



“WOMEN BELONG IN ALL PLACES WHERE DECISIONS ARE BEING MADE.”

– Ruth Bader Ginsberg

Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



“HERE’S TO STRONG WOMEN: MAY WE KNOW THEM. MAY WE BE THEM. MAY WE RAISE THEM.”

– Michelle Obama

Public domain, via Wikipedia



“HOW WONDERFUL IT IS THAT NOBODY NEED WAIT A SINGLE MOMENT BEFORE STARTING TO IMPROVE THE WORLD.”

– Anne Frank

Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The Times, They Have Changed

Dorothy Chambers

Women Lawyers Before World War II

For Women’s History Month, last year’s March *Bar Briefs* recounted some of the stories of pre-WWII women lawyers. The few women who were admitted as lawyers were lucky to acquire a job as a legal secretary. At that time, one woman lawyer was told she could not go to ABA functions. She went anyway.

https://www.loubar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Bar-Briefs_March25_web.pdf.

A Shifting Landscape: The Surge of Women in Law

In 2026, women lawyers continue to defy expectations. It’s fair to say, the times, “they are a’ changing.” Before the 1970s, less than five percent of lawyers were women. In the 1970s and 1980s, a great surge of women entered the legal profession.

I, and many of my friends, were part of that “great surge.” Here are some of our stories.

Personal Stories of Women Lawyers

One top-tier graduate went looking for a legal job in Louisville in 1977, only to be told the firm was hoping to hire their “first woman lawyer.” Although she was a top graduate with substantive work experience, she was asked if there were any women with a higher class-ranking. When she acknowledged there was one woman who ranked higher in their class, the interviewer abruptly terminated the interview.

A woman lawyer at a law firm in Louisville was akin to a black swan. There could only be one.

This same lawyer persisted and sent her resume to other major Louisville firms. One firm wrote back that they were not hiring. Two weeks later, that same firm posted a notice they were recruiting. When confronted with this inconsistency, the firm apologized for their “clerical error” and then proceeded to ask if she was married and had children. She was and did. She was not hired.

A Watershed Moment in Legal Education

UofL’s law school class of 1977 was a watershed year.

“Before we enrolled in 1974 there had never been more than five or six women students. My class had an enrollment of 53 women that August of 1974. They didn’t know what to do with us. Many of us were married or single mothers. The one women’s restroom was ridiculously small. The slights to women litigants in the case law was profound.”

Alternative Paths and New Opportunities

Some women came to the law as a second career, as former legal secretaries. They found their prelaw background essential to finding judicial clerkships and in-house positions.

“Were it not for my ‘legal’ background before and during law school, I am certain the judicial clerkships and the subsequent in-house roles would not have come so easily my way. I witnessed the challenges of so many of my women classmates and other women I knew in the legal field, stellar students, challenged to set their careers in gear.”

Experiences in the Field

Some came to Louisville after having substantial legal experience elsewhere, only to be treated as an oddity:

“I was sent to argue a motion in a rural county. Upon

entering the courthouse, I realized I had an audience: the staircase was crowded with clerks and probably local attorneys eager to see the first ‘girl’ attorney make an appearance there.”

Another woman lawyer (later a judge and mediator) who moved to Louisville remembers her interview with a large law firm:

“I had already passed the California and Kentucky bars. During the awkward interview I was asked what my father did. I answered ‘Why? He isn’t looking for a job.’ And so ended my big firm legal career.”

Shifting Careers and Opening Doors

Some women eventually entered other careers after judicial clerkships and in-house positions. One such lawyer explained her decision:

“I founded an executive search firm in Louisville specializing in legal and financial executive positions. I recruited many general counsel and staff attorney positions for many Louisville companies and organizations. Most of these companies were keen to have me present women candidates for consideration, and indeed many did hire a woman for these roles during the 1985 to 1995 timeframe of my firm’s existence.”

One of her women recruits notes:

“I was fortunate to be one of the women recruited! In 1990 I was hired as VP-General Counsel of a large health care company. I will always be grateful to “The Law” and the career opportunities it opened for me!”

Progress and Persistent Barriers

As a part of the “great surge,” one woman recounted:

“I arrived at Georgetown Law School in the mid-1970s, pleased to find approximately half of my classmates were women. In 1979, after graduating *magna cum laude* and member of the Editorial Staff of Georgetown Law Journal, I had several offers from top law firms in major cities.

