



Women's History Month Feature

# Women Lawyers and Judges Making Pennsylvania History

By Kathleen D. Wilkinson

In 1987, Congress declared March National Women's History Month. Since women began entering law school in the 1860s, women lawyers and judges have been making history in Pennsylvania. According to the *ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2024 – Women in the Legal Profession*, as more male lawyers retire from the practice of law, women lawyers are finally achieving greater representation in the legal profession.

## Statistics

According to the American Bar Association (ABA) 2024 Profile, 41 percent of lawyers in the United States are women. The report notes that while 56.2 percent of law school students are women, only 28 percent of partners in law firms were women. The ABA report notes that Pennsylvania ranks as the sixth largest state in number of lawyers, at 47,519, with women comprising 38.4 percent of lawyers in the commonwealth. The *Pennsylvania Bar Association (PBA) Commission on Women in the Profession (WIP) 29th Report Card (2023-24)* corroborates that number, stating that women lawyers comprise 39.6 percent of Pennsylvania's attorney population. The WIP Report Card has a section on women by gender and race and/or ethnicity, shown below:

Race/Ethnicity	Male	Female	Prefer Not to Answer	TOTAL	%
White or Caucasian	36,663	22,722	1	59,386	80.06 %
Black or African American	1,381	2,076	1	3,458	4.66 %
Asian	871	1,105	0	1,976	2.66 %
Hispanic or Latino	675	699	0	1,374	1.85 %
American Indian or Alaskan Native	144	123	0	267	0.36 %
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	41	41	0	82	0.11 %
Other	346	271	1	618	0.83 %
Prefer Not to Answer	4,720	2,263	35	7,018	9.46 %
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>44,841</b>	<b>29,300</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>74,179</b>	
<b>%</b>	<b>60.45 %</b>	<b>39.50 %</b>	<b>0.05 %</b>		
*More Than One Race and/or Ethnicity Identified	487	541	0	1,028	

**Gender and Race and/or Ethnicity of All Registered Pennsylvania Attorneys.**

\*The data provided in this row reflects the number of attorneys who identified more than one race and/or ethnicity. The underlying selections for these attorneys are reflected in the respective categories above.

The ABA Commission on Women in the Profession has highlighted persistent racial and gender disparities, particularly for women of color, who comprise 13 percent of associates but fewer than 3.5 percent of partners and only 2 percent of equity partners, a percentage that has remained unchanged for two decades.

### **Earliest Women Lawyers**

In 1648, Margaret Brent of Maryland became the first woman lawyer in the United States. The ABA created an award in her name for women attorneys.

In Pennsylvania, women lawyers and judges have made their mark. There are many women to acknowledge for their “firsts,” but here are a few highlights.

Although she initially was denied admission to the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Dr. Caroline Burnham Kilgore was the first woman to become a Pennsylvania lawyer, in 1883, and the first woman admitted to the Supreme Court of the United States.

In 1921, Dr. Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander was among the first three Black women in the United States to obtain a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. In the fall of 1924, she entered the University of Pennsylvania Law School and was the first Black woman to graduate from that institution, as well as the first Black woman admitted to the Pennsylvania bar, in 1927. She worked for her husband’s law firm, became a Philadelphia city solicitor and was later appointed a Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas judge.

In 1994, the PBA WIP created an award named after Anne X. Alpern, the first woman to hold the positions of Pennsylvania attorney general (1959-61) and justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court (1961-62).

Juanita Kidd Stout was appointed to the Philadelphia Municipal Court in 1959 and later served on the Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas. With her appointment to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1988, she became the first Black woman justice to serve on any state Supreme Court. Justice Stout’s name is memorialized on the Criminal Justice Center in Philadelphia, the building renamed in her honor in 2012.

In the federal courts, there have been many trailblazers. Norma Shapiro, who was very active in the WIP, was the first woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. She had been in line to become the first woman chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association when she accepted the nomination to the court in 1978. In 1979, Sylvia Rambo became the first woman to serve on the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania, and first chief judge, serving until 2024. Her name is now on the new federal courthouse in Harrisburg. In 1982, Carol Los Mansmann was the first woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania and, in 1985, she was elevated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

### **Women Judges As Leaders**

The first woman chief justice of Pennsylvania in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s 300-year history, Debra Todd, was sworn in on Oct. 1, 2022. She was elected to the Supreme Court in 2007, after serving on the Superior Court from 2000-07. In 2024, for the first time, all three Pennsylvania appellate court president judges were women: Chief Justice Todd, Superior Court President Judge Anne Lazarus and Commonwealth Court President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer.

When asked what is like to be the chief justice, Chief Justice Todd stated: “It is an honor and a privilege to serve as the



“... in striving for success, there is no reason to be anything other than who you are in order to make it in what is, admittedly, a tough profession ...”

