

Connecticut Explored

Connecticut history, one good story after another.

VOLUME 24/NUMBER 4/FALL 2026 \$10.00

IN THIS ISSUE: HISTORIES OF POWER

- (Not) Just Another Old House ➤ Remembering 9/11 after 25 Years
- I. Charles Mathews, a (Very) Special Counsel ➤ Dam(n)ing the Fish
- Connecticut's Father-Son Presidential Duo



"You Need Not Always Be a High School Dropout":

THE TRANSFORMED LIFE OF **I. CHARLES MATHEWS**

By Stacey Close

In 1978, I. Charles Mathews, a young Cornell Law School graduate and special counsel to the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations, which investigated the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., sat in Coretta Scott King's home as she weighed whether to grant him access to her husband's papers and files. A transformed life had brought him there. In a March 28, 2025, interview with the author, the Louisiana-born Mathews recalled the road he had traveled to reach that moment.

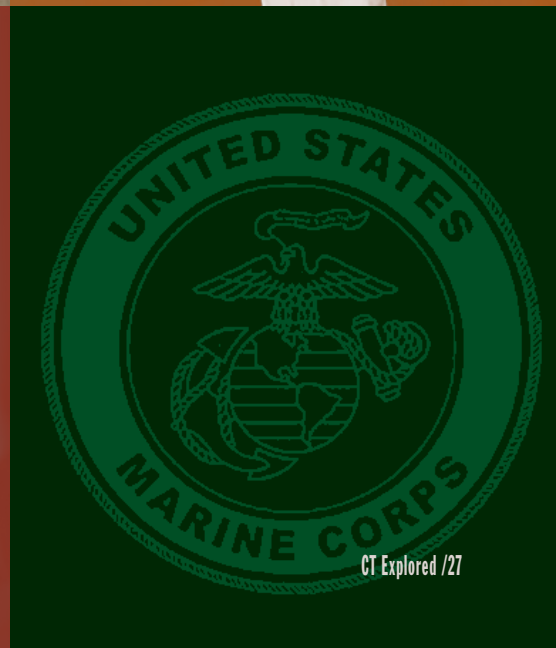
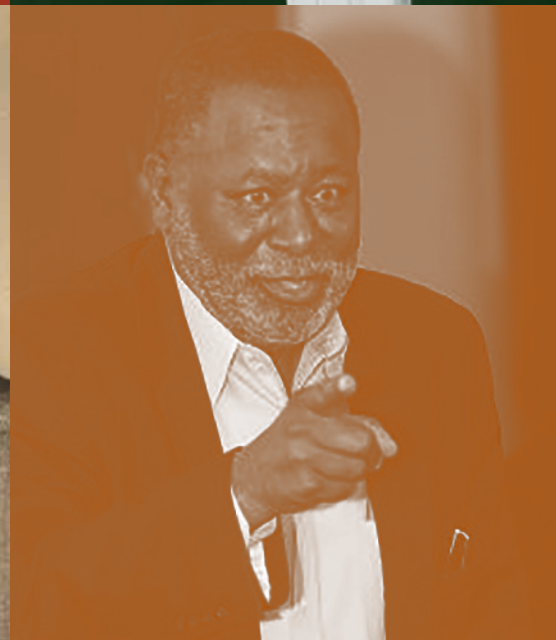
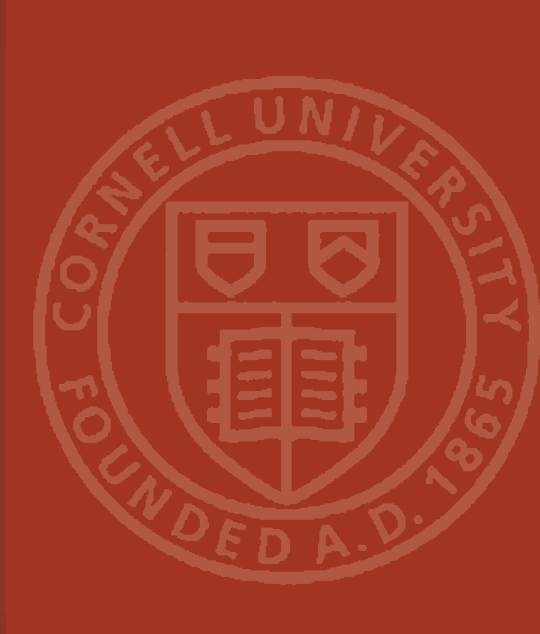
A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

