

Julian D. Steele: Massachusetts' First Black Town Moderator

Upon learning of the death of his friend and colleague, then-US Transportation Secretary (and former Massachusetts Governor) [John A. Volpe wrote](#), “[Julian Steele’s](#) service to his community, state and nation was exemplary. Known and respected in Washington, responsible and influential on Beacon Hill, he still reserved time for participation in local government as moderator of the town of West Newbury. [At all levels of endeavor his expertise was always coupled with compassion and his ambition was paired with dedication.](#)” After his death, West Newbury voted a proclamation saying that Steele “[left an example of a life worthy of the emulation of all.](#)”

[Julian Denegal Steele](#) was born on October 20, 1906, in Savannah, Georgia. His mother, [Minnie Ellis Steele](#), was the daughter of a Jamaican minister who became a US citizen and a prominent [pastor in Boston](#) before moving to Savannah. His father, [Alexander McPherson Steele](#), was a postal worker whose mother was a [Free Person of Color](#) in Savannah. Her [father](#) descended from Dover, New Hampshire’s first [European settlers](#).

[Around age seven, Julian Steele moved with his mother and siblings to Boston](#) while his father remained in Savannah as he had good employment and could better continue to support his family. Steele attended Boston Latin School and in 1929 graduated cum laude from Harvard College. After graduate studies in social work in New York, he returned to Boston. By 1932 he was the Executive Director of the [R.G. Shaw Settlement House in Roxbury](#), where one [Mary \(Polly\) Bradley Dawes](#), the “[daughter of an old New England family](#)” was in charge of the all-day nursery, what we would call day care now.

A divided R.G. Shaw board forced Julian Steele’s resignation, finding that a mixed marriage would, as the [Boston Globe reported](#), “impair his usefulness to Shaw House.” Students at [Ward Belmont College](#) in Nashville, which Polly Dawes had attended before graduating from Boston University, [hung two “Negroes” in effigy](#) to protest the engagement. A journalistic free-for-all followed their quiet New York City wedding in 1938. The [San Francisco Examiner](#) quoted the bride: “True love has no barrier. It transcends class, color, creed, or conditions.” More typical was the [Daily News](#) story, “Mixed Wedding Revealed.”

Soon after, Julian Steele was heading Boston’s new [Armstrong Hemenway Foundation](#), focusing on affordable housing. [Jet Magazine](#) summarized his career: “In 1954 he was named to the Massachusetts Parole Board.... He was appointed deputy administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency for Region 1 (New England and New York) in 1960. In 1968 [he was] appointed ... commissioner of the Dept. of Community Affairs, the first Black to head a major state agency in Massachusetts.” [He also advocated for civil rights and served as president of Boston’s NAACP and Urban League.](#) He became the first Black Moderator (chief layman) of the Commonwealth’s Congregational Church “[because he is a brilliant Christian gentleman.](#)”

The Steeles bought property on Crane Neck Street in the early 1940s, [attracted to West Newbury’s countryside as a good place to raise a family.](#) A 1954 [Ebony](#) article explained, “In West Newbury, Steele ... found the perfect New England environment for him and his family. In West Newbury a man can be an avid admirer of Senator Joe McCarthy and an equally avid advocate of racial and religious tolerance.”

Once here, Julian and Polly Steele engaged in the community, with numerous interests ranging from schools, to church, to summer theater. In March, 1952, Julian Steele (the Town’s only Black voter) was elected Moderator—the first Black person to hold that position in the state. The [New York Times](#) reported, “Neighbors credit him with elevating the cultural life of the community. He began a men’s forum in the Congregational Church which grew so large it now meets in Town Hall.” He served as Moderator until his death here [on January 17, 1970.](#)

Julian Steele’s words, quoted half a century ago in his [Boston Globe](#) obituary, remain a call for hope and action today: “Human progress can be measured largely in terms of acceptance of difference as interesting and our common humanity as profoundly important ... I am convinced that we shall get through the present ‘stalemate of terror’ that exists in the world, not so much by force of arms as by the moral and spiritual forces in the universe that as yet have not been tapped.”

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Julian and Polly Steele, 1954 Source: [Jet Magazine](#)



Marker Location: 491 Main St., West Newbury, MA Latitude: 42.80518 Longitude: -70.98074

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING – 1971

Pursuant to the warrant issued by the Selectmen February 9, 1971, which was posted according to law by Constable Eugene M. Willis, Jr., who made proper return of his doings thereon, the annual town meeting was called to order by Moderator William A. Cook at 1 p.m., Feb. 27, 1971. It was voted to allow non-voters to sit in and listen to the proceedings in a special section.

A count of the house by the constables revealed only 71 voters present at 1:10 p.m. On motion of Russell Joy a 10-minute recess was declared.

