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## Rhode Island Women's Bar Association & The History of Women Lawyers in Our State

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for a law student, who will work at Legal Aid Services of Oregon in the summer of 2019.

In 2019, in celebration of OWLS' 30th anniversary, the Foundation launched the Oregon Women Lawyers Foundation Legacy Society to honor donors who have pledged a gift to the Foundation through their estate or financial plans.

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## RHODE ISLAND

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### RHODE ISLAND WOMEN'S BAR ASSOCIATION & THE HISTORY OF WOMEN LAWYERS IN OUR STATE

Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., Cassandra L. Feeney, Esq.  
and Gina Renzulli Lemay, Esq.<sup>1</sup>

Every year in recent memory, the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association (RIWBA) and the student Women's Law Society of Roger Williams University School of Law (RWU Law) join together at an annual dinner named Women in Robes. At this yearly event, members of the Rhode Island bench and bar join law students for dinner, fellowship, and a short speaking program. At the Women in Robes event in 2017, a speech by Rhode Island Superior Court Justice Nettie Vogel piqued much interest when she spoke of historical underrepresentation of women attorneys in Rhode Island. Out of this speech grew an intensive statewide collaborative effort to rediscover the history of women in law in our state. Beyond rediscovering the names of these women, we rediscovered, retold, and celebrated their lives, their careers, and their stories, even joining together to commemorate a plaque in honor of these "First Women" at the law school in April 2019. This article is a brief summary of the work done in Rhode Island by members of the RWU Law staff, faculty, and administration with the help of members of the state judiciary, the state bar association, members of the bench and bar, friends and family of these early women attorneys, and, of course, the RIWBA.

In order to celebrate the early women lawyers in our state, we had to first figure out who they were. One of the most surprising parts of our state's story is that no one in Rhode Island has been tracking members of the bar by gender in any wholistic way. As one might expect, that makes researching the history of women attorneys in our state quite a challenge.

Because there was no one entity that had tracked gender of lawyers in the state, researchers had to attempt to re-create a list. An incomplete list was found in an old filing cabinet and was used as a starting point of sorts. From there, the research team amassed the most complete collection to date by reviewing old news articles, historical law firm advertisements, old Supreme Court rolls, historical bar association yearbooks, historical bar application information, bar association archived data, and many conversations with community members. RWU Law Library researchers discovered that others, namely Cassandra L. Feeney and the RIWBA, had started similar projects. All involved shared their work to try to compile the most accurate list to date. The list was published in the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* with a statement that encouraged community members to send names of known or possible women who may have been overlooked or omitted. The legal community responded with several names and recollections, which were then further explored by the research team. The research was made especially challenging because of the practice of some women of taking their spouses' names upon marriage. Led by the diligent efforts of researcher Nicole P. Dyszlewski and members of the RWU Law Library staff, we now have the clearest picture of the early women attorneys in our state that we have ever had.

The first woman admitted to the Rhode Island bar was Ada L. Sawyer. Rhode Island's foremost Ada L. Sawyer scholar is another female lawyer in our state, Denise Aiken. Aiken describes the hurdles Sawyer had to overcome in a 2010 article, stating:

"In 1920, when Ada took the Bar exam, many states including Rhode Island still allowed its applicants to read the law. ... Percy W. Gardner was Ada's employer and tutor. However, when Ada went to take the exam, the Board of Bar Examiners

**The story of female attorneys in Rhode Island is dynamic, inspiring, and important. They were not just female attorneys. They were attorneys and mothers, daughters, wives, state senators, elected officials, fearsome litigators, CEOs, judges, newsmakers, standard bearers, glass ceiling breakers, activists, partners, leaders, and icons.**

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balked. After all, the rules stated that any 'person' could read the law. Was a woman a person? They required a letter from Supreme Court Associate Justice (and later Chief Judge) William H. Sweetland ... since Ada L. Sawyer was found to be a person, she could sit for the exam."<sup>2</sup>

In another article, Aiken continues Sawyer's story, "Of the 22 people who took the bar in September 1920, she was the only one of who passed who had not gone to either college or law school."<sup>3</sup> From Sawyer's admission in 1920 to 1959, there were only 18 additional female lawyers to be admitted (five others were admitted in the 1920s, one in the 1930s, two in the 1940s, and nine in the 1950s). The number of women admitted rose modestly in the 1960s (two in 1960, two each in the years 1965, 1966, and 1967, one in 1968, and one in 1969). The numbers then rose dramatically in the 1970s, and by 1979, our state had seen a total of 176 female lawyers admitted to the bar.<sup>4</sup> Next year, in 2020, will be the centennial celebration of Sawyer's admission to the Rhode Island bar.