Mathews's father had worked in the Louisiana salt mines. During World War II, the draft sent him to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where he served in a unit alongside Edward Brooke, later a U.S. senator from Massachusetts and the only African American ever elected from that state to the U.S. Senate. As his service drew to a close, Mathews's father decided to bring his family from Louisiana to Boston, where they settled in a South End community of African Americans and Eastern Europeans.

Like many African American parents, Mathews's mother and father emphasized education, but he struggled academically at Boston English High School. The harsh realities of the streets pulled him out of school and into serious legal trouble. By 1960, he had joined the Lord Sociables, a local street gang, and served as war counselor and strategist. Given his struggles and absence from school, his father told him he needed a job. That advice set Mathews on a transformative road: from potential trouble to service to his country, skilled labor as a sheet-metal worker, graduation from an Ivy League law school, work for Fortune 500 corporations, and public service in the city of Hartford, which he came to love.

Stacey Close, PhD, is a professor of African American history at Eastern Connecticut State University, a frequent contributor to *Connecticut Explored*, and an editor of *African American Connecticut Explored*.

All photos are courtesy of the private collection of I. Charles Mathews.





Civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson shaking hands with I. Charles Mathews, during Jesse Jackson's high-profile "March to Rebuild America," which he led through Connecticut from Bridgeport to the State Capitol in Hartford in 1991. At the time of this meeting, I. Charles Mathews was serving his final term as Hartford's deputy mayor.

At a session of the United States House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) in 1978, Representative Christopher J. Dodd (left), from Connecticut; I. Charles Mathews (standing center), counsel; and Representative Walter E. Fauntroy (right), from the District of Columbia, who served as the chairman of the HSCA's Subcommittee on the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.



Members and investigators from the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations walk down Mulberry Street near the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, during their official 1970s reinvestigation into the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1962, Mathews, then a high school dropout, chose the U.S. Marine Corps, one of his earliest transformative decisions. After his mother signed his enlistment papers, Mathews learned he was headed to Parris Island, South Carolina, for basic training in the segregated South, even though the Marines were integrated. He would be among thousands of young Marines preparing for combat. For Mathews, the Corps brought organization, structure, and stability at a time when he needed all three.

As the young Marine prepared to deploy to Southeast Asia, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the titan of the civil rights movement, was helping lead a civil rights campaign in Greenville, South Carolina. Mathews and some friends realized the march offered an opportunity to socialize with the many young women who planned to attend the reception afterward. As Mathews approached an attractive young woman at the punch bowl, King grabbed his arm and asked whether he was a student. Mathews paused, then said he was a dropout. To his astonishment, King gently asked why he had left high school and why he had joined the Corps. Just before someone drew King away, he told Mathews, "You need not always be a high school dropout." It was a moment and a set of words Mathews never forgot.

FINDING A WAY FORWARD

Mathews's military service took him to Okinawa, Thailand, and the Philippines, and during that time he began to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. A voracious reader of *U.S. News & World Report*, he rose to the rank of corporal (E-4) after 18 months in Southeast Asia. At Quantico, Virginia, after Mathews was told he would be reassigned as a firefighter specialist, his captain said his record was extraordinary and that he wanted him to reenlist. By then, Mathews had earned his high school equivalency certification. Although the captain offered sponsorship and better pay, Mathews feared reenlistment might send him back to Southeast Asia.

Mathews left the Corps and went to his mother's home in Dorchester, Massachusetts, where he began civilian life. Nervous about his decision, he checked in with the reserve office in Boston and then visited the employment office. In his Marine dress uniform, he told the staff about the weapons he had used in the military. Frustrated by the lack of immediate work, he considered reenlisting. Fortunately, the employment office called to say that the Manpower

Development Program offered a 10-week sheet-metal program. He finished first in his class, an opportunity he called a "godsend." Though making air ducts and selling fuel oil paid his bills, Mathews wanted more. After reading that United Aircraft's Pratt & Whitney division, the major East Hartford jet-engine manufacturer, offered a three-year program to increase his skills and improve his future, he seized the opportunity to relocate.

