-Haron:** First African American woman elected as Justice of the Peace and first African American woman appointed to Nevada’s state justice system.
- **Federal District Court Judge Richard Boulware:** First African American man appointed to the federal district court.
- **Judge Tierra Jones:** First African American woman appointed to serve on a district court in Nevada.
- **Judge Jasmin Lilly Spells and Judge Erika Ballou:** Simultaneously became the first African American women to be elected to the Eighth Judicial District Court without appointment.
- **Judge Dee Smart Butler:** First African American woman elected to the bench in the Eighth Judicial District Court, Family Division.
- **Judge Belinda T. Harris:** First African American woman elected to the bench in North Las Vegas.

African American Attorneys in Statewide Service:

- **William Horne, Esq.:** First African American Majority Leader of the Nevada Assembly.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11

- **Jason Frierson, Esq.:** First African American Speaker of the Nevada Assembly.
- **Sandra Douglass Morgan, Esq.:** First African American appointed as North Las Vegas City Attorney; first African American Chair of Nevada Gaming Control Board.
- **Attorney General Aaron Ford:** First elected African American Nevada Attorney General.

Attorneys in Public Service:

- **Marcus Cooper, Esq.:** First African American Clark County public defender.
- **Booker Evans, Esq.:** First male African American deputy district attorney and first African American assistant U.S. attorney.
- **Las Vegas City Attorney Bryan Scott:** First African American city of Las Vegas City Attorney in its 119-year history; first African American president of the State Bar of Nevada; first African American president of the Clark County Bar Association; first African American president of the Clark County Law Foundation.

Attorneys in Private Practice:

- **Arthur Williams, Esq.:** First African American in-house counsel (Reynolds Electrical & Engineering Company).
- **John Bailey, Esq.:** First African American male partner of Nevada's largest law firm (Lionel Sawyer & Collins).
- **Doreen Spears Hartwell, Esq.:** First African American female partner of Nevada's largest law firm (Lionel, Sawyer & Collins); first African American to become chair of the Ninth Circuit Lawyer Representative Coordinating Committee.
- **Brittnie Watkins, Esq., LL.M., Ph.D.:** First African American woman elected to the State Bar of Nevada Board of Governors.

Nevada African American Attorney "Firsts"

These individuals relied on their tenacity, talent and hard work in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, in becoming trailblazing firsts. Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, another pioneering "first," once said: "People who end up as 'firsts' don't actually set out to be the first. They set out to do something they love."

I believe that these African American pioneers love the legal profession. Their diverse perspectives provide a more expansive range of talents and viewpoints while at the same time dispelling negative stereotypes and personal biases about different groups.

Cultural diversity and inclusion help us recognize and respect "ways of being" that are not necessarily our own. Major milestones in civil rights laws are on the books for the purpose of regulating equal access to public accommodations; equal justice before the law; and equal employment, education and housing opportunities. Our struggle for civil rights has inspired movements by other disenfranchised groups, including, but not limited to, Native Americans, Latinos and women. What was once considered "the norm" is no longer acceptable. This diverse new world brings bold opportunities to excel in areas that were once off limits.

While African Americans continue to make unprecedented advancements in governance, education, the arts and other professions, more needs to be done to increase diversity in the Nevada legal profession.

I am grateful for the opportunities afforded me thanks to those role models who preceded me, but I also hope to be the same for the young lawyers who come after me.

BRYAN K. SCOTT is the city attorney for the City of Las Vegas and a past president of the State Bar of Nevada, as well as the first African American to hold numerous positions in Nevada, as listed above. Scott began his career with the city in 1996. Prior to his career with the city, he was in private practice for five years. He earned his bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and his Juris Doctorate from Northwestern School of Law, Lewis and Clark College.

