

W. Byron Rumford and Fair Housing

William Byron Rumford, an African American, was born in Arizona in 1908. When he was young, Arizona schools were segregated. A high-school teacher encouraged him to go to California. He went to college in Sacramento and San Francisco. He became a pharmacist.

Later, he opened his own pharmacy. But politics interested him. In 1948, voters in Berkeley elected him to the state assembly. He was the first African American to be elected to office in Northern California.

He noticed problems in California's housing while he was in office. Too often, real-estate agents excluded African Americans from buying or renting homes in certain neighborhoods.

In 1963, Rumford wrote a law against the discrimination. It passed in the assembly. It passed in the senate. The governor signed it into law. It was called the Rumford Fair Housing Act.

But opponents of the Fair Housing Act fought against Rumford's success. They sponsored Proposition 14. This proposed law would reverse the Fair Housing Act. Voters approved Prop. 14 in 1964.

African-American renters challenged Prop. 14. They argued that the law allowed racial discrimination and violated the 14th Amendment. In 1967, their case made it to the U.S. Supreme Court, the highest court in the nation.

The Supreme Court agreed with them. The renters won their case. The Supreme Court ruled that Prop. 14 denied African Americans equal protection under the law. It was based on racial discrimination and unconstitutional. Rumford's fight for fair housing was won.



Byron Rumford helped to outlaw employment and housing discrimination in California. (Courtesy of UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.)