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## History of the First Women Project

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# First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island

## History of the First Women Project

**Nicole P. Dyszlewski\***

It would be fair to say that the First Women project had its origins in several places. First, it could rightly be said that this project's origin was the very admission of Ada L. Sawyer to the Rhode Island Bar Association. On November 10, 1920, Sawyer's certificate to the bar made her the first female member admitted in

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Rhode Island.<sup>1</sup> It could also be said that the 1975 article *Women Lawyers in Rhode Island* by Sophie Douglass Pfeiffer might have been the original impetus for the First Women project, as this article memorialized the author's attempt to "cross-check the membership of the women lawyers' association against the bar association rolls."<sup>2</sup> Still further, about twenty years ago then-dean of Roger Williams University School of Law (RWU Law) Harvey Rishikof (Dean from 1999–2001)<sup>3</sup> convened a meeting of some of the earliest female members of the Rhode Island Bar Association for a celebration event.<sup>4</sup> The eventual goal of Dean Rishikof's event was to compile a list of these early female attorneys, but the project was never finished to completion.

But while the preceding events provide a backdrop, the 2017 Women in Robes event was the most direct origin for the First Women project in its current form. Women in Robes is an annual dinner sponsored by the RWU Law Women's Law Society, a student group. The event, which includes a speaking program, is intended to be "a wonderful opportunity for law students to engage with members of the judiciary and legal community in Rhode Island."<sup>5</sup> One of the speakers at the 2017 Women in Robes event was the Honorable Netti C. Vogel. Her speech referenced the slow pace at which women became members of the Rhode Island bar. As RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky described it, "Judge Vogel spoke to our students about how slowly women became integrated into the Rhode Island bar . . . the first woman was admitted in 1920, but it was not until 50 years later that the total number of women admitted to practice in Rhode Island reached 30."<sup>6</sup> In her speech,

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1. Sophie Douglass Pfeiffer, *Women Lawyers in Rhode Island*, 61 A.B.A. J. 740, 740 (1975).

2. *Id.* at 741.

3. *Mission and History Timeline 1995-1999*, ROGER WILLIAMS U. SCH. L., <https://law.rwu.edu/why-rwu-law/mission-and-history/1995-1999> [https://perma.cc/RUL4-BKN2] (last visited Apr. 4, 2020).

4. Michael M. Bowden, *Celebrating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island*, ROGER WILLIAMS U. SCH. L. (Apr. 9, 2019), <https://law.rwu.edu/news/news-archive/celebrating-first-women-lawyers-rhode-island> [https://perma.cc/MXC8-8QSK].

5. R.I. Women's Bar Ass'n, *For RIWBA, A Chock Full Year In Review*, R.I. LAW. WKLY. (June 17, 2019), <https://rilawyersweekly.com/blog/2019/06/17/for-riwba-a-chock-full-year-in-review/> [https://perma.cc/9HXS-UCXU].

6. Bowden, *supra* note 4 (internal quotation marks omitted).

Judge Vogel also mentioned the earlier attempt to identify these early female members of the bar by RWU Law under the leadership of Dean Rishikof.

Following the event, Dean Yelnosky sent an email to Judge Vogel pledging the support of the law school to “finish[] the job Harvey [Rishikof] started.”<sup>7</sup> The email stated,

I would love to do what I can to resurrect the “First 25” project. One of the provisions in our draft strategic diversity plan focuses on the need to pay attention to the ways in which the representations of lawyers and judges in the law school buildings are consistent (or not) with our commitment to diversity. This project would be a great step in the right direction.<sup>8</sup>

As evidenced by the name Dean Yelnosky used, the project was envisioned as an attempt to “rediscover” the names of the first twenty-five female lawyers in Rhode Island. Also included in that email were a handful of attendees at the Women in Robes event, such as RWU Law student Lauren Higgins; President of the Women’s Law Society, RWU Law Professor Emily Sack; faculty advisor to the Women’s Law Society, RWU Law Assistant Dean of Students Lorraine Lalli; and RWU Law librarian Nicole P. Dyszlewski.

