

LEGACY OF AMERICAN FEMALE ATTORNEYS (2016 REV.)
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Miranda Hobbes. Claire Huxtable. Annalise Keating. What do these television characters have in common? They were attorneys. Whether or not female attorneys are portrayed accurately is another debate. Dengler (2010) laments that female attorneys are often portrayed as “single, [living] in nice condos, [having] no children [and working] in criminal law...” (2010). But consider a time when a female attorney could not even be imagined.

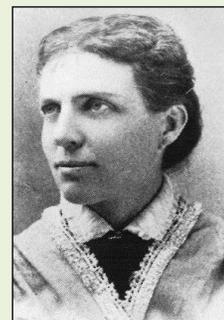


Margaret Brent

According to Cunnea (1998), in 1638, Margaret Brent became the first female attorney in the Colony of Maryland. Brent arrived in St. Mary’s City with her siblings on November 22, 1638. Within a decade after her arrival, Brent managed to become a landowner, businesswoman, and executrix of Governor Leonard Calvert’s estate (Baker, 1997). As an unmarried woman, Brent retained certain rights that would have normally been undertaken by a husband. Such rights, which included being the head of the household, enabled Brent to represent herself in court to collect debts and handle business affairs (Carr, Maryland State Archives).

In 1648, Brent appeared before the Maryland Assembly. When Maryland Protestants rebelled against the Catholic government in Ingle’s Rebellion, Calvert hired mercenary soldiers to fight against the insurgents. Calvert died before the mercenaries were paid and they began threatening mutiny. To pass a tax to help the displeased soldiers, Brent promptly appeared before the Assembly to demand two votes: one as a landholder and the other as the absent Lord Baltimore’s attorney. The Assembly denied her request, and Brent fell out of favor with the Calvert family due to her actions. Brent later moved to Virginia with her brother and resided there until her death in 1671.

Arabella Mansfield (née Belle Aurelia Babb)—revered as the first female attorney admitted to a state bar in the United States—was born on May 23, 1846 near Burlington, Iowa. It was Mansfield’s mother Mary Moyer Babb that encouraged her daughter to attend college (Federer, 2002). Mansfield would eventually become an educator at Iowa Wesleyan University and taught assorted subjects (Biography Resource Center, 2015). Mansfield was admitted into the Iowa state bar in 1869, though she never actually practiced as an attorney—which Federer (2002) attributes to Mansfield’s involvement in several suffragist causes. After becoming widowed, Mansfield continued teaching at DePauw University until her death on August 2, 1911.



Arabella Mansfield



Charlotte E. Ray

Charlotte E. Ray has the distinction of being the first African-American woman to graduate from law school and become a practicing attorney. According to Osborne (2001), Ray was born on January 13, 1850 in New York City, New York. In her childhood, Ray was sent to Washington D.C. and attended the Institution for the Education of Colored Youth. In 1869, Ray completed her education, and soon after became a teacher at Howard University’s Normal and Preparatory Department. When she applied to Howard Law School, Ray wrote “C.E. Ray” on the application. The admissions committee thought she was male, and did not discover until later that she was a woman. In 1872, following graduation, Ray opened her legal practice. When business did not prove lucrative, Ray returned to New York. From 1895 and onward, Ray remained active in the National Association of Colored Women. She succumbed to acute bronchitis on January 4, 1911.

According to Parker (2010), Lyda Burton Conley was the first Native American female attorney in the United States. Born in 1869, Conley was of Native American and European descent. She was the direct descendent of Wyandot tribe’s Chief Tarhe (Dayton, 1996). In 1909, Conley challenged the sale and development of Huron Place Cemetery in Kansas City, Kansas. Conley had a personal stake in the case, as her mother was buried in the cemetery. Her lawsuit against the Secretary of the Interior reached the U.S. Supreme Court, and she became the first Native American to argue her case



Lyda Conley

before the high court. Although she lost her case, Conley continued to defend the cemetery. In 1916, a bill was passed by Senator Charles Curtis that designated the burial ground as a federal park. Despite the bill's passing, Conley and her sisters stayed on the land and safeguarded the cemetery against any trespassers. She passed away on May 31, 1946, and was buried with her family at the Wyandot Burial Ground.



