

# [***Minnesota's first Black lawyer helped pave the way for many after him***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BCJ-5K41-JBSS-S1GV-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

February 20, 2024 Tuesday 7:11 PM GMT

Copyright 2024 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 455 words

**Byline:** By Susan-Elizabeth Littlefield

**Dateline:** (WCCO)

**Body**

[*Click here for updates on this story*](https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/minnesotas-first-black-lawyer-helped-pave-the-way-for-many-after-him/)

ST. PAUL, Minnesota ([*WCCO*](https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/minnesotas-first-black-lawyer-helped-pave-the-way-for-many-after-him/)) -- It's a success story even local historians have trouble comprehending. It's the story of Frederick McGhee.

Judge JaPaul Harris, an attorney based in St. Paul says he is mesmerized by the story of McGhee.

"I just was very interested in lawyers who had come before me, Black lawyers," Harris said.

Born into slavery in Mississippi, his family escaped with Union soldiers to Tennessee where he got a law degree. In the late 1800s, he took a job in St. Paul to become the first Black lawyer in Minnesota.

"I think what stands out is, one, persistence but also his talent - the fact that he was born into slavery," Harris said.

It's a story that also fascinates Historian Paul Nelson, he wrote a book about McGhee called, "A Life on the Color Line." He says McGhee was the first lawyer but so much more.

"Somebody was gonna be first, that's not what was important it was what he did with it, and what he did with it was he made himself one of the top criminal defense attorneys of his era," Nelson said.

McGhee won trial after trial, becoming a front-page staple.

"He was a southern Black man who made his living successfully in the almost completely white world of Minnesota courts," Nelson said. "He was a guy who was good with our juries of German and Scandinavian men. So he had some remarkable abilities to connect with Minnesotans and who would have figured that."

He made waves in other areas too - converting from Republican to Democrat, converting from Baptist to Catholic, and helping found St. Peter Claver Parish.

He also helped found the Niagara Movement, a precursor to the NAACP.

"Every single civil rights organization, whether here in Minnesota or nationally, he was either an officer in or helped found. Let's think about that - he was either an officer or helped found," Harris said.

Harris says the mark he made is an inspiration.

"I think what he symbolizes is how you can be a first, build bridges as someone who is a first but also leave a lasting mark on your community," Harris said "Whether it was his criminal defense work, whether it was his career in ***politics***, whether it was in civil rights, his sole focus was uplifting those around him, uplifting his community and I think that is his story."

McGhee died in 1912 at age 50 of a lung condition. He is buried in St. Paul. A plaque about McGhee is displayed at Western Bank on University Avenue.

**Please note: This content carries a strict local market embargo. If you share the same market as the contributor of this article, you may not use it on any platform.**

By Susan-Elizabeth Littlefield

TM & © 2024 Cable News Network, Inc., a Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

**Load-Date:** February 20, 2024

**End of Document**