

Leona Pouncey Thurman

Attorney
1911-1985

by Kimberly R. Riley

Leona Pouncey Thurman was the first African American woman to practice law in Kansas City.

Born in Russellville, Arkansas, on July 1, 1911, Thurman attended Henderson Business College in Memphis before settling in Kansas City in 1931. She became interested in the law profession as a career while working as a secretary for attorney James D. Pouncey, whom she married in 1937.

Following her husband's death, Leona Pouncey entered Howard University Law School. She received her law degree in 1949 and became the first black woman to practice law in Kansas City. Like her husband, her office was based in the 18th and Vine area.

Thurman's career, which spanned 34 years, focused primarily on criminal cases in the early years of her practice but soon shifted to divorce cases. She married A. Odell Thurman in 1957, an administrator for the Kansas City school district.

Thurman was active in the community, serving as a member of the YWCA, Women's Chamber of Commerce, and League of Women Voters. She also served on the board of directors of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Greater Kansas City Chapter of the American Red Cross, Mid-Continent Council of Girl Scouts of America, and the Carver Neighborhood Center.

Thurman was also a devoted member of the Republican Party. In 1969 she was one of 15 civic, business, and government leaders appointed by President Nixon to serve on a blue ribbon panel to conduct a year-long study of Defense Department organizations and management.

Thurman, who served as president of the Southwest Bar Association, was also chairman of the women's division of the World Peace Through Law Center. She received the C. Francis Stradford Award in 1960 from the National Bar Association.



Thurman continued to practice law at 1505 East 18th Street and devoted many hours to the restoration of the neighborhood as a jazz center. She died at her home on May 1, 1985, and was buried at Forest Hill Cemetery.

Sources

Flynn, Jane Fifield. *Kansas City Women of Independent Minds*. Kansas City: Fifield Publishing Co., 1992.

The Kansas City Star, 3 July 1970; 22 Jan. 1971; 15 Feb. 1975.

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