#### I. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Among the first things that needed to be established were the names of the first twenty-five female members of the bar.<sup>9</sup> The task was complicated by some realities of record keeping and preservation. First, the Rhode Island Judiciary does not track or keep gender information on bar admittees. In fact, “the Rhode Island Supreme Court does not and has never tracked the gender

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7. Email from Michael J. Yelnosky, Dean & Professor of Law, Roger Williams Univ. Sch. of Law, to Judge Netti C. Vogel (Oct. 3, 2017, 9:36 PM) (on file with author).

8. *Id.*

9. This article is an attempt to create a linear narrative of an iterative and non-linear set of events and research processes. The researcher-author has attempted to summarize and streamline some of the events for the sake of clarity and readability.

of individuals admitted to the Rhode Island Bar.”<sup>10</sup> This posed a considerable challenge given that gender is arguably a social construct and inarguably difficult to ascertain with complete accuracy from historical records.<sup>11</sup>

For the purposes of this project, those involved took a narrow view of gender. For the sake of this research we assigned the gender of female to those who had historically held themselves out to be female. Many times, we had to guess the gender of an attorney by using names and context.<sup>12</sup> Also making matters more challenging, the most complete historical records the Rhode Island Supreme Court does keep on members were “recorded by hand in ledger books that today are somewhat fragile.”<sup>13</sup> The Rhode Island Supreme Court was graciously willing to allow inspection of the ledgers, and stated, “[i]n response, and after considerable discussion among the staff, we feel the only option is to invite you to the Supreme Court clerk’s office during business hours to view the entries from that period, and either record the names yourself or take a photo of the pages.”<sup>14</sup> However, this method of determining members’ gender is not only time-consuming but problematic because of the vagaries of handwriting and the lack of inherent gender of names.<sup>15</sup>

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10. Email from Debra A. Saunders, Clerk of the R.I. Supreme Court, to author (Dec. 4, 2017, 12:14 PM) (on file with author).

11. A quick note about gender. The researcher-author acknowledges that gender “is a sociocultural expression of particular characteristics and roles that are associated with certain groups of people with reference to their sex and sexuality.” See *Gender Concepts and Definitions*, JHPIEGO, <https://gender.jhpiego.org/analysistoolkit/gender-concepts-and-definitions/> [<https://perma.cc/CA9A-R7Q9>] (last visited Apr. 4, 2020). Furthermore, it is acknowledged that there is a difference between gender and sex, and both may be non-binary and mutable. Doing historical research with contemporary ideologies and insights presents challenges and it is not the intent of this author to skirt these challenges.

12. The researcher-author acknowledges the sensitivity and wrongheadedness of assigning gender.

13. Email from Craig N. Berke, Assistant State Court Adm’r, Dir., Cmty. Outreach & Pub. Relations, R.I. Judiciary, to author (Dec. 8, 2017, 8:54 AM) (on file with author).

14. *Id.*

15. To support this proposition, an anecdotal story was told that at the original early 2000s gathering of early female attorneys in Rhode Island at RWU, a male attorney named Lauren was invited by accident.

Upon reflection, it was agreed that examining the ledger books was not the most efficient way of determining the names of early female attorneys, and this would be seen as a last resort.

The next chapter of the research journey was written by good luck and the strong librarianship skills of RWU Associate Law Librarian Lucinda Harrison-Cox. Upon learning of the project to rediscover the names of the earliest female attorneys in Rhode Island, Harrison-Cox produced two documents from her office. One was a photocopy of Attorney Ada Sawyer's original petition to become a member of the bar and the other was a list of names. The list of names appears to have come via mail to the RWU webmaster in 2006 from Marian Mathison Desrosiers and then to have somehow made its way to the RWU Law Library and Harrison-Cox's filing cabinet. The limited notes on the list suggest that it was compiled by a careful review of Rhode Island Bar Association Photo Directories from the years 1904, 1942, 1968, 1974, 1980, and 1988.<sup>16</sup> The discovery of this list in the law library, and the research methodology that it briefly explained, was a tremendous boon for the project and not the last bit of luck the researchers encountered.

