



Wilhelmina Wright

Judge Wilhelmina “Mimi” Wright has served on the United States District Court for the District of Minnesota since 2016. She is the only jurist in state history to serve on Minnesota’s district court, appeals court, and state Supreme Court.

A trailblazer throughout her career, Judge Wright was the first Black woman to serve on the Minnesota Supreme Court and is also the first Black female federal judge in Minnesota history. Before joining the bench, Judge Wright handled complex civil matters in private practice and was a federal prosecutor for the District of Minnesota.

BIOGRAPHY

[Judge Wright](#) was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1964. She [said](#) her legal education began when her mother fought on her behalf to desegregate schools in Virginia, armed with the *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision: “It was my mother’s just sheer determination to say, ‘the Supreme Court said it, my children deserve to benefit from this court order.’ So my mother stood toe-to-toe with the superintendent of the Norfolk public schools.”

Wright graduated from Yale University in 1986, cum laude, with a B.A. in Literature and earned her J.D. from Harvard Law School in 1989. While at Harvard, she served as Executive Editor of the Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review. After law school, Judge Wright clerked for Judge Damon J. Keith of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit from 1989 to 1991.

LEGAL EXPERIENCE

From 1991 to 1995, Judge Wright was an associate at Hogan & Hartson LLP (now Hogan Lovells LLP) in Washington, D.C. As a young attorney in the firm’s education and litigation practice groups, she represented school districts seeking to enhance educational opportunities for public school students. Judge Wright successfully co-tried two civil damages bench trials awarding desegregation remedies in Kansas City, Missouri. She also counseled school districts in Dayton, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Lee County, Florida; and Pinellas County, Florida, regarding compliance issues relating to their respective court-ordered desegregation and student assignment obligations.

Her next position brought her to Minnesota in 1995 as an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of Minnesota. For five years, Judge Wright represented the United States in complex economic fraud and violent crime cases in federal district

courts and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit. She was awarded the U.S. Department of Justice, Special Achievement Award in 1997 and the U.S. Department of Justice, Director's Award for Public Service in 2000.

In 2000, Governor Jesse Ventura appointed Judge Wright to the Second Judicial District Court in Ramsey County, Minnesota. She served as a trial judge for two years, presiding over a general jurisdiction docket of criminal and civil matters. Governor Ventura then appointed Judge Wright to the Minnesota Court of Appeals, where she remained from 2002 to 2012. During her tenure on the appeals court, she decided approximately 2,010 cases and authored 697 decisions. From 2011 to 2012, Judge Wright served as Presiding Judge on the Special Redistricting Panel. She won re-election to the court in 2004 and 2010.

In 2012, Judge Wright was appointed to the Minnesota Supreme Court by Governor Mark Dayton, becoming the first Black woman ever on the court. She won re-election in 2014 and remained on the court until 2016. On April 15, 2015, President Barack Obama nominated Judge Wright to the U.S. District Court for the District of Minnesota. She was [confirmed](#) by the U.S. Senate on January 19, 2016, by a vote of 58-36, which included support from fourteen Republicans.

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES AND ACCOLADES

Judge Wright is a [member](#) of the American Bar Association, the Minnesota State Bar Association, the Ramsey County Bar Association, the Minnesota Association of Black Lawyers, and the National Association of Women Judges. She was elected to the American Law Institute in 2008. Judge Wright has taught Ethical Leadership in Litigation as an adjunct professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law and has lectured at graduate schools in Europe on judicial selection and judicial accountability in the United States.

Throughout her career, Judge Wright has been recognized with numerous honors and awards. She received the Diversity and Inclusion Award from Minnesota Lawyer in 2019, the Myra Bradwell Award from Minnesota Women Lawyers in 2006, the Lena O. Smith Achievement Award from the Minnesota Black Women Lawyers Network in 2004, and the B. Warren Hart Award for Public Service from the Saint Paul Jaycees in 2001.

JUDICIAL OPINIONS

Having served at all levels of the Minnesota state court system and as a federal trial court judge, Judge Wright has presided over thousands of civil and criminal trials and authored countless judicial opinions. The following review focuses on key decisions that Judge Wright authored during her service on the Minnesota Court of Appeals, Minnesota Supreme Court, and U.S. District Court for the District of Minnesota.