Elizabeth K. Ohi

According to Parker (2010), in June 1937, Elizabeth Kuma Ohi (referred to as K. Elizabeth Ohi in certain resources) became the first Japanese-American female attorney in the United States. She was born in Chicago, Illinois on February 9, 1911 to Sidney G. Ohi and Kate Larue Hicks. Ohi was the eldest child, and her siblings included brother Richard Ichiro and sisters Masa Larue and Keiko Mercelia. Her mother was Caucasian. Her father, who arrived in the United States from Japan in 1906, initially worked as a chemist before becoming a renowned designer for the Pullman Car Company (Parker, 2000). He passed away in 1932 after suffering a fatal slip on a sidewalk.

Pullman News (1928) announced Ohi's graduation as valedictorian from Pullman Free School of Manual Training (a 1932 issue mentioned that Keiko attended the same school). According to Kane (1975), Ohi was a valedictorian, and earned her LL.B. (1937) and J.D. (1938) from John Marshall Law School. She published the article "Whether a No-Action Clause of a Trust Deed or Mortgage Can Be Incorporated in a Bond or Note by Reference" in the *John Marshall Law Quarterly*, 2(2) (December 1936). She later published the article "New Food and Drug Legislation" in the aforementioned publication. Dubbed the "Nipponese Portia," in July 1937, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that Ohi was admitted to practice in Illinois' United States District Court. Ohi specialized in property law, and worked as a legal secretary and attorney for the law office of attorneys Max C. and Rebecca Liss.

She later became a legal secretary for future Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg. In the late 1930s, the FBI opened a file on Goldberg due to his legal representation of labor unions. Goldberg was classified as "left-wing" and placed on a list of citizens who would be detained during an enemy attack (Stebenne, 2013). However, on the eve of the Pearl Harbor attack, the detention order signed by J. Edgar Hoover for Goldberg was used on Ohi instead. She was released only after Goldberg threatened to file a habeas corpus petition on her behalf. According to Nakahara (1981), Ohi enlisted in the United States Navy after her release and worked as an ensign. A 1944 issue of the *Women Lawyers' Journal* stated that Ohi worked for the Budget Bureau (later named the Office of Management and Budget). She also worked as a Labor Department attorney (Parker, 2000). She passed away on August 14, 1976 in Washington, D.C.

Women such as Belva Lockwood had to fight for the right to practice. According to Willard and Livermore (1893), Lockwood (née Belva Ann Bennett) was born in Royalton, New York on October 24, 1830. She married Uriah H. McNall at eighteen years of age. Within a few years of marriage, Lockwood became a widow and a single parent to a young daughter. Lockwood returned to teaching upon her husband's death, and sold portions of his land to pay her tuition at Genesee College (now called Syracuse University) in Lima, New York. Upon graduating with honors in 1857, Lockwood became the head of Lockport Union School District. After serving for two years on the school district, Lockwood became the headmistress of Gainesville Female Seminary.



Belva Lockwood

In 1865, Lockwood relocated to Washington, D.C. Shortly after her relocation, she married Dr. Ezekiel Lockwood. She established a school for young ladies and became an outspoken advocate for women's rights (equal wages for women was amongst her causes). After completing her legal studies in May 1873, Lockwood was denied her diploma. She wrote a letter to President Ulysses S. Grant, and her diploma arrived a week later. In September 1873, Lockwood was admitted to the bar of the District of Columbia, and began her own legal practice—with her daughter Lura assuming secretarial duties. Upon learning that women must attain special permission to plead their cases before the U.S. Court of Claims, Lockwood petitioned Congress for legislative change. In 1879, Congress passed a law which allowed women the right to plead their case. Lockwood argued many cases before the U.S. Court of Claims. She was the legal counsel for Jim Taylor, a man that was suing the American government for money owed to his Cherokee tribe. After years of litigation, Lockwood successfully won the case and \$5 million was awarded to the Cherokee people. She passed away on May 19, 1917 after a forty-three year career.