At this point in time, the Desrosiers list and the research methodology seemed the most efficient starting point from which to proceed. Accordingly, the researchers, who now included Nicole P. Dyszlewski and Jessica Silvia, re-traced the footsteps of Dr. Desrosiers, re-examined early bar directories, and tried to verify the list's entries. Beyond just verifying the names on the list from the bar directories kept in the Rhode Island State Law Library Collection, the research team also reached out to the Bar Association itself in an effort to confirm the research and expand the list to include the rest of the 1970s. An email was sent to the Rhode Island Bar Association's Director of Communications Kathleen Bridge, detailing the project and asking for the names of some of the early female attorneys in Rhode Island. Like the Rhode Island Judiciary, the Rhode Island Bar Association showed great generosity and willingness to contribute to the research.<sup>17</sup> One

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16. Letter from Marian Mathison Desrosiers, Ph.D., to Webmaster, Roger Williams University (June 23, 2006) (on file with author).

17. The researcher would like to express thanks again to Kathleen M. Bridge. She received a request for data with no context and was able to

exciting contribution that the bar association data added to the research was the self-identification of gender. Kathleen Bridge explained, “[w]e do have records of gender (and can generate lists according to gender), as long as the attorney did indeed mark it on their original application. I can probably find out if there are any attorneys during those years who did not check off either gender.”<sup>18</sup> She added that, while the membership information in the bar’s possession was unofficial, she was willing to supplement existing research whenever possible. She stated,

let me note that any official records of when attorneys became licensed in RI come from the Supreme Court, not from the Bar Association . . . . We have our records, for our own membership purposes, but any official records of when attorneys were sworn in and/or licensed/admitted should come from the Court.<sup>19</sup>

The data shared by the bar association answered some questions and raised some others.

The list created by the researchers using the Desrosiers list and the historical bar directories was next compared to data from the Rhode Island Bar Association and several discrepancies were found. There were names on the bar list which were not on the researchers’ list and vice versa. It was also discovered that the bar association data did not include the names of members who had resigned from practice. Additionally, the data had several inconsistencies regarding names. All of this presented an opportunity for the researchers to more fully confront the common practice of American women in the 1900’s of taking their spouse’s last name.

The researchers suspected that some names on the list (which now included additional names from the bar association data) were female attorneys who were listed twice, once under their maiden

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respond very quickly and helpfully. Kathleen and the Rhode Island Bar Association showed great support for this project at this stage and in future stages, and those contributions were significant. The organization’s collaboration speaks well of the relationship between RWU Law and the bar association, its members, its employees, and its administration.

18. Email from Kathleen M. Bridge, Dir. of Commc’n, R.I. Bar Ass’n, to author (Dec. 5, 2017, 10:22 AM) (on file with author).

19. Email from Kathleen M. Bridge, Dir. of Commc’n, R.I. Bar Ass’n, to author (Dec. 6, 2017, 4:29 PM) (on file with author).

names and once under their married names. In some cases, this uncertainty was further complicated by the prospect that some women were divorced and remarried, and had chosen to take their second spouse's last name. Additionally, it even turned out that some women were married when they became members of the bar, but later divorced and reverted to using their maiden names. One precaution that the researchers took to minimize this confusion was to investigate this through the judiciary's Attorney Search web feature.<sup>20</sup> This allowed the researchers to try and piece together if there were duplicate names. For example, we had Anne Maxwell listed as both Anne Maxwell and Anne Livingston. Searching the database allowed the researchers to confirm that these were in fact the same woman, Anne Maxwell Livingston.<sup>21</sup> But while the database was an efficient way to confirm names, it was neither comprehensive nor entirely reliable. Craig N. Berke, in a December 13, 2017 email, explained, "[b]ecause of other priorities, we have never reconciled the hard-copy master roll with the information in our electronic database. When we converted from hard copy to electronic in the 1980s, attorneys were issued bar numbers. We have no idea why, but not all attorneys admitted obtained bar numbers."<sup>22</sup> In order to de-duplicate the list as it stood, it was going to take some creativity and additional effort.