At 1:25 p.m. Town Clerk Norman H. Hobson read the opening and closing of the warrant, it having been voted that such a reading would constitute a proper reading of the warrant. The motion was made by Selectman Albert E. Elwell.

Moderator Cook recognized Mr. Elwell as a distinguished state official at his first town meeting since being elected to the Great and General Court of Massachusetts. Rep. Elwell thanked the people for their overwhelming support at the polls in November.

At 1:30 p.m. exactly 90 voters was counted in the hall.

Article 1. To be acted on Monday, March 1, 1971.

Article 2. Voted, on motion of Raymond H. Poore, chairman of the Finance Committee, that the election of all other town officers be left in the hands of the Selectmen.

Article 3. Rep. Elwell moved for appointment of a committee to bring in resolutions of former Selectman M. Paine Hoseason, a copy of which will be sent to the family of the deceased and that these resolutions be spread upon the records of the town. This was voted.

Police Chief Willis read the following resolutions on the death of former Moderator Julian D. Steele:

Whereas, Divine Providence has called from our midst, our esteemed fellow citizen,

Julian D. Steele

Be It Resolved: That in the passing of Julian Steele who served the Town as Moderator, the Town has lost a valuable and faithful public servant who has left an example of a life worthy of the emulation of all.

Be It Resolved: That the Town does hereby express deep regret at the passing of Mr. Steele and extends this sincere sympathy to his family.

Be It Resolved: That a copy of these resolutions be sent to the family of Mr. Steele and a copy be entered in the records of the Town.

(Signed) Eugene M. Willis, Jr.
W. Martin Phillips
Robert J. Murphy, DDS

Congressional Record Remarks of Rep. Hastings Keith

Honoring Julian D Steele
April 9, 1970

EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

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continually impressed by his talent and skill. Even more, however, I was impressed by Julian Steele the man—by his outlook on life, and by his infectious spirit of drive and accomplishment.

It is with sorrow at his passing, and with pride at having known him, that I am today including in the RECORD an editorial from the Commerce Digest, which conveys, to a small extent, some of the feeling that those of us who knew Julian had for him:

JULIAN D. STEELE

Some who analyze these deeply troubled times, in which many of the young are preoccupied with drugs and rebellion, say that youth is alienated because of a lack of respect for elders.

One adult who did not fit this category was Julian D. Steele of West Newbury, the first Negro to head a Massachusetts department.

At the time of his recent death, he was Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs, having previously served as head of the Urban Renewal Division of the Massachusetts Department of Commerce and Development.

Julian Steele was a man who became involved. For 19 years, he had served as Town Moderator of West Newbury. He had also been Executive Director of the Robert Gould Shaw Settlement House in Boston's South End; and he had served as Assistant Administrator for the regional office of the United States Housing and Home Finance Agency. He was a past president of the Boston Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a Vice Moderator of the Massachusetts Congressional Christian Conference.

Julian Steele was an educated man. He was proud of the fact that he graduated from Boston Public Latin School and was cum laude from Harvard in 1929. Building upon his education, his energetic interest in public affairs, and his sense of humanity, he acquired a large circle of good friends in very high places.

Governors, Congressmen, Legislators, mayors, councilors, selectmen, educators, and low and high ranking clergymen of several faiths worked with him, respected him, and knew him affectionately as "Julian".

If his education stands as an inspiration to fellow blacks, certainly, too, the way he handled his "blackness" should attract widespread attention. Those who knew him or worked with him never looked upon him as "black". This was to the great credit of the man and could well have been the result of his outlook on the matter, which he once expressed this way: "Human progress can be measured largely in terms of acceptance of difference as interesting and our common humanity as profoundly important."

Julian Steele was an exceptionally busy man with much to do. He was a hard-driving, demanding executive—a perfectionist and a loather of red tape.

His mind was on many projects: the welfare of his home town, housing for the poor and the elderly, the improvement of blighted areas. One program, project, or seminar overlapped another and there were always people to call, people to see, things to do, papers to sign.

Julian Steele always seemed to feel that his life would never be long enough for him to complete the many things he wanted to accomplish.

Perhaps this is why one of his favorite poems was Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening." Frost, who had stopped to watch the woods fill up with snow on "... The darkest evening of the year ..." concluded:

"... The woods are lovely dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."

Now he sleeps. Well done, Julian!

FEDERAL CRIME FUNDS

HON. WILLIAM D. FORD

OF MICHIGAN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 8, 1970

Mr. WILLIAM D. FORD. Mr. Speaker, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act was widely welcomed as a great advance in our efforts to lessen mounting crime rates. Yet experience with this act shows that its block grant provisions have created serious problems. The Detroit News carried an article on March 5, 1970, which details problems created when one sets up, through block grants, a new layer of administration where none existed before.

