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Celebrating Women's History Month: Influential Female Lawyers in History

This blog post is in honor of just a few of the women attorneys who influenced the practice of law in the United States. These women faced insurmountable obstacles and stood up to gender barriers, racial barriers, and monetary barriers. Our profession is better because of their contributions.

Arabella Babb Mansfield. Mansfield was born on her family's Iowa farm in 1846. By 1862, college admissions were on the decline because young men were forgoing college to fight in the Civil War and universities began admitting more women students. Mansfield enrolled at Iowa Wesleyan College where she graduated as valedictorian. She then taught political science, English, and history at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. Just a few years later in 1868, she married her husband and together they read law as apprentices in her brother's law office. In 1869, Mansfield passed the bar exam, even though Iowa law restricted the bar to males over the age of 21. Later that same year, Iowa became the first state to admit women to the practice of law after Mansfield challenged the state law that exclude her. The Court ruled women could not be denied the right to practice law and admitted her to the bar. Mansfield, however, opted to work as a professor and an activist. She was a member of the National League of Women Lawyers and the Iowa Women's Suffrage Convention in 1870.

Ada Kepley. In 1870, Kepley became the first woman in the United States to graduate from law school and earn a law degree. At the time she graduated, women were not permitted to become members of the Illinois state bar. The Illinois legislature passed a law allowing women to join the bar in 1872, however, Kepley did not join until 1882.

Charlotte E. Ray. When Ray applied to Howard School of Law, she did so under the name C.E. Ray to disguise her gender for purposes of admission. In 1872, she was the first African American woman to graduate from law school and the first to formally practice law in the U.S., setting a precedent by women in other states who sought admission to the bar. Ray was considered one of the best corporate lawyers in the country. However, due to prejudice against African Americans and women, she was unable to earn a living in private practice.[1] She later became a teacher, was active in the women's suffrage movement, and was a member of the National Association of Colored Women.

Eliza Burton "Lyda" Conley. When Conley was born in 1869, her mother was a member of the Wyandotte tribe, and her father was a Kansas farmer. She graduated from the Kansas City School of Law and was admitted to the Missouri Bar in 1902. Conley is also credited with being the first woman admitted to the Kansas Bar in 1910. She is best known for being the first Native American woman to argue before the Supreme Court, and for her activism and efforts to protect the Huron Indian Cemetery located in downtown Kansas City, Kansas.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary. Born in 1823, Cary was an American Canadian anti-slavery activist, journalist, publisher, teacher, and lawyer. Prior to the Civil War, Cary traveled across the country speaking out against slavery and advocating for full racial integration. She participated in the 1855 Philadelphia Colored Convention, even though women had never been permitted to attend. She was the founder and editor of an anti-slavery newspaper called *The Provincial Freeman,* which was in circulation from 1853-1857. Using the power of the pen, Cary wove Black activism into her writings and fostered public discourse on Black labor and women's rights.[2]

During the Civil War, Cary served as a recruiting officer to enlist Black volunteers for the state of Indiana. After the war, she taught school for over 15 years. She then attended Howard University School of Law, graduating in 1883 at the age of 60. She was the second African American woman in the U.S. to earn a law degree. Cary was an active member of the National Woman Suffrage Association, and she testified before the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1998, Cary was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Jane Bolin. Bolin was born in 1908 in New York where her father was a lawyer and the first African American to graduate from Williams College and her mother was an immigrant from the British Isles. As the child of an interracial couple, Bolin was often the target of discrimination by businesses that would deny her services. She was influenced by articles and pictures of lynchings in *The Crisis,* the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After high school, she was denied admission to Vassar College because they did not accept Black applicants. At age 16, she enrolled at Wellesley College where she was one of two Black freshmen, and in 1931, she became the first African American woman to graduate from Yale Law School. Bolin ran unsuccessfully for the New York State Assembly in 1936. In 1939, Bolin was appointed as a judge of the Domestic Relations Court where for 20 years, she was the only African American female judge in the country.[3] Judge Bolin remained on the bench for 40 years and she was an activist for children's rights and education.

Mary Belle Grossman. Born in 1879, Grossman was a suffragist, attorney, and judge. She worked in the law office of her cousin from 1896-1912 as a stenographer and bookkeeper. In 1909, she enrolled in Cleveland Law School's evening program. Cleveland Law School was the first Ohio Law School to accept women as students. She graduated in 1912 and passed the Ohio Bar the same year. In 1923, she began her solo law practice. Grossman was the first female lawyer to practice in Cleveland District Federal Court, and one of the first two women admitted to the American Bar Association. She was later elected Cleveland Municipal Judge, serving on the bench until 1960.

Mary Florence Lathrop. Born in 1865, Lathrop began her career as a journalist in Philadelphia. After contracting tuberculosis, she moved to Colorado where she enrolled at the University of Denver and studied law, graduating summa cum laude in 1896. Lathrop was the first woman to open a law practice in Denver, Colorado, the first female admitted to the Colorado Bar Association and the Denver Bar Association, and she was one of the first two female members of the American Bar Association (ABA), later becoming vice president of the ABA. Lathrop also has the distinction of being the first woman to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Born in 1933, Ginsburg attended Columbia Law School where she graduated first in her class. In 1960, at the start of her legal career, Ginsburg

encountered gender bias when she was denied clerkships because she was a woman. She was ultimately hired as a clerk for Judge Palmieri of the U.S. District Court for the Southern district of New York. From 1961-1963, Ginsburg conducted research at Lund University in Sweden for a book she co-authored on civil procedure. While living in Sweden, she observed equal footing for women in the legal profession. There were significantly more women law students, lawyers, and judges. Her observations inspired her to work for equal rights for women in the United States.

Ginsburg's first position was a professor at Rutgers Law School in 1962, where she was paid less than her male colleagues. At the time she began teaching, there were fewer than 20 female law professors in the U.S. In 1970, she co-founded the *Women's Rights Law Reporter*, the first law journal in the U.S. to focus exclusively on women's rights. In 1972, she co-founded the Women's Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), becoming the project's general counsel in 1973. The Women's Rights Project and related ACLU projects participated in more than 300 gender discrimination cases by 1974. She argued six gender discrimination cases before the U.S. Supreme Court between 1973 and 1976, winning five of the six. Ginsburg was a skilled orator and litigator. Her body of work led to significant legal advances for women under the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution. She brought meaningful changes to the law that discouraged legislatures from treating women and men differently.

Ginsburg was appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals by President Carter in 1980 and in 1993, President Clinton nominated her as an associate justice of the Supreme Court. The U.S. Senate confirmed her by a vote of 97-3. She remained on the bench until her death in September 2020. She was 87 years old.

This blog was drafted by Diane Minear, an attorney in the Spencer Fane Overland Park, Kansas office. For more information, visit www.spencerfane.com.

[1] *Chicago Legal News*, October 23, 1897.

[2] "Leave that slavery-cursed republic": Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Black feminist nationalism, 1852-1874, Atlantic Studies Global Currents, Volume 18, 2021 – Issue4: Black Editorship in the Early Atlantic World.

[3] Wolf, Julie (February 18, 2016). "Judge Jane Bolin Battled Institutional Racism in NYC Courts for Decades". *The Root*. Archived from the original on 28 March 2018.

Retrieved 28 March 2018.