The next steps of the research are a bit messy to describe. The researchers tried to prove that each woman on the updated list was in fact a unique individual. Using public records available online, genealogical research databases, and old newspapers, the team tried to puzzle out which women on the list might have been listed more than once. Researchers used census records, obituaries, bar journals, legal newspapers, legal notices, local newspapers, law school archives, and marriage records to de-duplicate the updated list. Additionally, the researchers used these resources to correct

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20. *Attorney Search*, R.I. JUDICIARY, <http://rijrs.courts.ri.gov/rijrs/attorney.do> [<https://perma.cc/6VZG-AQ5S>] (last visited Apr. 4, 2020).

21. *Attorney Search*, R.I. JUDICIARY, <http://rijrs.courts.ri.gov/rijrs/search/Attorney.do?subactionId=3&attorneyNumber=250198> [<https://perma.cc/RF3N-4ZJ2>] (search by name for "Anne Maxwell Livingston") (last visited Mar. 12, 2020).

22. Email from Craig N. Berke, Assistant State Court Adm'r, Dir., Cmty. Outreach & Pub. Relations, R.I. Judiciary, to author (Dec. 13, 2017, 9:19 AM) (on file with author).

name spellings, eliminate names which had been included in error, and deduce which unisex names were in fact female.

It was around this time that the project stumbled into some further good luck. The researchers sent an email to Attorney Krystle Tadesse, then President of the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association, to see if the association had done any historical research on early female members of the Rhode Island bar. Attorney Tadesse responded that "Cassandra Feeney . . . started a project on this topic and might be able to provide some assistance. Cassandra is a current member of the RIWBA board of directors."<sup>23</sup> Attorney Cassandra L. Feeney, it turned out, had indeed previously done historical research on early women attorneys in Rhode Island. Feeney's research was inspired and supported by Judge Vogel and Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. A former Rhode Island Supreme Court law clerk, Feeney worked with Justice Goldberg and her legal intern at that time, Tess Rossi, to attempt to compile a list of the earliest female attorneys in Rhode Island. As Feeney recounted,

[a]n intern [Rossi] and I went through the old books at the RI Supreme Court Clerk's office. We identified what information we could about the RI Women Attorneys for each year, until it went electronic in the 1980s . . . . Any name that was questionable as to whether it was male or female was identified in our research, so there will need to be some research on the 'questionable' names identified. There are also names identified of both male and female attorneys [where] we just have the bar number but not year of admission, so there needs to be further research into what year the female attorneys were admitted.<sup>24</sup>

Attorney Feeney and her colleagues had done the time-intensive work of reviewing the Rhode Island Supreme Court's historical ledger and she was willing to share her work product. She sent her project notes to the researchers and the list grew and changed again.

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23. Email from Krystle Tadesse, Attorney, to author (Jan. 24, 2018, 8:47 AM) (on file with author).

24. Email from Cassandra L. Feeney, Attorney, to author (Apr. 30, 2018, 4:45 PM) (on file with author).

The addition of Attorney Feeney's notes to the project was important, not just because of the immense value of her research but also because it confirmed that this was something of a community effort. The rediscovery and compilation of the list was not something that was happening somewhere off in academia. This project was supported by the RWU Law community and also by the contributions of researchers, attorneys, and historians beyond the walls of the law school.

The resultant draft list of women was an amazing resource. As it continued to grow, so did the scope of the project. Although the original idea was to identify the "First 25" there was a problem; namely, that the 25th and 26th women had both joined the bar in the same year, meaning that 25 was not a distinction that could easily be made. The same happened for the 75th and 76th women and the 100th and 101st women. It was therefore determined that the project would be reconfigured to compile a list honoring the first sixty years of female attorneys in Rhode Island—from 1920 to 1979. Around this time the project also found its name, "First Women." Rhode Island Bar Association President Carolyn Barone summarized the sixty-year span, explaining that

for the first forty years following Attorney Sawyer's admission to practice, women becoming lawyers were few and far between. The year of 1965 appears to be the "wake up" year for women in the law. That year ushered in an unbroken cycle that continues to this day. From 1965 going forward and continuing to the present time, women have been admitted to the Rhode Island Bar every year. Although the middle to late 1970s saw yearly up-ticks in the number of female attorneys, it was not until the middle to late 1970s that ranks of women lawyers swelled in comparison to all prior decades.<sup>25</sup>

The late 1970s marked the first time in which significant numbers of female attorneys were admitted. While female attorneys in the 1980s and beyond certainly had obstacles to overcome and glass ceilings to break, it was the trailblazing women of those first sixty years whom the First Women project sought to honor.