Celebrated as the first female attorney in California, Clara Shortridge Foltz's life was both traditional and revolutionary. Foltz was born on July 16, 1849 in New Lisbon, Indiana. From 1860-1863, Foltz received a formal education at Howe's Female Seminary before eloping with Jeremiah Richard Foltz in 1864 (Biography Resource Center). By the time the couple settled in San Jose, California, Foltz had given birth to five children. It is believed that Foltz divorced her husband in 1879 and became a single parent (Schwartz, et. al, 1976).



Clara Shortridge Foltz

Since men were only allowed to practice law, Foltz wrote an amendment to Code of Civil Procedure §275 (Schwartz, et. al., 1976). With the help of suffragists, she convinced the California legislature to pass the amendment in April 1878. The amendment was entitled Senate Bill 66 or the Woman Lawyer's Bill (Schwartz, et. al., 1976). Despite being admitted to the state bar, Foltz still had to sue San Francisco's Hastings College of Law to gain admission (Schwartz, et. al. 1976; *Foltz v. Hoge*, 54 Cal. 28). After prevailing in her case, Foltz was soon admitted to the bar of the California Supreme Court in 1879. Additionally, Foltz became the first woman to become a clerk of the judiciary committee of the California Assembly.

In 1893, Foltz presented the idea of a public defender at the World's Fair in Chicago (Caldwell, 2013). She drafted a model statute not long afterwards, and campaigned for its introduction into state legislatures (Flaherty, 2011). In 1913, Los Angeles opened the first Public Defender's Office. Eight years later, California would adopt the Foltz Defender Bill (Flaherty, 2011). Foltz died on September 2, 1934, having had a career that included working as a deputy district attorney. Foltz's legacy still lives on. On February 8, 2002, the City of Los Angeles rededicated the Downtown Criminal Courts to be the Clara Shortridge Foltz Criminal Justice Center.



Annie Coker

Annie Coker (née Annie Virginia Stephens) has the distinction of being California's first African-American female attorney. According to McCarthy (2009), Coker was born on April 7, 1903 to William Morris and Pauline Logan Stephens in Oakland, California (Schiesl, 2015). As evidenced by a 1920 United States Federal Census, Coker and her family lived for a time in Monterey County, California. It is revealed in the same census that her father was born in Virginia, and her mother in California.

Upon receiving her Bachelor of Science degree from the University of California, Berkeley, Coker was encouraged by her father to attend Boalt Law School. In the male-dominated law school, Coker was one of two female students. She received her LL.B in 1929, and was admitted to the State Bar of California the same year (a 1930 United States Federal Census lists Coker's occupation as "attorney at law"). Unfortunately, her mother had passed away the same year on May 22nd (her father would later pass away on November 30, 1932).

Details about Coker's life are sparse, though it is known that she practiced law in Alexandria, Virginia for some time (McCarthy, 2008). Alameda County Superior Court Judge Brenda Harbin-Forte included details about Coker's life in her article "Black Women Pioneers in the Law" (*Historical Reporter*, Spring 1987). According to the Lingenfelter Archives (1998), Coker married twice: George Pendleton (first husband) and George Coker (second husband; he passed away on March 28, 1970). In her book *Rebels at the Bar: Voices in the History of Black Women Lawyers*, Smith (2000) does refer to Coker as "Mrs. Virginia Stephens Pendleton." Coker returned to California in 1939 and began working for Sacramento's State Office of Legislative Counsel. Among her responsibilities was indexing all pending bills and rendering legal opinions (Beitiks, 2002). Coker worked for twenty-seven years with the legislative counsel upon her retirement in 1966. She passed away on February 17, 1986 in Sacramento at the age of 83.



