

# **Fort Taber Flag to honor Judge George N. Leighton WWII Veteran and Fierce Civil Rights Advocate**

During the month of July, the 23rd Lights for Peace flag to fly at the Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum honors the memory of Judge George N. Leighton, who served as a Captain in the 25th Infantry Division of U.S. Army during WWII.

George Leighton was born in New Bedford on October 22, 1912 to Antonio and Anna Leitao, who were natives of Cape Verde. He came from very humble beginnings and was forced to leave school at an early age, just before entering 7th grade, to help earn money for his family. His drive and ambition, as well as his love of reading and talent for writing, helped him to earn a scholarship to Howard University which set him on a path of success. He would eventually become a prominent lawyer and judge, serving as the first Cape Verdean on the Illinois Appellate Court. He was well known for his work as a civil rights lawyer and his involvement with the NAACP (National Assoc. for the Advancement of Colored People). A major milestone in his career came when he was nominated by President Gerald Ford to serve as a U.S. District Court judge and confirmed on Feb. 2, 1976.

Leighton spent most of his early years living in New Bedford and Wareham. According to an on-line biographical sketch, instead of attending 7th grade, he took a job on an oil tanker sailing from Fall River to Aruba. He spent most of his free time reading extensively. In the winter of 1936, Leighton entered an essay contest for the Cape Verdean Memorial Scholarship Fund and was awarded \$200, which provided the initial tuition for any college of his choice.

He submitted an application to Howard University and was accepted as an "unclassified student." The registrar informed him that if he could prove he could do the college work, without having attended high school, he would be a candidate for a degree. At the end of the first semester, Leighton made the Dean's Honor Roll and was made a candidate for a degree in the College of Liberal Arts. He graduated in 1940, magna cum laude.

Leighton was then awarded a first year scholarship to Harvard Law School and enrolled in September 1940. He was drafted to serve in the United States Army on March 6, 1942, during WWII. He reported to Fort Benning, GA where he attended the 206th Basic Class of Reserve Officers. He was ordered to report for duty with the 93rd Infantry Division at Fort Huachuca, AZ on June 18, 1942.

He served with the 93rd Division as a Munitions Officer, earning the rank of Captain while serving in the New Guinea Campaign and the Solomon Islands Campaign. According to his military records, he was relieved from military service on Feb. 6, 1946.

Upon his discharge from the military, he returned to Harvard Law School and graduated on November 25, 1946 with his LLB (Legum Baccalaureus) or Bachelor of Laws degree. He passed the Massachusetts Bar exam Oct. 1946. He moved to Chicago IL and was admitted to the Bar of the State of Illinois in January 1947, where he began his long and distinguished career.

The Illinois State Bar Association Newsletter featured a story: A life in the law: George N. Leighton, 1912-2018, written by Hon. Alfred M. Swanson Jr., a retired judge. In this newsletter, Judge Timothy Evans describes Judge Leighton's experience upon arriving in Chicago at that time. "Judge Leighton came to Chicago in 1946 at a time when an African-American man could neither rent an office downtown nor hail a taxi in the loop. He made a name for himself as an

attorney who fought for voting rights, integrated schools, fair housing and equal access to jury service.”

Leighton became involved in civic affairs in Chicago, presiding as President of the Chicago Chapter of the Howard University Alumni Assoc., Chairman of the Legal Redress Committee of the Chicago Branch NAACP, served two terms as the President of the Chicago Branch of the NAACP, as well as becoming a Life Member.

According to A Biographical Sketch of George N. Leighton, “Leighton was active in cases that attracted national attention. In 1950, Leighton represented Negro parents of school children in Harrisburg, Illinois in a proceeding which he filed in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Illinois. An injunction was obtained ordering desegregation of the public schools of Harrisburg Illinois.”

Leighton “was on the cutting edge of several issues,” working diligently with the NAACP and one of his clients “included Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

Hon. Alfred M. Swanson explained that “as an attorney, George Leighton never shied away from unpopular cases or people.” He took a case in the early 1950’s, representing an African-American family in Cicero, IL, a suburb of Chicago. The case involved enforcing a lease for the family to move into an apartment. “That resulted in fierce opposition; the building was burned and there was a riot in the streets. Rather than charges against the rioters, attorney Leighton was indicted for inciting the riot. His defense attorney who got the indictment dismissed was a fellow NAACP attorney, Thurgood Marshall, who later became the first African-American justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1951, Leighton organized the law firm, Moore, Ming & Leighton, which was “considered by the profession to be one of the largest predominately black law firms in the United

States.” After 18 years of serving as a lawyer, Leighton was elected to the position of a Justice of the Circuit Court of Cook County in November 1964. In July of 1969 he became the first African-American to serve as a judge on the Illinois Appellate Court. Then, on Dec. 19, 1975, President Gerald Ford nominated Judge Leighton to serve as a United States District Judge, Northern District of IL. He was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on Feb. 29, 1976.

Lee Blake of the New Bedford Historical Society explains that there are many references to Judge Leighton becoming the first African-American to hold the position of Judge on the

Illinois Appellate Court, yet Leighton was of a Cape Verdean descent. There seems to be a difference of interpretation when it comes to some Cape Verdeans considering themselves African-Americans while others consider themselves a mixed race, Latino or white. For the purpose of this article, the term African-American is used when the source it was taken from references it.

The biography explains that “during his professional career, Leighton represented plaintiffs and defendants in civil cases of every kind. He defended more than 200 criminal charges in bench and jury trials. During this same period he handled more than 175 appeals or reviews, civil and criminal, in state and federal courts.”

Leighton was initiated as an honorary member of the Chicago Alumni Chapter of the Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity in October 2009. Based on recollections of friends and colleagues, Leighton explains his reasoning for wanting to become a lawyer. “I don’t know how many of you have ever kneeled on a cranberry bog, but let me tell you what happens. Cranberry vines are like thistles. So, I was there, on my knees, weeding and the hot August sun was beating me on my head when I got the idea that I wanted to be a lawyer. I had never spoken to a lawyer, I didn’t know what lawyers did for a

living. The only explanation I had was that in the heat of the day and the pain I my knees from the vines, it must have occurred to me that there just had to be a better way of earning a living.”

Hon. Alfred M. Swanson describes Leighton as “a fearless litigator and a fierce advocate for this clients and causes in which he believed. Friends and colleagues also described George Leighton as a gentleman, a scholar with a passionate love of the law, and a man with an infectious sense of humor who always had a smile. A man with so many accomplishments it is difficult to list them all.”

During a dinner at the 2012 NAACP breakfast, held at UMASS Dartmouth, Leighton shared these words: “Don’t forget to devote your time to the poor, the voiceless, the oppressed, the not guilty innocent who are prosecuted in our courtrooms.”

Also in 2012, Judge Leighton was one of the leading guests at the 2012 Cape Verdean Recognition Committee Scholarship awards dinner; the same scholarship that Leighton received 77 years earlier that changed the trajectory of his life.

Judge Leighton died at the age of 104 on June 6, 2018. He and his late wife, Virginia Berry Quivers, had two daughters: Virginia Anne and Barbara Elaine.

Linda Ferreira, of **Empire Ford of New Bedford**, researches the life histories of area residents. American flags are provided by Empire Ford of New Bedford. Flags are raised by the staff at Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum. Those who would like to honor a local veteran in the future can contact Ferreira at [lferreira@buyempireautogroup.com](mailto:lferreira@buyempireautogroup.com)