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25. Carolyn R. Barone, *Hey, Little Girl*, R.I.B.J., Nov./Dec. 2018, at 3, 4.

Around this time, a draft version of the list was published in the Rhode Island Bar Journal.<sup>26</sup> This was significant because it allowed the list of names to be vetted by the community. Sure enough, the researchers received emails, phone calls, and letters from members of the Rhode Island legal community who sought to help fill in the blanks. In particular, many bar members contributed leads on names that were missing, spelled incorrectly, or duplicative. The researchers investigated every such lead and were able to add names to the list that had not previously been discovered in the court records, were not in the bar journal directories, and were not in previous iterations of the list. To confirm that a name was correct, the researchers needed to confirm the name with the court, or the bar, or the Rhode Island Judicial Records Center.

However, once one name was discovered as missing from the draft list, the researchers began to doubt their approach and started to look at additional ways to rediscover names not found through court records or bar records. Strategies employed included scattershot searches for key terms in a variety of sources, including HeinOnline.<sup>27</sup> Of note, HeinOnline has a collection titled the Women & the Law collection which includes “[m]ore than 1 million pages of contemporary and historical works related to women’s roles in society and the law.”<sup>28</sup> Also in HeinOnline, the researchers reviewed and found helpful historical issues of the *Women Lawyers Journal*, the publication of the National Association of Women Lawyers, which included the names of several early women lawyers in Rhode Island in its pages. Additionally, the researchers searched broadly in databases with historical newspapers, local history, legal news, and the internet, generally.

An example of a woman whose name appeared neither in the court records nor in the bar records was Attorney Dorothy R. Crockett Bartleson. The researchers discovered Crockett’s name in a scattershot search on the internet which hit upon the website of

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26. *Researching Early Women Lawyers in Rhode Island: We Need your Help!*, R.I.B.J., May/June 2018, at 28.

27. Search terms included “female lawyer,” “woman lawyer,” “lady lawyer,” “woman attorney,” “female member of the bar,” etc.

28. See *Women and the Law*, HEINONLINE, <https://heinonline-org.rwulaw.idm.oclc.org/HeinDocs/Women&theLaw.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/6PJF-Q2Z5>] (last visited Mar. 12, 2020).

New England Law Boston, formerly known as Portia Law School, from whence Crockett had graduated. The website stated she was the first black female attorney in Rhode Island.<sup>29</sup> The researchers reached out to librarian Karen Green at the New England Law Boston Law Library to try and find any information on Crockett that her alma mater might still have. Green generously shared the information she had on Crockett, but there was nothing definitive to prove Crockett had been a Rhode Island attorney. The researchers found news stories from when Crockett became a member of the bar but still had no official proof from the Court that Crockett was an attorney. The researchers contacted the Judicial Records Center again and weeks later were surprised by an email from a state employee, Andrew Smith, who had uncovered Crockett's bar application. The overjoyed researchers had rediscovered Rhode Island's first black female attorney. Attorney Dorothy R. Crockett Bartleson was Rhode Island's only female attorney admitted in the 1930s (to have been discovered so far) and her story is a true testament to her character. The discovery of her name is also a testament to the work of the research team, Andrew Smith, Karen Green, Michael Bowden, Michael Donnelly-Boylan, Lucinda Harrison-Cox, Deborah Johnson, Lorraine Lalli, Michael Yelnosky and others who were committed to unearthing the forgotten history of the Rhode Island bar.<sup>30</sup>

While it would be nice to describe the list at this point in the narrative as definitive and stable, the realities of historical research are that—at this point and at any point in the future—the names on the list could change and the list could continue to grow. The researchers could discover another name lost to time, a woman could change her name and ask it to be changed on the list, or there

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29. *Blanche Braxton and Dorothy Crockett*, NEW ENG. L., <https://student.nesl.edu/HistoryProject/personalities/1908-braxton-crockett.html> [<https://perma.cc/BKJ3-3ALD>] (last visited Apr. 4, 2020).

