black history month

The Tennessean is profiling an important African-American figure in the state’s history each day during February.

Adolfo A. Birch Jr.: pioneer chief justice

By Lexy Gross
The Tennessean

Adolfo A. Birch Jr. in 1994 became the first black chief justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court.

Birch was born in Washington, D.C. He attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania for two years and earned his bachelor's and law degrees from Howard University.

He came to Nashville and taught medical law at Meharry Medical College.

Birch also taught law at Fisk University and Tennessee State A&I University, now Tennessee State University, while maintaining a private law practice. He was appointed assistant district attorney for Davidson County in 1966.

In 1969, Birch was named a General Sessions court judge, becoming the first black Tennessee to serve in a county-wide office. He held several other Davidson County positions and also became an instructor at the Nashville School of Law.

Birch's fellow justices elected him chief justice in 1994. He was the first person to serve at every judicial level in Tennessee. Birch was sometimes described as “Tennessee’s Thurgood Marshall.”

In 2006, the year Birch retired, Davidson County dedicated its new criminal court building, the Justice A.A. Birch building, in his honor.