After giving notice to his employers in the fall of 1967, Mathews, then 21, packed his 1965 Pontiac and drove the Massachusetts Turnpike toward Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford. He arrived in Hartford, searched for lodging, and found himself on Jewell Street in front of the YMCA. After securing a room there for \$43 a week, he drove the next morning to Pratt & Whitney's employment office in East Hartford. When he asked to be placed in the three-year apprentice program, the company sent him down the D tunnel to take the test. Given the chance to enter the program, he pushed through and graduated with a certificate in jet-engine metalsmithing. Support at work came from a circle of 15 African American men, who forged decades-long friendships and helped him imagine a broader future. Robert Jackson, a native of Eufaula, Alabama, and a veteran, became one of his closest friends and confidants. Workers at Pratt told him that one day he would wear a white shirt and tie and become a supervisor, but Mathews yearned for more.

Although Mathews hesitated to pursue a college education, a coworker, Papalardo, whose ancestral roots went back to Greece, told him that no matter how long he waited, "you'll still be the same age." In 1969, Mathews enrolled at Greater Hartford Community College (GHCC), near the Colt Building. He presented his sheet-metal certificate and GED diploma and told admissions staff he hoped to graduate from law school one day. His acceptance propelled him to earn his law degree and become an attorney. During his time at GHCC, he had the honor of meeting both Dr. Arthur Banks, the college's founding president, and the president of the student senate.

After graduating from GHCC, Mathews applied to Wesleyan University in Middletown and was accepted in 1972. A GHCC counselor told him about Wesleyan's academic program and its outreach to African American students and veterans. A political science major with an economics minor, Mathews met Dr. Edgar Beckham, a legendary

mentor for a generation of African American students, especially those who had served in the military. The academic rigor of Wesleyan prepared him for the next phase of his education and for admission to Cornell Law School. At Cornell, he worked on prison reform and visited Attica Prison after the 1971 riot. He studied under G. Robert Blakey, an expert in criminal law. After graduating with his JD, Mathews was interviewed by United Technologies Corporation (UTC) at the Gold Building in Hartford and offered a position in Connecticut. Then Blakey, his former professor, called to invite him to join two high-profile federal investigations.

THE LAW AND THE KING INVESTIGATION

Blakey served as general counsel for the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Louis Stokes chaired the committee, while Walter Fauntroy, the District of Columbia's delegate to Congress, led the King investigation. Mathews became special counsel and had the opportunity to interview Senator Edward Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, former president Gerald Ford, and Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader. That same year, when his duties shifted to the King investigation, he met with both Fauntroy and Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King Jr.'s widow.

As special counsel, Mathews had access to materials, including the autopsy report conducted after King's 1968 assassination in Memphis. The work reconnected him with the memory of meeting King in South Carolina, where the minister had told him, "You need not always be a high school dropout." The message had taken root. King had seen something more in the young man he met in Greenville. The high school dropout had transformed himself into a graduate of two prestigious universities and a formidable legal mind.

To complete its work on the King investigation, the committee sought access to documents in the basement of Coretta Scott King's Georgia home; she resisted allowing the committee to enter her home to view her husband's private papers. After Walter Fauntroy urged him to speak with her, Mathews traveled to Georgia to discuss the committee's investigation into her husband's assassination. Few people were granted the honor of spending time with Mrs. King at her home. With grace and dignity, she had carried the weight of her husband's legacy for decades. When Mathews visited, he sat quietly as she talked about her husband and snapped string beans. As they both snapped

beans, she shared her struggle to live with his assassination. Eventually, she told Mathews she trusted him to examine items in her basement. He asked whether King might have sensed his future. Mrs. King stood and, in words that surprised Mathews, said, "Martin knew." It became one of the defining moments of his professional life.

