



JOHNETTA PAYE ESQUIRE

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Black History Month legal tribute: Charlotte E. Ray



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February is not only significant for Black History Month. Charlotte E. Ray, the first African-American lawyer in the U.S., graduated from law school during this month in 1872, after reading an essay on "[Chancery](#)."



**BLACK HISTORY MONTH
LEGAL TRIBUTE: KAMALA
HARRIS**



**BLACK HISTORY MONTH
LEGAL TRIBUTE: LORETTA
LYNCH**

'Founders Library — on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C.

(Architect: Albert I. Cassell; Photo credit: Josh/Wikimedia Commons)

Behind the legal scene

In J. Paye in Brief's 2017 Black History Month series, we went behind the legal scene to learn 10 more facts about Ray for those who may not know the historic woman.



Charlotte E. Ray drawing (Photo credit: Fair Use/Wikimedia Commons)

1. In 1872, Charlotte E. Ray became the first female African-American lawyer in the United States. (Source: [Biography](#))

2. Her historic rise as a “first” was the same year that she graduated from HBCU Howard University in the School of Law. (Source: [Biography](#))

3. Her legal aspirations may have been influenced by her father, who edited the abolitionist publication,

Commons)

“Colored American,” and who helped slaves escape to the North through the Underground Railroad. (Source: [Biography](#))

4. Although being both a woman and an African-American proved to be difficult in furthering her legal career, she still made an effort to do so by running an ad in Frederick Douglass’s newspaper, The North Star, for her commercial law practice. (Sources: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#), [Biography](#))

5. Ray attended the Institution for the Education of Colored Youth, now known as Cheyney University, in Washington DC. The school, which opened in 1852, was founded by a Quaker named Richard Humphreys, who used \$10K from his estate to start a school that would educate African-Americans. (Source: [Cheyney University](#), [The Leadership Conference via CivilRights.org](#))

6. In addition to being the first African-American lawyer in the U.S., she is also the first woman to gain admission to practice law before the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia. (Source: [Howard University School of Law](#))

7. There are mixed historical opinions about



7. There are mixed historical opinions about whether she initially wanted to lean toward a career in teaching, which she later did after working as a lawyer became too difficult due to racism. Before completing law school, she was hired as a teacher for its Preparatory and Normal Department, which trains school teachers. (Source: [BlackPast.org](#))



Carnegie Library on Cheyney University (PA)

Campus quad (Photo credit:

Smallbones/Wikimedia Commons)

8. Ray was a member of the National Association of Colored Women. (Source: [NewsOne](#))

9. A visitor at Howard University School of Law remembered Ray as a student who could “read us a thesis on corporations, not copied from the books but from her brain, a clear incisive analysis of one of the most delicate legal questions.” (Source: [Google Books](#) excerpt from “[Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary, Volume III: 1607–1950, P–Z](#)”)

10. She passed away of acute bronchitis in 1911 and is buried in Brooklyn’s Cypress Hills Cemetery. (Source: [Google Books](#) excerpt from “[Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary, Volume III: 1607–1950, P–Z](#)”)

Please visit [J. Paye in Brief's News](#) to read the entire six-part Black History Month legal series tribute, honoring [former President Barack H. Obama](#), [former first lady Michelle Obama](#), [Nelson Mandela](#), [Loretta Lynch](#), [Kamala Harris](#) and [Charlotte E. Ray](#).

Shamontiel L. Vaughn compiled this blog. Find out more about her at [Shamontiel.com](#).

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