I insert this article in the RECORD and commend it to the attention of my colleagues who are working for effective law enforcement and crime control:

DETROIT, WITH 40 PERCENT OF STATE'S CRIME, GETS ONLY 18 PERCENT OF FEDERAL FUNDS TO FIGHT IT

(By Hugh McDonald)

WASHINGTON.—More than 40 percent of the crime in Michigan occurs in Detroit yet Detroit got only 18 percent of the \$1.05 billion in federal anti-crime funds given Michigan last year.

Grand Rapids, population 205,000, and one of the cities where rioting helped prompt passing of the safe streets act in 1968, got only \$188 in federal funds.

That paid for two-thirds of the cost of two Polaroid cameras and one fingerprinting set.

Yet Ludington, a resort community of 9,500 on the shores of Lake Michigan, received a grant of \$17,000 to establish a regional police "investigators' school."

Largely rural Isabella County in mid-Michigan got \$18,000 for its sheriff's department to buy new radio equipment.

When Congress passed the crime control and safe streets act on June 6, 1968—two months after the rioting that followed Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination—and 20 hours after Senator Robert F. Kennedy was shot—backers hailed it as the "most important legislation ever passed" in the nation's efforts to halt crime.

It was designed primarily to help cities fight organized crime and prevent and control riots.

Under the act, block grants would be given each year to the states, which would distribute the funds to the communities as it saw fit.

Some congressmen expressed fears that the cities would be shortchanged, because states have traditionally been rurally oriented and are not equipped to parcel out money for cities' street crime problems.

House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford disagreed, however. He successfully led the battle to let states allocate the funds, rather than having the federal government provide direct grants to cities.

Ford's hometown is Grand Rapids. It applied for \$279,834 to establish a crime control lab and for riot control funds.

But it got only the \$188.

Lansing got only \$600. Ann Arbor got nothing.

"Some of the smaller communities had better projects planned," said Louis A. Rome, executive director of the Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, which operates the state program.

"We have a heavy responsibility to dispense funds which will do some good, according to the intent of the law."

Delta County in the Upper Peninsula, with a population of nearly 100,000 less than Lansing's, got \$15,000 to train volunteer probation aides for work with misdemeanor offenders.

Largely rural Ogemaw, Gratiot, Sanilac and Osceola counties, which presumably have not been overrun with street rioting, received a total of \$10,028 for police radio equipment.

Fraser, a community of 13,000 in Macomb County, received three separate grants totaling \$5,325 to "fight organized crime." Livonia, on the other hand, with a population of 102,000 got nothing.

"The commission is as concerned about the situation as the communities that didn't get much," said Rome. "They know that crime exists mainly in the cities, but there's only so much to spread around."

For the \$1.05 billion available to Michigan in fiscal 1968-69, there were more than 200 applications with requests totaling about \$6 million, Rome said.

All 28 members of the commission are appointed by Gov. William G. Milliken, who serves as chairman. Detroit has five members on the commission. Flint has one member, and Lansing and Saginaw have no local representation.

The rural counties, however, are disproportionately represented, the larger cities argue, and they ask why counties in the first place should get funds to fight street rioting and organized crime.

Detroit Mayor Gibbs, on the other hand, argues that the funds should not even be distributed on a population basis, but rather on rates of crime incidence.

Testifying at a congressional hearing on the safe streets act on Monday, Gibbs declared:

"I'm not saying that some sheriff in a village in northern Michigan shouldn't get a little something, but Detroit needs a larger share. The money should go where the crime is."

He said Detroit received \$247,000 last year, about 18 percent of the total allocated to Michigan. But although Detroit has only 19 percent of the state's population, he added, 40 percent of the crime in Michigan occurs in Detroit.

Gibbs proposed that the act be amended so that cities get at least half of the funds in direct grants.

Drug addiction is Detroit's most serious problem in fighting crime, Gibbs asserted. He said that about 6,000 drug addicts now walk the streets of Detroit, and each needs "about \$200 a day of other people's property" to support his drug habit.

"This is where the bulk of the crime stems from. We simply haven't the funds in Detroit for enough drug rehabilitation clinics," Gibbs said.

Of the list of 20 priorities the Michigan Crime Commission established for funds, control of drug abuse is not even mentioned.

"That largely involves personnel, and we haven't the money for that," said Rome.

Gibbs also recommended to the House Judiciary Subcommittee that Congress reduce the local cost share from the present 40 percent to not more than 10 percent.

"This year alone Detroit is faced with more than a \$60 million deficit in our budget just to maintain our level of spending," he said.

The Nixon administration has proposed in next year's budget that federal anti-crime funds be increased from \$278 million to \$480 million, but has yet to introduce a bill to support it.