But upon moving to Louisville, I was told by the major firms here, they either were not hiring or already had ‘their one woman lawyer.’ Luckily for me, a federal district court

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judge hired me as his first woman law clerk. After two years in that position, I readily found a place at a major Louisville law firm.”

To some extent the times had changed. Law firms realized they could employ more than one woman lawyer without pandemonium or “hen parties” ensuing.

Women Ascend to the Judiciary

It was only a matter of time before women occupied judicial positions. Olga Peers, having graduated from UofL School of Law in 1951 and after many years of practicing law, is generally recognized as the first woman appointed to the old Louisville Police Court in 1972. (However, Wikipedia reports the first woman judge in Kentucky was Kathleen Mulligan in 1928. *List of first women lawyers and judges in Kentucky - Wikipedia.*)

After the courts were reformed, in 1978 Peers was elected as a District Court Judge. Judge Peers later became the first woman to serve as a Circuit Court Judge and remained in that position until her retirement in 1990. See SR 148; see also, UofL Interview 4/41993 Interview with Judge Peers. <https://ohc.library.louisville.edu/subjects/622>.

Another trailblazer for women jurists, Ellen Ewing was one of the first women elected to the bench on Jefferson County’s juvenile court in 1978. *University of Louisville Oral History Center.* The Honorable Judge Ewing eventually became Chief Circuit Judge. In 1990, the LBA awarded her a richly deserved honor, “Judge of the Year.”

Women Judges’ Impact

From first-hand experience, women lawyers who appeared before both Judge Peers and Judge Ewing report they witnessed both judges’ brilliant intellect, even-handedness and judicial temperament on the bench:

“It was a pleasure and honor to appear in front of them and litigate in their courtrooms.”

Political Progress and Appointments

Just as women in legal recruiting positions helped other women in the legal profession, there were some giants in politics, such as Governor Paul Patton, (D) (serving 1995 to 2003). Governor Patton appointed a record number of women to the Kentucky judiciary.

Governor Patton truly was a trailblazer, appointing 29 women to judicial positions, a full 41% of his appointments. The previous high was 17%.

Governor Patton appointed more women and minorities to the bench than any other governor in Kentucky at that time, and more women to judicial positions during his first term than all the previous Kentucky governors combined.

See Miller, Penny M. (1996) “Staking Their Claim: The Impact of Kentucky Women in the Political Process,” *Kentucky Law Journal*: Vol. 84: Iss. 4, Article 14. Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj/vol84/iss4/14>.

Justice Lisabeth Hughes, Justice Sara Walter Combs, Justice Pamela Goodwine, Judge Judith McDonald-Burkman, Judge Denise Clayton, Judge Karen Conrad and Judge Joan Byer are just some of the stellar jurists who were appointed to the courts by Governor Patton.

Modern Shifts and Remaining Challenges

The times continue to change for women lawyers and the profession. Three years ago, for the first time, women surpassed men as law firm associates. Women now are also the majority in law schools.

Nevertheless, despite the influx of women in law schools and the profession, according to the ABA, “men still dominate the upper echelons of the legal profession through federal judgeships, state supreme courts, law firm partnerships and corporate counsel positions.” See “Women in the Legal Profession” American Bar Association.

There still is a way to go before women lawyers are fully accepted in the profession. Women lawyers report more dissatisfaction in how they are treated at law firms, such as a lack of recognition and opportunities for advancement. Fifty percent of women at law firms also reported sexual harassment. One in four feared retaliation if harassment was reported.

According to the ABA report on Women in the Law, male lawyers still greatly outnumber women lawyers. If current trends continue, it will be two decades before women hold equal numbers nationwide in the profession.

Kentucky may take even longer for parity in the profession. While 41% of lawyers nationwide are women, our Commonwealth is playing catchup; only 37% of Kentucky lawyers are women.

Conclusion

Women have come a long way in the legal profession. As Bob Dylan, the poet laureate of this generation of women, sings:

“The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast
The slowest now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin’
And the first one now will later be last
Cause the times, they are a-changin’”
Song by Bob Dylan, 1964

Dorothy J. Chambers, traveler, free-lance writer and grandma, is a member of the LBA Communications Committee. ■



“THERE IS NO FORCE MORE POWERFUL THAN A WOMAN DETERMINED TO RISE.”

– W.E.B. Du Bois



“WE CANNOT ALL SUCCEED WHEN HALF OF US ARE HELD BACK.”

– Malala Yousafzai



“IF THEY DON’T GIVE YOU A SEAT AT THE TABLE, BRING A FOLDING CHAIR.”

– Shirley Chisholm