Emma Lum

Emma Ping Lum was the first Chinese-American woman to practice law in California (Yung, 1995) and the United States (Wong, 1961; Higgins, 1975). Lum was one of seven children (Wong, 2011). She was born on August 30, 1910 in San Francisco, California to civil rights activist Walter Uriah Lum (1882-1961) and Gum Young Lee (1885-1936). Walter U. Lum was not only the founder and managing editor of the *Chinese Times* (Kinnaird, 1966), but he also established the Chinese-American Citizens Alliance of the United States (Choy, 2013). In 1985, a street in San Francisco's Chinatown was renamed in his honor. Based on her father's background alone, it is understandable why Lum was such a trailblazer.

According to Kinnaird (1966), Lum studied Chinese throughout her formative years. In the *University of California Register, 1946-1947*, a section entitled “HASTINGS COLLEGE OF LAW—*The Degree of Bachelors of Law upon*” confirms that Lum passed the State Bar (pg. 7) in addition to stating that she received her A.B. from San Francisco State College (1934) and an M.A. from Columbia University (1943). A 1952 edition of the *Hastings Alumni Bulletin* states that Lum became the first Chinese-American female to practice before the United States Supreme Court (referenced also in *News Notes of California Libraries*, Vol. 73, No. 2, 1978). As of 1966, Lum had long established her general practice at 745 Grant Avenue in San Francisco, and she represented both American and Chinese clients (immigration law was amongst her specialties).

Due to her fluency in various Chinese dialects, Lum served in San Francisco’s Office of Censorship during WWII. She received a certificate of merit for her service (Kinnaird, 1966). As Kinnaird (1966) described, Lum was affiliated with the “California State Bar Association, San Francisco Bar Association, the Queen’s Bench, and Kappa Beta Phi legal sorority.” Lum traveled extensively to Europe, Cuba, and Hong Kong during the course of her career. She passed away in May 1989 (“In Memoriam” in *Hastings Community*, Winter 1990, references her passing).

According to the *California Bar Journal*, Chiyoko Sakamoto (1912-1994) holds the distinction of being the first female Japanese-American attorney in California. In 1938, at the age of 27, Sakamoto was admitted to practice law shortly after graduating from the American University, Washington College of Law in Los Angeles (Parker, 2010). According to a 1938 article in the *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, Sakamoto “studied law four years at night school while working as a secretary.” When her efforts to find a law firm position proved fruitless, Sakamoto worked as a legal assistant for a Japanese-American community leader that specialized in translation services (Beaton, 2012).



Chiyoko Sakamoto

During World War II, Sakamoto was imprisoned in an internment camp. Upon being released in February 1947 (Matsumoto, 2014), she had an even more difficult time finding employment. As Robinson (2012) described, Sakamoto’s plight caught the attention of Harvard-educated African-American attorney Hugh E. Macbeth, Sr.—a staunch defender of Japanese-Americans. With a law firm based in Los Angeles, Macbeth, Sr. hired Sakamoto as an associate and thereby helped launch her career. Matsumoto (2014) noted that Sakamoto was unique in that she worked for a non-Nisei law firm. Her colleagues nicknamed her “Chiyo” (Ringwald, 2015). She later opened her own law firm in Los Angeles, Little Tokyo and was one of the founders of the Japanese-American Bar Association and the California Women’s Bar (Parker, 2010). Retired Associate Justice Kathryn Doi Todd recollected that Sakamoto’s husband was a farmer in New Mexico, and that Sakamoto often commuted from Los Angeles to New Mexico (Lan, 2012). According to Ringwald (2015), the Sakamotos also had farms in California. Due to the managing of several farms, Sakamoto did not undertake as many cases. She passed away in 1994.



Eva M. Mack

Eva M. Mack, Esq. was another woman attorney trailblazer affiliated with Hugh MacBeth, Sr.’s law firm. Mack was born on May 10, 1913 in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and moved with her family to California in the 1920s. According to Lydia E. Ringwald, Mack’s eldest daughter, she was one of only six women that passed the California State Bar in 1938 (Ringwald, 2015). During the Depression, employment opportunities for attorneys (let alone for women) were scarce. Even after WWII, there were few prospects for women lawyers. However, MacBeth, Sr., the sole African-American attorney in Los Angeles, offered Mack a position at his office in Downtown Los Angeles.

