



John Edward Hawkins

The first Blacks who arrived in Seattle worked mainly as barbers and restaurateurs. Toward the end of the 19th century, the fields of law and journalism opened up to Blacks. One of the most unique lawyers of the time was John Edwards Hawkins.

Born in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1866, Hawkins came to Seattle in 1890. He immediately started work as a barber in a building which housed many lawyers. Perhaps he was influenced by his customers, but he soon became determined to become a lawyer through diligent study. After working on his feet six and a half days each week, ten hours a day, Hawkins would go home and study law. He also studied with Judge Isaac Hall and W.A. Slate, an attorney. His hard work paid off in 1895 when he was admitted to practice in the King County Bar. He was the first Black person in the state of Washington to be admitted to the bar without prior certification.

Hawkins handled both civil and criminal cases, but his most renowned suits involved racial discrimination. He sued many restaurants and other public places for refusing to serve Blacks. Often he won his case—but was awarded a mere \$1 in damages by the court. He was heard to say, "It's the principle, not the damages, we're after."

Hawkins became so successful at his practice that he bought a house on Capitol Hill and was later appointed the first Black judge pro tem in Seattle.