The Court Archive:
Judge Albert George

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Nearly everyone in the judiciary is aware that Justice Charles E. Freeman was the first African American to be elected to the Illinois Supreme Court in 1990. Many people know that George N. Leighton was the first African American to join the Illinois Appellate Court. Who was the first African American judge at the circuit level? This honor belongs to Judge Albert George.

Albert B. George was born in Washington, DC in 1873. He briefly studied law with an established attorney in Pennsylvania before moving to Chicago in 1893. George worked with Frederic DeYoung, later an Illinois Supreme Court justice. George graduated from Northwestern University College of Law in 1897 and was admitted to the Illinois bar that same year. He began the practice of law in Chicago.

In 1918, George married Maude Roberts, who was a noted musician and a music critic for the *Chicago Defender*. In the 1930s, she served as president of the National Association of Negro Musicians and was responsible for having the Chicago Symphony Orchestra play one of African American composer Florence Price's symphonies at the Century of Progress World's Fair.

Cook County Republicans had attempted to slate an African American for a judgeship but failed both times. In 1924, Republicans asked George to put his name forward to run for Municipal Court judge. He was endorsed by prominent Chicagoans, both white and Black, and easily won the election by more than 65,000 votes.

He was the first African American to be elected to a judicial position. Others before had been appointed, but George was the first to win a popular vote. George said, "I'm not exulting over a personal victory. I am sensible of the fact that it will be my duty to be a good judge in every sense of the word." Judge George remained in his position for 6 years, presiding in several important cases. The *Defender* added that he demonstrated ability, courage, and honor, receiving high recommendations from the Chief Judge Harry Olson. By 1927, he was "recognized as one of the ablest judges on the bench."

In 1930, Judge George decided to run for re-election, and all of the newspapers supported his candidacy. However, the Republican power brokers of 1924 were gone, and the new Republicans

in charge failed to support him. George lost the nomination by a handful of votes, so he was never on the 1930 ballot.

After George left the bench, Illinois Governor Louis Emmerson appointed him on the State Board of Pardons and Parole. George also became a national speaker on race, welfare, and culture, specifically regarding the younger generation. He died in March 1940 at Provident Hospital. He was buried in Lincoln Cemetery, a historic African American cemetery in Blue Island and final resting place of poet Gwendolyn Brooks, publisher Robert Sengstacke Abbott, aviator Bessie Coleman, and Negro Leagues executive Rube Foster.