The Court Archive:
The Cicero Race Riot and George Leighton

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George Leighton, a prominent civil rights lawyer and later judge, was involved in several court cases concerning segregation during the middle of the twentieth century. He graduated from Howard University and attended Harvard Law School. He served in World War II as a ROTC second lieutenant from 1942 until his discharge in 1945. After the war, he completed his legal studies at Harvard, and he and his wife Virginia then moved to Chicago without knowing anyone in the area. During his career, Leighton represented individuals and families in the state, handling crucial cases on school desegregation, voting rights, and the rights for African Americans to serve on juries. Five years after Leighton's move to Chicago as a new lawyer, he was indicted for conspiracy to incite a riot after violence in Cicero following the attempt of Leighton's client Harvey Clark Jr. to move into an apartment.

One of the largest riots in U.S. history began on the evening of July 11, 1951, after Harvey Clark Jr. and his wife Johnetta moved into an apartment building in Cicero, an all-white suburb west of Chicago. The pair met at Fisk University and had been living in a small two-tenement room with their two children along with a family of five in the South Side of Chicago. A World War II veteran who moved to Chicago from Mississippi, Clark worked as a bus driver and wanted to find better opportunities in the north for his family. Harvey and Johnetta found housing options in Cicero with more space and cheaper rent, but they were quickly refused and turned away by the sheriff. Clark hired George Leighton as his attorney and Leighton helped to give them legal permission to rent the apartment. At the time of representing Clark, Leighton was with the NAACP and represented parents of children in the Harrisburg schools and filed an injunction that the schools be ordered to desegregate earlier in the year. The year of 1951 was one of continued racial tensions with disputes school desegregation with Leighton working on a similar desegregation case in Cairo, Illinois with Thurgood Marshall assisting on the case.

Harvey Clark and his family obtained the legal right to move into the apartment building, but the residents of Cicero were not pleased with this effort to integrate the town. The violence began the night of July 11, 1951 when 4,000 white Cicero residents rioted and the apartment building was set on fire after the mob stormed the apartment destroying the family's home and belongings. Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson called in the National Guard to halt the violence.

It took a total of over 600 police officers, guardsmen, and sheriff's deputies to halt the mob over three days of rioting.

In the riot's aftermath, a grand jury investigated the incident. Instead of charging the rioters and looters, the jury indicted the owner of the building, her lawyer, the rental agent, the Cicero Police Chief, and NAACP lawyer, George Leighton with conspiracy on September 18, 1951. The indictment charged that Leighton caused the riot by 'encouraging' the Clarks to move into the apartment. Civil rights activist Thurgood Marshall, special counsel for the NAACP, traveled to Chicago to represent Leighton. Marshall later became the first African American on the U.S. Supreme Court serving from 1967 until 1991. The charges against Leighton were dismissed three months after the indictment when Assistant State Attorney James A. Brown requested all charges against the lawyer be dropped. All of the indictments were eventually dismissed except one against Cicero Police Chief Erwin Konovsky due to failing to prevent the mob from rioting. The court ordered a fine and sentence, but the Illinois Appellate Court later overturned the sentence. Cicero continued to have issues with desegregating into the next few decades. The involvement of two influential black attorneys in the events of the riot in Cicero help to display the significance of the events relating to the law in Illinois and how civil rights history unfolded during this period.

George Leighton continued to practice law and work as a civil rights attorney. He often traveled to southern states to provide legal counsel pertaining to issues of civil rights. In 1960, he and Thurgood Marshall represented Martin Luther King Jr. during his appeal of some arrests. Leighton later became the first African American appointed to the Illinois Appellate Court and was appointed to the U.S. District Court, Northern District of Illinois He spent his final years in Massachusetts where he died of pneumonia on June 6, 2018 at the age of 105. His energy and passion for helping others and bettering the world was evident throughout his life.

The Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission awards the George N. Leighton Award to honor Leighton for his exceptional service to the legal community and recognizes the recipient as an outstanding citizen who exhibits the qualities which personified Judge Leighton's character, service, and legal career.