

Arabella (Belle) Babb Mansfield, First Certified Female Attorney in the United States

Arabella “Belle” Babb Mansfield was born on August 23, 1846 in Des Moines County, Iowa. Her family moved to Mount Pleasant, Iowa, in 1860 when her father died. She graduated from Iowa Wesleyan College in 1866. She studied law for two years at her brother’s law office. Ms. Mansfield passed a rigorous bar examination administered by the all-male members of the Henry County Bar Association in 1869, thus becoming the first certified woman attorney in the United States. As a result of Ms. Mansfield passing the examination, Iowa state law was changed to allow women to practice law.

She never practiced law in the traditional sense. Instead she enjoyed a long and successful career as an educator, public orator, world traveler, art historian and journalist. Ms. Mansfield was also a pioneer in the Iowa Suffrage movement, chairing the first Iowa Suffrage Association state convention in 1870, held in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. She was the group’s first secretary and campaigned for equal educational opportunities for women as well as voting rights. She was also active in drafting the Constitution for the Henry County Woman Suffrage Association.

Ms. Mansfield also traveled with her husband to England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, Austria and Scotland. She attended classes and observed different courts of law during her travels. She also was on the faculty of Iowa Wesleyan College, Simpson College and DePauw University. She died in 1911 at the age of 65 and is buried at Forest Home Cemetery in Mount Pleasant.

This profile was written by was written by Kristen Corey, Office on the Status of Women and Mary Elgar, Mount Pleasant

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