

LAW OFFICE OF
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FAMOUS FEMALE LAWYERS
by Susan C. Ryan, Esq.

March is Women's History month. Throughout history women have devoted themselves to improving the lives of others, and many have chosen to do so through the legal profession. In pursuing their quest to become lawyers, women often had difficulty enrolling in law schools. Most law schools denied women the opportunity for a legal education until the mid-twentieth century. Harvard Law School did not admit women until 1950. In 1908 Portia Law School, now known as New England Law, offered a legal education to women of working class families. Sensitive to the financial and family demands women faced, Portia offered part-time enrollment, enabling women to attain their dreams of being a lawyer.

However, women were blazing the legal trail even before that time. In 1869 Arabella Mansfield became the first woman admitted to practice law in Iowa. Although Myra Colby Bradwell passed the Illinois bar exam, that state's Supreme Court refused to admit her. She was finally admitted in 1890. Charlotte E. Ray was the first black female lawyer, admitted to the Washington, D.C. bar in 1872 only because the bar admissions committee assumed she was a man. It wasn't until the 1930's that women were named to serve on state and/or federal benches. In 1981 Sandra Day O'Connor became the first female justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, with Ruth Bader Ginsburg as the second female Supreme Court Justice. The third female justice, Sonya Sotomayor, was also the first Hispanic U.S. Supreme Court Justice. The fourth and most recent addition to the U.S. Supreme Court is Elena Kagan, who assumed office in 2010, after being the first female dean of Harvard Law School.

One of the most well-known female lawyers from Massachusetts is Margaret Marshall. Although she was born in South Africa, Margaret Marshall completed her legal education at Yale Law School. After being appointed to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, she became the 24th Chief Justice of that court, and was the first ever female to serve in that capacity from 1999 to 2010.

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