

Arabella (Belle) Babb Mansfield, of Mount Pleasant, Iowa, passed the bar exam on June 15, 1869 to become the first woman licensed to practice law in the United States.

Belle was born in Sperry, Iowa in 1846. Her mother, having heard that Mount Pleasant had excellent schools, moved the family to Mount Pleasant when Belle was a child. In 1866, Belle graduated from Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant. The following year, she began studying law with her brother in the Ambler Law Office. In June 1868, she married John Mansfield, a professor of science at Iowa Wesleyan.

Belle never practiced law in the traditional sense. It is likely that she was too involved with teaching and women's issues at the time. Throughout her career, not only was she a professor at Iowa Wesleyan College, Simpson College and DePauw University, but Belle was a strong advocate of women's voting rights. In the fall of 1869, she joined the executive committee of the National Woman Suffrage Association. The following spring, she became president and chair of the first Iowa state-wide woman suffrage convention, held in Mount Pleasant.

During the early 1870's, Belle traveled extensively in Europe observing the courts of London, and studying law in France. In the summer of 1893, Belle addressed the National League of Women Lawyers at the Chicago World's Fair, where she was officially acknowledged as the first woman to be admitted to the

bar in the U.S. After enjoying a long and successful career as an educator, public orator, world traveler, art historian, and journalist, Belle Babb Mansfield passed away in 1911, at age 64.

Honors

- The National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) presents an annual Arabella Babb Mansfield Award, the organization's highest honor, given in recognition of professional achievement, positive influence, and valuable contribution to women in the law and in society.
- Belle Babb Mansfield was inducted into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame by Governor Robert Ray and the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women on August 21, 1980.
- The Iowa Organization of Women Attorneys established an annual Arabella Mansfield Award in 2002.
- The Belle Babb Mansfield memorial room was established in 1969 in Chadwick Library on the Iowa Wesleyan College campus.

The Office of the First Lady of Iowa, Iowa Wesleyan College, the Iowa Organization of Women Attorneys, and southeast Iowa community leaders, have set a preliminary fund-raising goal of \$250,000 to go toward:

• Commemorative Statue

The creation of a bronze statue of Belle Babb Mansfield to be placed on the Iowa Wesleyan campus in Mount Pleasant (estimated cost: \$100,000).

• Mansfield Symposium

An endowment for the Belle Babb Mansfield Symposium to be held at Iowa Wesleyan College beginning in 2006. The annual event will host high profile and nationally recognized speakers to honor and highlight the accomplishments of women and to encourage their professional empowerment (estimated cost: \$150,000).

I grew up in Mount Pleasant knowing nothing about Belle Babb Mansfield. I want girls growing up here to know that women can do and be anything they choose. I want young women who consider attending Iowa Wesleyan College to know that this community has always nurtured women who achieve. I want student-athletes who compete at the College, children riding their bikes to school, and visitors from far away who come to Mount Pleasant to learn about Belle Babb Mansfield.

—Christie Vilsack, First Lady of Iowa

Belle Babb Mansfield

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Belle Babb Mansfield



ca. 1876

*First woman admitted to the Bar
in the United States in 1869*

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