Mack and Macbeth, Sr. were a successful team. She acted as co-counsel in a California Supreme Court case (*Davis v. Carter*, 1948) defending jazz musician Benny Carter against Edythe Davis (Brilliant, 2010). Carter had purchased a home in which the owners had signed an agreement that the occupants had to be of “the white or Caucasian race” (Brilliant, pg. 99). Davis sued the Carters because the African-American citizens did not meet the agreement’s racially discriminating criterion. During the trial, when the plaintiff’s attorney insisted on a limited definition of race, Mack overcame the overt racism with the rebuttal: “You and I are arguing about something that we as human beings do not know... what is white and what is black and what is negro [sic] and what is Caucasian” (Brilliant, pg. 100). Mack prevailed, earning the court’s ruling in favor of Carter. This important transitional case ultimately lead a

year later to the U.S. Supreme Court case *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which established that restrictive housing covenants were in direct violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause (Livermore, 1949).

Mack often commuted on behalf of clients to Baja, California to handle assorted cases (Robinson, 2015; Ringwald, 2015). Mack remained at the law firm until Macbeth, Sr.'s death in 1956. Even though there were more women attorneys by the mid-1950s, most still could not find positions in law firms. In 1956, according to a survey conducted by Harvard Law graduate Nancy Young "about the careers of thirty-four women in the Harvard Law School classes of 1953-1955," law firms objected to hiring women due to "client reaction and the expectation that women would marry and leave" (Bowman, 2009). A 1956 memo, issued by an unidentified law firm, explicitly stated that "Lady Lawyers" were not on equal terms with their male counterparts (Rubino, 2015). Thus, to overcome those obstacles, Mack built her own office and opened her own practice at 8200 South Broadway in South Central, Los Angeles.

Mack also promoted her career and the profession of women lawyers as an editor, journalist and actress. In 1957, Mack was one of the first women attorneys to appear on the popular reality television series *Divorce Court*. Her television appearances in episodes of *Divorce Court* from 1957-64 contributed to a greater public acceptance of women attorneys (Ringwald, 2016).

In addition to her law practice, Mack was also an instructor of business and family law at the Washington Adult School in Los Angeles (*Women Lawyers' Journal*, Spring 1958) and continued her work as an editor and journalist, engaging in international issues in 1959, when she presented her paper entitled "Function of Women in Promoting International Relations" at a National Association of Women Lawyers conference in Miami Beach, Florida.

A 1959 *Desert Sun* article announced that Mack would serve on a Southern California Women Lawyers panel to discuss the common legal mistakes in probate court. Thirty other women attorneys attended, among them Rosalind Goodrich Bates—a founding member of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA International Federation of Women Lawyers, 2013).

According to Endres & Lueck (1996), Mack served as the editor for the *Women Lawyer's Journal* from 1957-1958 and attended the International Conference of Lawyers in London, England under the auspices of the American Bar Association. During the conference, she and other women barristers met Queen Elizabeth, and visited judges and lawyers in the courts of various other European countries. In the 1940s and 1950s, because of the social stigma affecting working women, many female attorneys were often either single or married without children. Bowman (2009) cited the example of famed politician Dawn Netsch (née Clark) who, particularly during her time as an attorney for Covington & Burling (1952-1954), adopted the model of "marry late or not at all and never have children." Mack broke through this social barrier by maintaining a successful legal career while also raising three children. Her husband, Dr. Siegfried C. Ringwald served as a college administrator and President of Cerritos College before becoming an attorney in 1977 (Ringwald, 2015).

Despite her accomplishments, Mack was not immune to often overt prejudice against women attorneys. Her daughter Lydia Ringwald recalls that, in 1949, Mack had to appear before a judge to be awarded payment for her legal services. Since Mack was in the advanced stages of a pregnancy at the time of appearance, the judge only awarded her a fraction of what she deserved (Ringwald, 2015). Although much has changed for women lawyers since 1949, Mastro (2001) argued that pregnant litigators still experienced discrimination in the twenty-first century—which will hopefully vanish through the continued advocacy for women's rights.

