

Margaret A. Burnham

University Distinguished Professor of Law; Director of Reparations and Restorative Justice Initiatives; Director, Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project; Faculty Co-Director, Center for Law, Equity and Race (CLEAR)

Tougaloo College, BA 1966

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Professor Burnham is an internationally recognized expert on civil and human rights, comparative constitutional rights, and international criminal law. She is the faculty co-director of the law school's [Center for Law, Equity and Race \(CLEAR\)](#) and founded and directs the [Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project \(CRRJ\)](#), which investigates racial violence in the Jim Crow era and other historical failures of the criminal justice system. CRRJ serves as a resource for scholars, policymakers and organizers involved in various initiatives seeking justice for these crimes. Among her impressive accomplishments, Professor Burnham headed a team of outside counsel and law students in a landmark case that settled a federal lawsuit. Professor Burnham's team accused Franklin County Mississippi law enforcement officials of assisting Klansmen in the kidnapping, torture and murder of two 19-year-olds, Henry Dee and Charles Eddie Moore. CRRJ's investigations are widely covered in the national press, including a PBS *Frontline* documentary series, "[Un\(re\)solved.](#)"

In 2021, President Joe Biden nominated Professor Burnham to serve as a member of the Civil Rights Cold Case Records Review Board; in 2022, the U.S. Senate confirmed her appointment. The board is charged with reviewing the records of Civil Rights era cold criminal cases of murders and other racially motivated violence that occurred between 1940 and 1979. Many of these records are still closed to the public. The board is examining agency decisions to withhold access and to engage with them to determine if the records should still be withheld.

Professor Burnham began her career at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. In the 1970s, she represented civil rights and political activists. In 1977, she became the first African American woman to serve in the Massachusetts judiciary, when she joined the Boston Municipal Court bench as an associate justice. In 1982, she became partner in a Boston civil rights firm with an international human rights practice. In 1993, South African president Nelson Mandela appointed Professor Burnham to serve on an international human rights commission to investigate alleged human rights violations within the African National Congress. The commission was a precursor to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She joined Northeastern Law in 2002.

A former fellow of the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College and Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Studies, Professor Burnham has written extensively on contemporary legal and political issues. In 2016, Professor Burnham was selected for the competitive and prestigious Carnegie Fellows Program. Provided to just 33 recipients nationwide that year, the fellowship provides the "country's most creative thinkers with grants of up to \$200,000 each to support research on challenges to democracy and international order." Professor Burnham used the funding to deepen and extend CRRJ's work and research dedicated to seeking justice for crimes of the civil rights era. Among her many honors, *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* inducted Professor Burnham into its Hall of Fame in 2023. Also in 2023, she was honored with a Mass Humanities

Governor’s Award for her “dedication to exploring history, illuminating truth and confronting injustice in order to protect civil and human rights locally, nationally and internationally.”

Professor Burnham’s book, [*By Hands Now Known: Jim Crow’s Legal Executioners*](#) (W.W. Norton, 2022), was nominated for or awarded a number of prizes, including:

- *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize: winner in the history category
- Hillman Prize: book category
- Nautilus Book Award: gold medal for journalism and investigative reporting
- Hurston/Wright Legacy Award
- NPR: Books We Love in 2022
- Named a Best Book of the Year: *The New Yorker*, *Oprah Daily*, *Kirkus*, Chicago Public Library and *Publishers Weekly*
- Massachusetts Book Awards Must-Read Nonfiction: long listed
- Kirkus Prize: finalist in nonfiction
- Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction: long listed

The book is a paradigm-shifting investigation of Jim Crow-era violence, the legal apparatus that sustained it, and its enduring legacy. *Publishers Weekly*, which reviewed it with a coveted “star,” called it, “An essential reckoning with America’s history of racial violence.” Legendary activist Angela Davis has said, “*By Hands Now Known: Jim Crow’s Legal Executioners* needs to be read by everyone who recognizes the historic mandate of our time: to interrupt cycles of racist violence that are rooted in slavery and have repeatedly found new modes of expression, even as the unresolved old forms plague our historical memory.”