

George Carroll, first black Richmond mayor and Contra Costa County judge, dies at 94

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Judge George D. Carroll, right, is congratulated by his former clerk Nanci Chew Carlson, while his wife Janie Mabry looks on during a ceremony renaming the Richmond courthouse the Judge George D. Carroll Courthouse in Richmond, Calif. on Friday, Oct. 16, 2009. Carroll was the first African-American on the Richmond City Council, the first African-American mayor of Richmond and the first African-American judge in Contra Costa County. (Dean Coppola/Staff) (Dean Coppola)

RICHMOND -- George Carroll, who became Richmond's first black mayor in 1964 and Contra Costa County's first black judge the following year, died in his sleep Thursday. He was 94.

Carroll was a leader who had a "distinguishing career by any means," said Richmond Mayor Tom Butt. "I think that he was a figure admired by everyone in Richmond, but I think particularly people in the African-American community because he was an example to people."

Two landmarks in the city were named after Carroll, he said. Judge George D. Carroll Courthouse was named after him in 2009, and a park in the Point Richmond District was named in his honor.



Judge George D. Carroll is all smiles during a ceremony renaming the Richmond courthouse the Judge George D. Carroll Courthouse in Richmond, Calif. on Friday, Oct. 16, 2009. Carroll was the first African-American on the Richmond City Council, the first African-American mayor of Richmond and the first African-American judge in Contra Costa County. (Dean Coppola/Staff) (Dean Coppola)

"Most people don't get things named after them until after they die," Butt said. "But I think if you get something named after you when you're alive that means you're a pretty special person."

Supervisor John Gioia, who got to know Carroll during the process of renaming the courthouse, said it was pivotal to have the building named for an African-American.

"I think it was really significant to have the symbol of the legal system in West County named after an African-American role model, knowing that sometimes that system was not fair and impartial toward African-Americans," Gioia said.

Carroll was born in Brooklyn, New York, where he graduated from college and earned his degree. He worked at the District Attorney's Office in Kings County, New York, for five years before moving to a private practice.

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The former mayor came from humble beginnings. His father was a truck driver and his mother cleaned homes until she died when he was 5. His older sister encouraged him to get a higher education.

"I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth," he said in an earlier interview with the Contra Costa Times.

The Army veteran relocated to Berkeley in 1952, then in 1954 he settled in Richmond, where he opened his private practice and became the city's first black attorney.

Carroll quickly became an active community member. He ran an unsuccessful race for City Council in 1959 before winning a seat in 1961 and serving a four-year term. He was appointed mayor from July 1964 to May 1965.

"In fact, some people believe that he was the first black mayor of a large American city," Butt said.

Carroll switched gears from lawyer to judge in 1965 when then-Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, the current governor's father, appointed him to the Contra Costa Municipal Court. The judge was elected and re-elected in 1970, 1976 and 1982. He retired from the bench in 1982.

He rejected a chance at a promotion to Superior Court because he wanted to continue serving Richmond rather than moving to Martinez.



Judge George Carroll, who was the first African American to be elected to Richmond city council, sits in his home on Thursday May 3, 2007 in Richmond, Calif. Councilman Nat Bates is interviewing Carroll for a program on Richmond's first African American officials that will air on Comcast. (Gregory Urquiaga/Contra Costa Times) (GREGORY URQUIAGA)

Former mayor and seven-term City Councilman Nat Bates crossed paths with Carroll during his first campaign for City Council in 1967. When Bates was elected, he became the fourth African-American to serve on the City Council.

"His guidance and assistance were paramount," Bates said. "He shared his knowledge and enthusiasm with others without reservation. He said 'Be yourself and don't try to be someone else. Be true to that and don't try to deceive people.'"

Carroll overcame barriers during a time of segregation and discrimination in the country, Butt said.

"The fact that he was able to overcome the barriers and achieve what he did is remarkable," he said.

Staff writer Sarah Tan contributed to this report. Contact Katrina Cameron at 925-945-4782. Follow her at [Twitter.com/KatCameron91](https://twitter.com/KatCameron91).