The Court Archive:
A. Morris Williams

John A. Lupton
© Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission
January 2024

By the late 19th century, there was a growing population of African American attorneys in Chicago. However, we don't often hear much about African American attorneys downstate. One of the more significant early Black attorneys was Abraham Morris Williams.

Williams was born in Virginia in 1879. In 1901, he and his wife moved to Springfield, Illinois, where he found work as a cobbler. He eventually studied law and was admitted to the Illinois bar on October 2, 1907. He became the first African American licensed to practice law in Sangamon County, the home of Abraham Lincoln.

In one of his earliest legal cases, Williams served as co-counsel for Joe James in 1908. James, a young African American, was arrested for the July 1908 murder of Clergy Ballard, a white man living in Springfield. A month later, the Springfield Race Riot occurred. After the riot, as James's trial was set to begin, Williams motioned the Sangamon County Circuit Court for a change of venue, which was denied. An all-white jury quickly found James guilty, and he was sentenced to death. Williams motioned for a new trial, which was denied, and then tried to send the case to the parole board and to Governor Charles Deneen for review. James was executed in October 1908.

A year later in December 1909, Ida B. Wells visited Springfield to oppose the reinstatement of Sheriff Frank Davis, the Alexander County official who mishandled the protection of William "Froggy" James, an African American accused of the rape and murder of a white woman. James had been lynched in Cairo in November 1909. Williams assisted Wells, and Sheriff Davis was not reinstated.

Williams was frequently retained by various organizations to represent African Americans charged with crimes throughout central Illinois. Two of Williams's cases ended up at the Illinois Supreme Court. In *People v. Ensaw*, 341 Ill. 455 (1930), he represented Charles Ensaw, an African American who had been found guilty of receiving stolen property. In *People v. Johnson*, 345 Ill. 352 (1931), he represented Hazel Johnson, an African American who was found guilty of murder in Macon County. Williams lost both cases when the Supreme Court affirmed both. Ensaw remained in prison, and Johnson was executed.

In addition to his law practice, Williams was active in and became president of the Springfield NAACP in the 1920s. He was a real estate developer with the building of a Masonic Hall, a business block on Washington Street, and a hotel. Williams played an important role in Springfield's African American community over the first few decades of the 20th century, though he was certainly not without controversy. Williams was involved in several lawsuits as a defendant and was admonished by a judge in the 1930s for failing to pay over a client's alimony.

A. Morris Williams died in Springfield in 1936 and is buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery along with his namesake Abraham Lincoln.