

# Honor for Richmond man who broke barriers

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[Contra Costa Times](#)

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Janie Mabry, right, wife of Judge George D. Carroll, smiles during a ceremony renaming the Richmond courthouse the Judge George D. Carroll Courthouse in Richmond, Calif. on Friday, Oct. 16, 2009. Carroll was the first African-American on the Richmond City Council, the first African-American mayor of Richmond and the first African-American judge in Contra Costa County. (Dean Coppola/Staff)

George Carroll came from humble roots. His father was a truck driver. His mother cleaned houses until she died when he was 5 years old. It was his older sister who encouraged him to go to college, to get an education, to aim for something big.

He did.

Carroll went on to become Richmond's first black mayor in 1964 and Contra Costa County's first black judge the following year.

On Friday afternoon, the Richmond courthouse at 100 37th St. — where Carroll spent two decades administering the law — was renamed in his honor. More than 100 people stood near the entrance and cheered as a tarp on the wall was pulled back to reveal "Judge George D. Carroll Courthouse" in large lettering.

"I personally can never fill his shoes, but I am very proud to follow his trail," said Diana Becton Smith, Contra Costa Superior Court assistant presiding judge. Becton Smith is the county's third black judge.

Colleagues and friends describe Carroll, 86, as fair and modest, a "trailblazer for people of color" and a model of that American ideal in which anyone — regardless of background — can climb their way to success through education, hard work and perseverance.

"He achieved these positions not because he was African-American," said County Supervisor John Gioia, who represents West County, "but because he was the best and the most qualified for the job."

Carroll was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he graduated from college and earned his law degree. He worked at the Kings County, N.Y., District Attorney's Office for five years before switching to private practice.

The Army veteran moved to Berkeley in 1952, then Richmond in 1954 where he opened an office. He is believed to have been the first black attorney in Richmond.

## ***JUDGE CARROLL COURTHOUSE 2-2-2-2***

He quickly became active in the community. He ran unsuccessfully for City Council in 1959 before winning a seat in 1961 for a four-year term. He was mayor from July 1964 to May 1965 — the first black mayor of a major American city.

Carroll made the move from lawyer to judge in 1965 when then-Gov. Jerry Brown appointed him to the Contra Costa Municipal Court. He was elected and re-elected in 1970, 1976 and 1982. He retired from the bench in 1985.

During his tenure, he turned down a chance at a promotion to Superior Court because he wanted to continue serving in Richmond instead of moving to Martinez.

His place both politically and professionally was neither by luck nor chance, the soft-spoken Carroll explained. Rather his success came through an education.

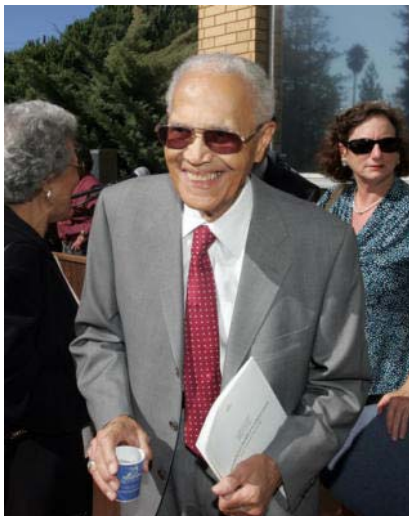
"I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth," he said.

He grew up at a time of discrimination and segregation in the country, but he said people in Richmond embraced him.

"I've lived through the best of times and the worst of times," Carroll said. "This city took me in and allowed me to prosper."

Katherine Tam covers Richmond. Follow her on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/katherinetam](http://www.twitter.com/katherinetam).

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Judge George D. Carroll, right, is congratulated by his former clerk Nanci Chew Carlson, while his wife Janie Mabry looks on during a ceremony renaming the Richmond courthouse the Judge George D. Carroll Courthouse in Richmond, Calif. on Friday, Oct. 16, 2009. Carroll was the first African-American on the Richmond City Council, the first African-American mayor of Richmond and the first African-American judge in Contra Costa County. (Dean Coppola/Staff)