

Pauli Murray Center to celebrate grand opening of trailblazing priest's childhood home

by [Melodie Woerman](#)

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The restored Durham, North Carolina, house where Pauli Murray spent part of her childhood. (Photo courtesy of the Pauli Murray Center)

The [Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice](#) on September 7 will celebrate the [grand opening](#) of the space that will anchor the nonprofit's programming—the restored 1898 house that belonged to Murray's grandparents and where the civil rights leader and [trailblazing Episcopal priest](#) spent part of her childhood.

Murray, who was born in 1910, lived there after her mother's death in 1914 until she graduated from Hillside High School and headed to Hunter College in New York,

according to the center's online [biography](#). (Because later in life Murray expressed ambiguity about her gender, the [center](#) and others sometimes refer to Murray by other pronouns, such as they and their.)

The nonprofit center in Murray's name opened in 2012, and its executive director, Angela Thorpe Mason, said that it had always envisioned that its work would be housed in Murray's childhood home, where it could offer programs in history and social justice to the community.

But the original one-and-a-half-story home in the historically Black, working-class West End neighborhood of Durham had fallen into significant disrepair. Through more than a decade of fundraising, \$1.2 million was raised and the home has been restored, Mason said, not as a historical museum but as a historic space where modern programming can happen.

The exterior now looks as it did in photos in the early 20th century, and the original walls, ceilings and floors of the four-room home were preserved and restored, Mason said. The center even tried to match the home's blue paint as closely as it could. A large room that Murray's grandfather had added to the back of the house, but which had been torn down in later decades, has been rebuilt.

The house was designated a National Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2015 and a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service in 2016.

"I like to remind folks that nobody happens in a vacuum, and that includes Pauli Murray," Mason said. She noted that when Murray lived in that Durham home, "those grounds shaped them, that neighborhood that they grew up in shaped them. The people in that home who raised them shaped them."

She said Murray's grandfather awakened her "earliest concepts of equity, democracy, freedom and liberation," while her grandmother instilled in her respect and adoration for the Episcopal Church, "a faith that would carry them, quite literally, to the end of their life and beyond."

Murray, who was born Anna Pauline Murray in Baltimore, Maryland, shortened her name to "Pauli" after college to reflect a less-gendered identity. As described in a [story](#) from 2022, Murray went on to study law at Howard University, the only woman enrolled, and graduated first in the class of 1944. Murray was the first Black

American to earn a doctor of the science of laws from Yale University Law School. She was a co-founder of the National Organization for Women and the Congress of Racial Equality.

As a lawyer, Murray argued against “Jane Crow,” in recognition of her struggle against both racial segregation and gender discrimination. In 1940, Murray was arrested for disorderly conduct for refusing to move to the back of a bus in Petersburg, Virginia, 15 years before Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama. Murray also organized restaurant and lunch counter sit-ins in Washington, DC, 20 years before the famed Greensboro, North Carolina, protests.

Former NAACP President and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall called Murray’s book, *States’ Laws on Race and Color*, the bible of the civil rights movement. Another future Supreme Court justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, named Murray as coauthor of a brief on the 1971 case *Reed v. Reed*, in recognition of her pioneering work on gender discrimination.

Murray was ordained a priest in 1977, the first Black woman to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. She served at Church of the Atonement in Washington, DC, from 1979 to 1981 and at Holy Nativity Church in Baltimore, Maryland, until her death in 1985.

She also is one of [five pioneering women selected](#) to be featured in the US Mint’s American Women Quarters program.

By action of the Episcopal general convention in 2018, she was [added to the calendar](#) of lesser feasts and fasts; her feast day is observed on July 1. —Episcopal News Service