# Remembering Macon Bolling Allen's Contributions To The Charleston Bar

**February 16, 2021**

February is Black History Month, and Rosen Hagood recognizes and celebrates the many contributions African Americans have made in the world of the law. We begin our first in a series of articles that take a closer look at these achievements by remembering Macon Bolling Allen and his legal legacy here in Charleston.

When Allen passed the Maine bar examination in 1844, he became the first African American licensed attorney in the United States. It was only the beginning of several historic firsts, and one that was made challenging not just because of Allen's race.

The district court in Portland, Maine, had rejected Allen's first application to the bar because he didn't meet the state's citizenship requirements. Undaunted, Allen decided to pursue admission to the bar by taking the exam, which did not have a citizenship requirement. But, he was met with hostility from the bar examination committee, adding another hurdle to his path. Working with General Samuel Fessenden, a local abolitionist and attorney who had served as Allen's mentor, Allen passed the exam and obtained his license on July 3, 1844.

However, passing the bar didn't make Allen's budding legal career any easier. Not only did whites in Maine not want to hire a black lawyer, but there were few blacks who lived there who might have retained him. So, Allen moved to Massachusetts and joined the Suffolk County bar in 1845, where he reached another milestone: becoming the first African American lawyer to try a case before a jury.

Then in 1847, Allen became the first African American to hold a judicial position when he became a justice of the peace for Middlesex County in Massachusetts. At the time, Allen was not considered a United States citizen, making his achievement even more improbable.

By this point in his life, Allen already had numerous legal accomplishments under his belt. But he wasn't finished. After the Civil War, Allen moved to Charleston where he joined two other African American attorneys, William Whipper and Robert Elliott, to form Whipper, Elliot, and Allen. It was the nation's first known African American law firm. Allen handled a number of different cases, including one in which he represented several black defendants who were facing death sentences.

Allen continued his judicial endeavors in Charleston by serving on the Inferior Court in 1873. The next year, he was elected as a probate judge for Charleston County.

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In the years following Reconstruction in the South, Allen moved to Washington, D.C. where he continued to practice law. He worked as an attorney for the Land and Improvement Association. Allen would remain in Washington until his death in 1894.

Allen's contributions to the practice of law say as much about him as they do about Charleston. For the birthplace of the Civil War to become the home of the nation's first African American law firm is truly remarkable. Nothing less could be expected from a man who worked tirelessly to break down barriers and proved what can be accomplished through determination.

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