



Female Lawyers in Ontario

Marica Piedigrossi

The Hamilton Law Association's History Committee is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of knowledge of the lives and accomplishments of its notable members, both past and present. The accomplishments of women lawyers in the Hamilton bar are both numerous and noteworthy, but have you ever wondered who was the first woman lawyer called to the bar in Ontario or Canada? Or who was the first woman member of The Hamilton Law Association? Thanks to the work of historians and archivists at the Law Society of Ontario and The Hamilton

Law Association's good friend Mr. John Ayre, former Assistant Deputy Attorney-General of Ontario, we have some insight into these questions. As is true for many notable women at the turn of the 20th-century, detailed biographies of these legal pioneers are hard to come by. We are often privy to only snapshots of women's lives, often through some official records, a handful of correspondences, obituaries, or through the accomplishments of their husbands or male family members. We are lucky to have the information that we do, but we can only strive to continuously seek out more. Let us start from the beginning, with the first five female lawyers to be called to the bar in Ontario.

ments of pathbreakers like Martin without condoning their failings. Martin's record also stimulated discussion on how much scholarly attention, positive and negative, should be given to the first individual from any given community, in preference to the first few, or the first generation who drive changes such as diversifying the bar.

Eva Maude Powley

Born in 1875, Eva Maude Powley was the second woman called to the bar in Ontario and in Canada, in 1902. She practised law in Port Arthur, Ontario. In 1908, she was interested in learning about women lawyers in other parts of Canada (there was only one, Mabel Penery French, admitted to the New Brunswick Bar in 1907) and wrote to the Law Society of British Columbia asking about the rules under which women could be admitted in that province (there were none until the same Mabel Penery French was admitted to the Bar of British Columbia in 1912 following a legislative amendment). By 1933, Powley was living in Winnipeg, "engaged in a coal business," and no longer practising, like many of the first generation of women lawyers, including Mabel Penery French.

Geraldine Bertram Wright

The third woman lawyer called to the bar in 1907 in Ontario, Geraldine Robinson Wright was a founding member of the Women's Law Association of Ontario and served as its third president in 1920. She practised law in St. Thomas for two years with her husband, Ward Wright, a bencher of the Law Society, but later devoted most of her time to painting and service work.



Clara Brett Martin

Born in 1874 in Toronto, Clara Brett Martin's remarkable achievement was to become the first woman lawyer, not only in Ontario but in the British Commonwealth, in 1897. In the process, she experienced opposition, discrimination and ridicule and she showed determination, courage and a sense of her own place in history. Historians, lawyers and feminists discussed the difficulties in recognizing and applauding the special achieve-

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Grace Ellen Hewson

Grace Hewson Knight was the daughter of Judge Charles Hewson who presided on Manitoulin Island and in the Sudbury District. Grace was called to the bar in 1908 and practised mostly real estate law. In 1912 she married Cyril W. Knight, a geologist. She was the fourth woman to be called to the bar in Ontario, but according to her obituary, “she always preferred to be called the fourth in the British Empire to demonstrate how slow all countries were in recognizing women’s rights.”



Jean Morris Cairns

Jean Morris Cairns was born October 31st, 1886 the daughter of James Gardiner Cairns and Christina (Watson) Cairns. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Toronto in 1910. She studied as a law student under Donald Grant in Huntsville and was called to the Bar in 1913. She married Phillip Reginald Morris four years later and she would practice under the name P.R Morris. Jean Cairns Morris was the first female member of The Hamilton Law Association and was the fifth woman to be called to the Bar in Ontario. She initially practised law with her husband, and later with her daughter Alma Morris Malcolm. Jean told Alma that when Jean attended university to obtain her Bachelor of Arts the men would pound their desks as a sign of contempt at her presence. That behaviour continued to some degree even while she was in law school. She had difficulty obtaining an articling position but finally did




so in Huntsville. She shocked the legal community by continuing to work after she married because the social expectation was that legal work was not the business of a married lady. She defied them and with her husband formed the firm of Morris & Morris. Jean retired from the practice of law in 1967 at age 81.

It is stories like Jean’s and her predecessors that speak to the long journey women have undergone to be recognized as respected and accomplished members of the profession. We cannot thank them enough for their sacrifices, struggles, and enduring spirit that paved the way for women to succeed and thrive as lawyers in Ontario. ■

Endnotes

1 All biographies found in this article can be found in The Law Society of Ontario’s biography compilation “Diversifying the bar: lawyers make history” Biographies of Early and Exceptional Ontario Lawyers of Diverse Communities Arranged By Year Called to the Bar, Part 1: 1797 to 1940.



The Hamilton Law Association Past President’s and History Committee cordially invite you to...

Women's Suffrage in Canada

100th Anniversary Celebration Lunch

to be held at the

John Sopinka Courthouse, Lawyers’ Lounge
 (45 Main Street East, Hamilton | Suite 500)

Friday, June 15th, 2018
 12:00p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Free Lunch and Gift Bags

To make your reservation(s), please contact Marica Piedigrossi at 905-522-1563 or email mpiedigrossi@hamiltonlaw.on.ca no later than noon on Friday, June 8th, 2018