These 176 "First Women" were trailblazers. They include the first three female Supreme Court justices in Rhode Island, one of whom – the Hon. Maureen McKenna Goldberg – remains on the bench today.<sup>5</sup> These "First Women" include at least 23 judges and justices who have sat on the Housing Court, Probate Court, Family Court, District Court, Superior Court, and the Supreme Court. According to our research, the earliest of the female lawyers who were admitted and are still alive were admitted in the 1950s (1953 and 1957).

Nationally, only two women from Rhode Island have served on the NCWBA board. The first was Mary E. Brouner from Providence in 1991-1995, and the second was Kale Ahern from Providence in 2017-2019.

The story of female attorneys in Rhode Island is dynamic, inspiring, and important. They were not just female attorneys. They were attorneys and mothers, daughters, wives, state senators, elected officials, fearsome litigators, CEOs, judges, newsmakers, standard bearers, glass ceiling breakers, activists, partners, leaders, and icons. They should be remembered for their contributions to law, to our state, and to the lives of all female attorneys now and to come in Rhode Island.<sup>6</sup>

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**Endnotes**

1. Nicole P. Dyzlewski, is the Head of Reference, Instruction, and Engagement at the Roger Williams University School of Law Library. Gina Benzetti Lentz is the current President of the RIWBA, and Cassandra L. Forney is a member of the Board of Directors for the RIWBA.

2. Aiken, Denise, "Ada L. Sawyer: The Providence Paria," *RI Bar Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Sept./Oct. 2010, pages 31-32. Available at: [https://www.ribar.com/UserFiles/Files/Sept-Oct\\_2010%20Jrnl.pdf](https://www.ribar.com/UserFiles/Files/Sept-Oct_2010%20Jrnl.pdf)

3. Aiken, Denise, "Ada L. Sawyer: The Providence Paria," *Roger Williams University Law Review*, Vol. 16, Iss. 2, Art. 1, 2011. Available at: <http://rlaw.rwu.edu/rlaw/vol16/iss2/>

4. One hundred seventy-six is the number of female attorneys admitted in Rhode Island in the first 60 years beginning in 1920 researchers have been able to identify at this time. New names and leads are continuously being pursued and this number could increase with new light being shed on their amazing women.

5. The first three women Supreme Court Justices in Rhode Island include the Honorable Florence Murray, the Honorable Victoria Lederberg, and the Honorable Maureen McKenna Goldberg. Tucker, Eric, "Veteran Judge Takes Over Top Spot on R.I. High Court," *South Coast Today*, Jan. 4, 2009. Available at: <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20090104/News/901040336>

6. For more information on the history of female attorneys and their stories, Cassandra L. Forney and Elin-Lou Schaub author a continuing series published in the *Rhode Island Bar Journal*. See, e.g., Cassandra L. Forney, Esq., and Elin-Lou Schaub, Esq., "Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future – Susan Leach DeBasso, Esq.," *RI Bar Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 5, March/April 2019, pages 21-22. Available at: [https://www.ribar.com/UserFiles/Files/CMSUploadFiles/RI%20Bar\\_Mar-Apr\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ribar.com/UserFiles/Files/CMSUploadFiles/RI%20Bar_Mar-Apr_2019.pdf). Cassandra L. Forney, Esq., and Elin-Lou Schaub, "Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future – The Honorable Neitz C. Vopp," *RI Bar Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 3, Nov/Dec. 2018, page 13. Available at: [https://www.ribar.com/UserFiles/Files/RI%20Bar\\_Nov-Dec2018\\_Jrnl%20.pdf](https://www.ribar.com/UserFiles/Files/RI%20Bar_Nov-Dec2018_Jrnl%20.pdf). Additional information about the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association, including newsletters and publications with further information on the history of Rhode Island women attorneys, is available at: <https://www.rwba.com/>