As special counsel, Mathews and his team prepared some of the living titans of the civil rights movement for the hearings. The Rev. Ralph Abernathy, King's best friend and a founding member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), came to Washington, DC, to testify before members of Congress. On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC returned to Memphis to support striking sanitation workers and to demonstrate that nonviolent protest worked after violence erupted during a march the previous month. SCLC organized a rally that evening, and residents packed the church hosting the gathering. The crowd waited anxiously to hear King's message; however, King arrived in Memphis late and went to his hotel. A driving rainstorm deluged Memphis that day; tired from travel, King prepared for bed. Abernathy frantically phoned his friend and leader to say the hall was full and the crowd longed to hear him. King dressed, went to the hall, and delivered what became known as his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. The next day, Abernathy was with King in Memphis when an assassin's bullet killed his leader and friend. It was Abernathy who cradled King in his last moments and whispered, "Martin, this is Ralph." Mathews spent considerable time interviewing Abernathy for the investigation and hearings, at one point even carrying his bag. Harold Ford Sr. and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, both known for their civil rights work, were also interviewed by Mathews and his team.

A LIFE RETURNED TO HARTFORD

After the investigation and hearings concluded in 1979, Mathews returned to Hartford and UTC, this time as staff attorney and employment counsel at the research center. He routinely handled employment terminations and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission matters. For two decades, he worked for UTC and immersed himself in Hartford politics. By the 1980s, he had won a seat on the Hartford City Council, where he served three terms. When his final term ended in 1991, Mathews, then deputy mayor, understood how power flowed through Hartford under the old charter. That same year, he endured a vicious attack

while attempting to enter a radio station in Bloomfield, Connecticut, for an interview. His years in the Marines and his days as a sheet-metal worker had made him strong enough to fend off the assailant.

For a time, Mathews left Hartford and Connecticut. His career took him to Chicago as a vice president at Quaker Oats and later to Florida. But Mathews, clearly missing his network of local connections, returned to Connecticut in 2005. His parents and siblings had also been laid to rest in the area. After battling cancer and undergoing chemotherapy, he reflected on what he could have improved in his life. In a September 9, 2007, profile in *The Hartford Courant*, Mathews said he wanted to be an ambassador for the community. As he walked the streets of Hartford and did pro bono legal work for the NAACP and community members, he received calls to run again for mayor. Though he failed to win office, Mathews found other ways to immerse himself in efforts to improve Hartford.

In 2021, Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin announced that he would nominate Mathews to serve as permanent director of the Department of Development Services, after serving his tenure as acting director since July 2020, according to a City of Hartford press release dated February 24, 2021. Deeply involved in Hartford's economic development, Mathews had served on the board of directors of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, now the Greater Hartford Gives Foundation; had been president of the Wilson-Gray YMCA board; and had chaired the Hartford Stadium Authority. Of the thousands who visit Dunkin' Park to enjoy a Hartford Yard Goats game, few know of Mathews's efforts to revitalize the area by working with partners to build the park, which draws families to Hartford throughout the spring and summer. New housing across the street from the stadium and the arrival of local businesses further enhanced the area. In 2025, the Hartford Yard Goats held a program to commemorate and celebrate his work. Elsewhere, the department's work to widen Albany Avenue improved access to local businesses and benefited both customers and businesses.

Over several decades, Mathews never left his favorite barbershop without encouraging young people to "stay in school and get as much education as possible." His words echoed a conversation with King, who had told him that more opportunities awaited him. Mathews listened, learned, and applied lessons from that conversation and from an earlier one with his father. Well into the 2000s,

some of the friends he had met at Pratt & Whitney in the 1960s, including Robert Jackson, still gathered for early-morning haircuts and barbershop debate, then ended their mornings with breakfast that deepened their bond.

Whether working on major development projects, supporting education, or encouraging young people, Mathews has continued to serve the place he calls home. Since quietly stepping down from his position with the City of Hartford in 2023, he has remained a trusted mentor and civic leader, with his counsel sought in times of crisis. His transformative legacy is visible in development projects; less visible, but no less enduring, is his support for young people and leaders throughout Hartford. Those efforts, he understood, were not separate from the advice he had received; they were its fulfillment. I. Charles Mathews met his moments, was transformed by them, and in turn transformed the lives of others. 🍌