30. The story of the life of Dorothy R. Crockett Bartleson, and how it was recreated by tireless research, is really a story in and of itself, deserving of its own article. For more information, see Michael M. Bowden, *The Amazing Dorothy Crockett*, RWU L., May 2019, at 34; see also Katie Mulvaney, *Roger Williams University Law School Dedicates Classroom in Honor of State's First Female African American Lawyer*, PROVIDENCE J. (Sept. 10, 2019, 9:54 PM), <https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20190910/roger-williams-university-law-school-dedicates-classroom-in-honor-of-states-first-female-african-american-lawyer> [<https://perma.cc/C52F-RDZK>].

could be a name included or spelled incorrectly. However, with the addition of names from the broad, scattershot approach to research, and with input from Rhode Islanders and local legal historians, the list leading up to the First Women event in April 2019 was as complete as it had ever been. The list was memorialized on a plaque mounted in the law school's second-floor atrium and includes reference to those names that are not yet known. The research will continue as long as the researchers and members of the public continue to share tips, photographs, memories, and newspaper articles.

## II. BEYOND THE LIST

The list itself, while important and remarkable, is just a list of names. The real magic of the First Women project is that a community came together to celebrate the names on the list and to honor these history-making women. In the months it took to research the list, many members of the RWU Law community were hard at work holding meetings, creating a coalition, and planning an event.

The group of people involved in creating the First Women event grew beyond just the small group in Dean Yelnosky's original emails. Dean Yelnosky convened a First Women Steering Committee, "co-chaired by RWU Law Board members Connie Howes, Esq., and the Honorable Patricia Sullivan, who worked to explore how these women might best be remembered and honored."<sup>31</sup> The First Woman Steering Committee consisted of women from both within and without the RWU Law community. It included judges, attorneys, board members, alumni, and law students. In addition to Sullivan and Howes, it included RWU Law Board of Directors and First Woman Co-Chair, the Honorable Maureen McKenna Goldberg, Honorary Degree Recipient RWU Law and First Woman; the Honorable Netti C. Vogel, RWU Law Board of Directors and First Woman; the Honorable Arlene Violet, Attorney General of Rhode Island (retired), RWU Board of Trustees and First Woman; Christine Awe, RWU Law 3L and President, Women's Law Society; Nicole J. Benjamin, Esq. '06, RWU Law Board of Directors; Carolyn Barone, Esq., President, Rhode Island Bar Association; Janet Coit, Director, Rhode Island Department of

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31. Bowden, *supra* note 4.

Environmental Management and Honorary Degree Recipient RWU Law; Linn F. Freedman, Esq., RWU Board of Trustees and RWU Law Board of Directors; Colleen Giles, RWU Law 3L and Vice-President, Women's Law Society; Gina Lemay, Esq., President, Rhode Island Women's Bar Association; Emily Sack, Professor, RWU Law and Faculty Advisor to Women's Law Society; Nicole Verdi, Esq. '12, '14, President, RWU Law Alumni Association; Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., Head of Reference, Instruction, & Engagement at RWU Law Library (*ex officio*); Lisa Raiola, Vice-President of Institutional Advancement, RWU (*ex officio*); and Michael J. Yelnosky, Dean and Professor, RWU Law (*ex officio*).

An important driving force behind this project has been Dean Michael J. Yelnosky's belief that one of RWU Law's many roles in the state is that of "convenor." The depth of the committee is a testament to the school's strong relationship with the Rhode Island legal community and the importance of the First Women project. As Alexandra Varney McDonald, the author of an article in *RWU Law*, the magazine of Roger Williams University School of Law describes, "[t]he law school's decision to support this monumental project reflects its commitment to diversity in the bar, reaching out to those historically underrepresented in the legal profession."<sup>32</sup> The meetings of the committee were engaging, powerful, and electric. Dean Yelnosky stated, "[t]hat's one of the roles of a law school—to be a convener. And I can tell you that the positive energy that I've felt when a group of these women have gathered to talk about the project is powerful."<sup>33</sup> The committee worked to explore how to best remember and honor the earliest female members of the bar, and the aforementioned plaque was one result. The committee envisioned that this event would be the start of the work to honor these women and that future events would follow.