Minnesota Court of Appeals

- [Munro Holding, LLC v. Cook](#) (2005): The court held that an employee was entitled to receive unemployment benefits because she quit for a good reason — sexual harassment caused by the employer.
- [State v. Barajas](#) (2012): The court held that a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy in the concealed digital contents of their cell phone; however, because the error was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt, the court affirmed the district court's judgment against Mr. Barajas.
- [Mitchell v. Smith](#) (2012): Mr. Mitchell, an incarcerated individual who refused to participate in sex-offender treatment, challenged a policy that prevented him from visiting with his minor child while incarcerated. The court affirmed the district court's judgment for the prison, finding that the visitation policy helped ensure child safety and promote sex-offender treatment and rehabilitation.

Minnesota Supreme Court

- [Hippert v. Ritchie](#) (2012): This case involved two lawsuits challenging redistricting in the wake of the 2010 census. After the governor and legislature failed to reach a redistricting agreement, the Court issued an order with the state's new congressional and state legislative districts, ensuring fair maps for the 2012 midterms.
- [Citizens State Bank v. Brown](#) (2014): The Court held that Minnesota's Uniform Fraudulent Transfer Act applies to transfers made pursuant to an uncontested marital dissolution decree. The Court affirmed the district court's judgment setting Mr. Brown's property transfers aside, finding the transfers were made with intent to defraud his creditors.
- [Staab v. Diocese of Saint Cloud](#) (2014): The Court ruled that a party who is severally liable cannot be required to contribute more than the party's equitable share of the total damages award, even when they are the only named tortfeasor.
- [State v. 3M Co.](#) (2014): The Court held that an attorney facing a disqualification order has standing to appeal independent of their client, highlighting the importance of one's right to counsel of choice.
- [State v. McMurray](#) (2015): The Court ruled that the warrantless search of Mr. McMurray's garbage was reasonable under federal and state constitutions because a person has no reasonable expectation of privacy in garbage set out for collection on the side of a public street.
- [State v. Hicks](#) (2015): The Court determined that a sentencing judge may use a defendant's concealment of the victim's body to impose an upward departure from the sentencing guidelines. Judge Wright dissented, arguing that

the majority's decision abandoned the fundamental goals of sentencing: uniformity, proportionality, rationality, and predictability.

U.S. District Court for the District of Minnesota

- [*Aragon v. Ku*](#) (2017): Judge Wright ruled in favor of twelve grocery store employees who sued their employers after a series of harassing and discriminatory incidents. She also held that defendants' violence, confinement, and threats of deportation violated a federal law designed to protect victims of human trafficking.
- [*Coons v. BNSF Railway Co.*](#) (2017): Judge Wright dismissed most of Mr. Coons' claims but allowed his claim for relief for an unlawful medical examination under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to proceed. She concluded that if proven true, requiring Mr. Coons to pay out-of-pocket for an MRI to secure employment would be a violation of the ADA.
- [*Wright v. Capella University*](#) (2019): Doctoral students at Cappella University alleged recruiters informed them that typical learners complete their PhD program in three years; in fact, the average student took 75 months to complete the program — more than twice as long. Judge Wright allowed certain plaintiffs to move forward with their education fraud claims.
- [*Bolus A.D. v. Secretary of Homeland Security*](#) (2019): Bolus A.D. (B.D.) asserted that his prolonged detention violated his Fifth Amendment right to due process. Judge Wright ordered an immigration judge to hold a bond hearing to make an individualized determination as to whether continued detention was necessary.
- [*Craig v. Simon*](#) (2020): Judge Wright ruled that an election in Minnesota's 2nd Congressional District could proceed in November 2020 as originally scheduled, despite the recent death of a third-party candidate. She concluded that allowing the election to happen was in the public's interest because a delay would cause constituents to go without representation for several months.
- [*Alexis Bailly Vineyard v. Harrington*](#) (2020): Judge Wright struck down Minnesota's Farm Wineries Act of 1980, which required in-state wineries to use only Minnesota-grown grapes. She determined the law posed an unconstitutional and unjustified barrier to interstate commerce that favored Minnesota's economic interests over those of other states.
- [*Berry v. Hennepin County*](#) (2020): Judge Wright rejected a request to halt the clearing of homeless encampments in city parks, explaining that plaintiffs had not met the "burden of demonstrating irreparable harm as required to secure a temporary restraining order."
- [*Goyette v. City of Minneapolis*](#) (2021): Journalists brought a lawsuit alleging

they were targeted and attacked by law enforcement while covering the civil unrest that followed the murder of George Floyd. Judge Wright imposed a ban on various Minnesota law enforcement agencies from arresting, threatening, or using force against journalists in the field without probable cause.