The Court Archive:
Ferdinand Barnett

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One of the most prominent African American attorneys in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-centuries was Ferdinand Barnett. Barnett was born in 1852 in Nashville, Tennessee. His father purchased his and his family's freedom and became a blacksmith. The family moved to Canada before the Civil War, then to Chicago in 1869. Young Barnett graduated from high school, moved to the South to teach, and returned to Chicago to attend the Union College of Law (now Northwestern Law School). On June 11, 1878, Barnett received his law license, becoming the third African American admitted to the Illinois bar.

Barnett did not enter into a legal partnership, preferring to practice solo. In addition to his law practice, Barnett became a newspaper publisher in 1878, beginning the first African American paper in Chicago—*The Conservator*. Barnett used his paper to promote civil rights and integration of public education and to emphasize editorial discussion and interpretation.

In 1896, Barnett was asked about his most interesting case. Barnett replied that he represented a former slave woman who went to court to assert her right to collect part of the estate of her deceased father, a white man. The principal question concerned whether African American heirs of interracial parents could collect inheritance. Witnesses testified that the father recognized his daughter after the Civil War and had a close relationship with her. The judge ruled for the woman that she had the right to collect her rightful inheritance.

Cook County State's Attorney Charles Deneen appointed Barnett to be an assistant state's attorney in 1897—the first for an African American in Illinois. Ten years later, Barnett ran for judge for the newly created Chicago Municipal Court. He lost the election after a controversial vote county and was the only Republican to lose an election for judge that year.

As an assistant state's attorney, Barnett argued a number of appeals to the Illinois Supreme Court. In his ten-year tenure with the state's attorney's office, Barnett handled nearly thirty Supreme Court appeals. Returning to private practice in 1911, Barnett continued to travel to Springfield for appellate cases. His most significant cases concerned Walter Colvin and Joseph Campbell.

Campbell was an inmate at the Joliet state prison and worked for the warden. In June 1915, the warden's wife died in a fire, and since Campbell was the only servant who had access to the wife's quarters that day, he was accused of rape and murder. Barnett represented Campbell, outlined the weak case with no evidence tied to Campbell, and concluded that Campbell was "the victim of race prejudice." Campbell was found guilty and sentenced to death, and the Illinois Supreme Court affirmed, but Barnett convinced the governor to commute the sentence to life imprisonment. 282 Ill.614 (1918).

Grand jury inquiry into the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 resulted in only a handful of indictments—all of them against African Americans. Walter Colvin and three others allegedly murdered a peddler during the riots. Colvin admitted to taking part but argued that his confession was coerced. The jury found him guilty and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Barnett represented Colvin on his appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court, but the Court found no error in the trial proceedings and affirmed the judgment. 294 Ill. 196 (1920).

Barnett's second wife was Ida B. Wells, and the two of them fought together for basic civil rights for African Americans. Barnett and Wells-Barnett used their newspaper, his legal career, and their social activities to campaign for racial advancement. Barnett died in 1936.