When Mack passed away on August 18, 1977, the family asked her old friend "Chiyo" Sakamoto to handle her estate with her husband Dr. Ringwald until he passed the bar later that year. Mack's legacy carries on through her children, who have also all led extraordinary lives.

According to Keenan-Villanueva (2010), Mary Virginia Orozco (referred to as Maria V. Orozco in certain resources) is the "first Latina in California history to pass the State Bar in 1962" (pg. 1). In addition, Orozco has the distinction of being the first Latina to graduate from Loyola Law School in 1961 ("50 Inspirational Alumni," Loyola Law School). As one of five children, she was born in 1928 in Whittier, California to indigent Mexican immigrants. While attending Whittier High School, Orozco was selected to train as a legal secretary for a law firm. Later, upon completing her undergraduate studies in psychology at



Mary V. Orozco

CSU Los Angeles, Orozco attended law school while also working full-time to help support her family (Keenan-Villanueva, 2010).

As noted in the *Loyola Lawyer* (Fall 1994), after graduating from law school, Orozco wanted to set up her own legal practice in domestic, civil and criminal law. As with other female attorneys during the 1960s, Orozco's legal credentials were not taken seriously by her male counterparts. According to Keenan-Villanueva (2010), while trying to exit a courtroom, a bailiff mistakenly identified Orozco as a criminal defendant. On the verge of being restrained, Orozco was only allowed to leave after presenting written proof of her attorney status. In 1962, she became one of the founders of the Mexican American Bar Association (MABA; originally called the Mexican American Lawyers Club). Orozco was also a founding member for the Latina Lawyers Bar Association. In addition to her bar association affiliations, Orozco has been involved with the East Los Angeles Women's Center and other organizations.

Orozco later established the firm Orozco & Orozco with her twin brother Hector (who specialized in personal injury law). Although they eventually dissolved their partnership, they still maintained law offices adjacent to each other until her brother passed away in November 2007 (*In the Matter of Armand J. Pasano*, 2008). *Loyola Lawyer* (Fall 1994) stated that Orozco retired from the active practice of law in 1987. She was given a lifetime achievement award from MABA in 2011. Whenever she encountered discrimination in her career, Orozco often relied on the strength and values instilled by her father. In Orozco's own words, as quoted by Loyola Law School, "My life has always been one of destiny... and hard drive."



Eleanor Nisperos

According to Rodis (2007), when Filipino-American Eleanor Nisperos (née Oducayen) attended Boalt Law School in 1969, she "was the first-ever pinay at any law school in California." Upon passing the bar in 1972, Nisperos made history by becoming the first Filipino to be hired as a Deputy Attorney General in the California Attorney General's Office in Sacramento. Nisperos later became an Administrative Law Judge, and became the Chief Judge within her department. In 1981, Nisperos co-founded the Filipino Bar Association of Northern California and became its first president. In 2007, Nisperos retired after practicing law for thirty-five years.

The *California Bar Journal* stated that, in 1974, Abby Abinanti became the first Native American female attorney to practice law in California. Born in 1947 in San Francisco, Abinanti grew up in the Yurok Indian Reservation alongside California's Klamath River (Steinberger, 2014). Prior to attending the University of New Mexico School Of Law, Abinanti studied journalism at Humboldt State University. Over the course of her distinguished legal career, Abinanti developed the first tribal program to help members clear their criminal records. Since the 1990s, Abinanti has served as a commissioner for the San Francisco Superior Court. Since 2007, she has served as the Chief Judge of the Yurok Tribal Court.



Abby Abinanti

This piece only addresses a small number of women who have made tremendous contributions to the legal field. Women's Legal History Biography Project, developed by the Robert Crown Law Library staff at Stanford University, features the biographical information of numerous other female attorneys from across the United States.

To conclude, I leave you with a quote from Clara Shortridge Foltz:

*"I am descended from the heroic stock
of Daniel Boone and never shrank from
contest nor knew a fear.*

I inherit no drop of craven blood."

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