Adler Pollock & Sheehan P.C. (AP&S) sponsored the event which included a cocktail reception, speaking program, and the plaque dedication.<sup>34</sup> The first female attorney at AP&S was Sally

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32. Alexnadra [sic] Varney McDonald, *The First Women of the Rhode Island Bar*, RWU L., May 2019 at 28, 30.

33. Bowden, *supra* note 4 (internal quotation marks omitted).

34. *Id.*

Dowling, one of the attorneys on the First Women list.<sup>35</sup> Attorney Dowling was also the firm's first female partner.<sup>36</sup> Nicole J. Benjamin '06, a shareholder with AP&S and a member of the First Women Steering Committee, stated that the firm was proud to sponsor the event and was

equally proud . . . to count some of those women as our own here at AP&S—Victoria Almeida, Susan DeBlasio, and Sally Dowling, who spent the last 40 years with AP&S—and so many others as our clients, mentors and dear friends. I consider myself fortunate to be the beneficiary of the perseverance of those early pioneers in our profession. They broke glass ceilings in courthouses, law firms and boardrooms, paving the way for generations of female lawyers in this state. Today, thanks to their leadership, mentorship and friendship, thousands of women stand on their shoulders. I am proud to be one of them.<sup>37</sup>

The celebration was preceded by a significant piece in the *Providence Journal*, which highlighted five of the First Women and heralded the event.<sup>38</sup> The event itself included a powerful and moving speaking program and a dedication of the plaque.<sup>39</sup> Many of the First Women attended, including some of the earliest names on the list.

This piece is being included in the *Roger Williams University Law Review* for several reasons. First, as a way of officially publishing the list somewhere beyond the halls of the law school itself. Second, the article may serve as a how-to guide for legal researchers and historians who wish to fact-check the list or repeat

35. *Joe and Sally Dowling Recognize Excellence with Charitable Giving*, BRADLEY BULL., Spring 2017, at 1, <https://lissuu.com/lifespanmc/docs/bradley-bulletin-spring-2017> [<https://perma.cc/6B7C-7TJW>].

36. *Id.*

37. Bowden, *supra* note 4.

38. Katie Mulvaney, *Pushing the Bar in R.I.: 5 Women Who Blazed Trails Through the Legal System*, PROVIDENCE J. (Apr. 8, 2019), <https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20190408/pushing-bar-in-ri-5-women-who-blazed-trails-through-legal-system> [<https://perma.cc/NJ88-F7N9>].

39. The event program itself can be found at *First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island: Dedication First Women of the Rhode Island Bar (1920-1979)*, ROGER WILLIAMS U. DIGITAL COMMONS, (Apr. 11, 2019), [https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1114&context=law\\_pubs\\_conf](https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1114&context=law_pubs_conf) [<https://perma.cc/L2TB-J92Y>].

the re-discovery process in another jurisdiction. Third, this article is a way of sharing the details of the celebration for those who know of, knew of, or were inspired by the women on the list. Included with this article are transcripts of the speeches given at the event.<sup>40</sup> May they inspire the readers of this journal as they inspired so many on the night of the event. Next, this article is being published to profusely thank, commemorate, and remember all of the trailblazing early women of the Rhode Island Bar. As Judge Vogel so eloquently stated in her speech, “[a]s the past has impacted the present, so will the present impact the future. . . . Appreciating that progression makes us recognize the vital need to remain active and vocal, and gives us the optimism to know we’re making a difference.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, this piece is a thank you to all involved in the research and creation of the First Women project. May this article serve as a reminder that a small group of committed people can truly create history, or at least rediscover and celebrate it.

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40. *Celebrating the First Women Lawyers of Rhode Island*, 25 ROGER WILLIAMS U. L. REV. 322 (2020).

41. *Id.* at 333.