

Biographical Sketch of Genna Rae McNeil

Genna Rae McNeil is a scholar of African American and United States Constitutional History, and the history of U.S. Social Movements. She is Professor Emerita of History at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She is widely known for *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, recognized as the definitive biography of Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall's forerunner and mentor. *Groundwork*, upon its publication, won the American Bar Association's Silver Gavel Award for Excellence in legal history. Professor McNeil has served as Chairperson of the Department of History at Howard University, a visiting distinguished Belle Zeller Professor at Brooklyn College, and a visiting professor of History and Law at Howard University's School of Law. She was historian of record for two *amicus curiae* briefs submitted to the Supreme Court of the United States in *Regents of the University of California v. Allan Bakke* by Howard University's School of Law and jointly by the National Bar Association, National Medical Association, and the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. Outside of the academy during the 1980s, Dr. McNeil worked as an archivist at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and held the position of national Ecumenical Officer and Deputy General Secretary for Cooperative Christianity of the multi-racial American Baptist Churches in the USA (then a denomination of more than 1.3 million).

In addition to *Groundwork*, Professor McNeil is lead author of the co-authored *Witness: Two Centuries of African American Faith and Practice at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New York*, with co-authors Houston B. Robeson, Quinton H. Dixie, and Kevin McGruder. (Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Rev. Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor were among Abyssinian's pastors.) Professor McNeil has co-edited three books: *African Americans and the Living Constitution*, with her former professor, the distinguished Dr. John Hope Franklin; *Historical Judgments Reconsidered* with Dr. Michael R. Winston; and *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century* with Drs. V. P. Franklin and Nancy Grant. She has, as well, published book chapters, essays, and numerous articles in law and history journals. Professor McNeil is currently completing a book-length study of "State [of North Carolina] vs. Joan Little, 1974-75, the 'Free Joan Little' Movement, and Social Justice Lawyering."

Professor McNeil was the chief historian for "Marching Toward Justice: The Fourteenth Amendment and the African American Struggle for Civil Rights," the 1999 inaugural exhibition for the Thurgood Marshall Judicial Center in Washington, DC (curated by Robert L. Smith for Damon J. Keith Law Collection of Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.). It became a traveling exhibition between 1999 and 2007 in such cities as New York, Philadelphia, PA., Kansas City, KS., Nashville, TN., and Cambridge, MA. A reconfigured "Marching Toward Justice" subsequently became a permanent exhibition on the occasion of the dedication of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University in 2011. Professor McNeil served as one of several consultant historians for the iconic prize-winning civil rights movement documentary, "Eyes On The Prize," produced by Henry Hampton of Blackside, Inc., for which the esteemed Dr. Vincent Harding was chief historian. Professor McNeil also served as lead historian-consultant for the African American history documentary "In the Land of Jim Crow" (produced by Kinocraft's Mykola Kulish and Jovida Hill).

Professor McNeil was a 2022 recipient of the Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit of the Washington Bar Association, Washington, DC and a 2023 recipient of the William Richardson Davie Award of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University's highest award of merit conferred for extraordinary service to the university and/or society. In

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2023, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill endowed its annual Black History Month Lecture and named it in Professor McNeil's honor.

Professor McNeil attended John Muir High School and was graduated from Westridge School for Girls in Pasadena, California. She is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Kalamazoo College in Michigan. She earned her Master of Arts degree in History and Doctor of Philosophy degree in United States and African American History at the University of Chicago. Her graduate work included summer studies at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria West Africa and her post-graduate studies included training in archival administration, having received certification from Case Western Reserve University in Ohio and the National Archives in Washington, DC.

Professor McNeil is a life member of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) and a former member of the editorial board of the *Journal of African American History*. Born in Longview, Texas, she is one of four children of Drs. Jesse Jai and Pearl Walker McNeil. Honoring the sacrifices of the ancestors on whose shoulders she gratefully acknowledges she stands, and following in the vocational footsteps of her educator-parents, Professor McNeil has devoted her life to telling the truths of history, doing justice, and encouraging all to be history-makers who, as an ancient proverb states, “plant trees under the shade of which they do not expect to sit.”

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