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Judge George N. Leighton Laid to Rest at Arlington National Cemetery

Arlington, Va. - In fulfillment of his final wish, Judge George N. Leighton was laid to rest today in Arlington National Cemetery.

“It was an absolute honor to be present at this moving ceremony, honoring Judge Leighton’s final wish. Judge Leighton was a true patriot in every sense of the word -- from his service to our nation during World War II to his courageous work as a civil rights attorney to his years of distinguished service on both the state and federal court benches,” said Chief Judge Rubén Castillo.

“We are so grateful to the many throughout the community who assisted the Court in ensuring Judge Leighton’s wish became a reality. Special thanks to Bob Whitfield, Langdon Neal, and Senator Dick Durbin for their efforts,” said Judge Castillo.

Judge Leighton’s wish for an Arlington burial was complicated by the cemetery’s strict burial requirements. To be eligible for in-ground interment at Arlington, one must have to have died in active duty, been a prisoner of war, won high military honors or completed 20 years of active service.

In January, Judge Leighton’s family began gathering information to include with his request to Arlington. Some of the records were lost in a fire at the Archives’ military records center in St. Louis 45 years ago. In March, in reviewing records, Senator Durbin’s office discovered that for some months near the end of the WW II, Judge Leighton apparently had been a prisoner in a Japanese P.O.W. camp, something Judge Leighton may never have told anyone about this part of his life.

Judge Leighton, the son of immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands, grew up in Massachusetts. Despite never graduating from high school, he earned his undergraduate degree from Howard University. He was awarded a scholarship to Harvard Law School where his studies were interrupted in 1941 with the entrance of the United States into WWII. He served as an officer in the Army's 93rd Division and was awarded the Bronze Star. After the war, he returned to

Harvard Law School, then graduated, passed the bar examination, and moved with his young family to Chicago in 1946.

As a young lawyer in Chicago, Judge Leighton became active in Chicago civic affairs. He helped integrate the Board of Managers of the Chicago Bar Association and served a term as president of the Chicago Branch of the NAACP. He was active in several cases that drew national attention, including his 1951 representation of Harvey Clark, an African-American who attempted to move into an apartment in segregated Cicero. In a strange turn of events, Judge Leighton was arrested for inciting a riot by his representation of the Clarks. Throughout his career, he fought diligently to improve the balance of racial equality for all Americans. He was instrumental in attaining voting rights for African Americans in the early 1950s through the 1960s. He also fought for school desegregation and the right of African Americans to serve on juries. Judge Leighton served as a Circuit Court Judge in Cook County from 1964 to 1969. He then went on to become the first African American District Appellate Court Justice in Illinois from 1969 to 1976. Judge Leighton was nominated to this Court by President Gerald R. Ford in 1975 and confirmed by the U.S. Senate on February 2, 1976. He served the District Court honorably until his retirement in 1987. Judge Leighton passed away at the age of 105 on June 6, 2018.

Last month, the District Court hosted a special memorial honoring Judge Leighton and unveiled a special exhibit, which chronicles Judge Leighton's extraordinary life and career, in the Court's History Museum. This special exhibit will run until December 3, 2018, and is open to the public on the 21st floor of the courthouse during regular business hours.

Chief Judge Castillo, District Judge Sharon Johnson Coleman, and the Clerk of the Court Thomas G. Bruton attended today's ceremony.

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