**Chief Justice of  
Pennsylvania  
Debra Todd**



“Being the face of the judiciary these days demands introspection and understanding.”

Superior Court  
President Judge  
Anne Lazarus

chief justice of Pennsylvania. We do live in politicized and polarizing times. However, I always remind the public that we are not Republican or Democrat justices. We are justices of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and politics are not a part of our decision-making.”

When asked for advice for women entering the legal profession, she said: “Many years ago, when I chose to enter the legal profession, it was a man’s world. Thankfully, that has changed, and women are now law firm partners, general counsel, judges and Supreme Court justices. That is not news to you. But I want to point out that in striving for success, there is no reason to be anything other than who you are in order to make it in what is, admittedly, a tough profession where assertiveness and tenacity reign supreme. You can be tough without being a bully. You can be kind without being weak. There was a book published in 2004 entitled *Nice Girls Don’t Get the Corner Office*. Well, as the first female chief justice of Pennsylvania, I am here to tell you that ‘Nice girls *do* get the corner office.’”

Chief Justice Todd observed that when she became an attorney in the early 1980s, it was not common to see women lawyers in the courtroom. She practiced as a trial lawyer and a commercial litigator for 18 years before her judicial career. She commented, “My biggest challenge as a young woman lawyer was knowing that some male lawyers, and even judges, tended to underestimate me. I addressed that challenge by working hard, winning cases and proving them wrong.”

Superior Court President Judge Anne Lazarus, in addressing her role presiding over the busiest appellate court in Pennsylvania, said, “On the Superior Court, the president judge [PJ] is elected, and the elections have, in the past, been somewhat contested. I made it a point to meet with each and every colleague and let them

know why I wanted to be the PJ, and what I hoped to accomplish.” She further stated, “Being the face of the judiciary these days demands introspection and understanding. The state judiciary is probably the one place that will stand for the rule of law.”

She explained, “I still only have one vote among the 13 other Superior Court judges. But since I was unanimously elected, I do have some sway. I find that I am constantly reminding my colleagues of the value of collegiality and respect for each other’s positions. In addition, as the face of our court, I am always mindful of ethical considerations, budgetary constraints and efficiency. It is a balancing act, to be sure.”

Being a Superior Court president judge brings challenges. President Judge Lazarus observed: “I face vacancies that impact the workload of each judge, budgets that are, for the most part, salaries, aging equipment, and recently, security issues that we have rarely had to deal with in years gone by. In my first week as PJ, we were the victim of a cyberattack.”

President Judge Lazarus believes “social media is of great concern,” as is artificial intelligence. She also is the go-to person for each judge when they have a problem, and her colleagues like to call her first even though she has a wonderful staff. The Superior Court currently has 12 women judges, two male judges and three senior male judges.

Commonwealth Court President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer notes that she presides over a court “unlike other courts; we are both an appellate and trial court. We are unique in the country.” See “How the Commonwealth Court Is Prepping for the 2024 Election Season,” *Legal Intelligence*, March 18, 2024. The Commonwealth Court is also unique in the number of women on the bench, with seven women judges, two senior women judges and two male judges,

and in its handling of litigation involving commonwealth entities and appeals from state agencies.

Theresa Ficken Sachs was appointed counsel to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 2019 after serving as shareholder and co-chair of the appellate group at Marshall Dennehey. She says she feels “lucky to be in my current role at a time when I can look to so many amazing women who have achieved the status of firsts.” She notes that upon law school graduation in 1984, “Women made up nearly half of my law school class, and I assumed that my time in practice would continue to reflect that balance, yet over time, the proportion of women active in the practice of litigation noticeably decreased.”

Sachs credits women like Chief Justice Todd, President Judge Lazarus and President Judge Cohn Jubelirer for reversing that decline. She says, “They exhibit not just professional excellence, but a distinct commitment to high visibility in the legal community. They have truly led by example, and their many successes have demonstrated to all of us what is possible.”

### Women in Law Firm Leadership Roles

Women lawyers hold many law firm management roles today. Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, with headquarters in Philadelphia, has been led by Jami McKeon since 2014. McKeon spoke about being a leader at one of the country’s largest law firms at a PBA Large Law Firm CLE Program in 2023: “Leadership starts with being a truly outstanding lawyer, development of your skills, delivery of exceptional client services and the development of a practice.” She said, “Being a respected member of your organization is job No. 1. A lot of good things flow from others having the opportunity to see you as terrific in whatever role you occupy. In my case, it was being a trial lawyer. But whatever kind of

law you practice, your first and most important job, should you ever aspire to leadership, is being outstanding at what you do.” See “Firm Leadership Begins With Being a Good Lawyer, Seizing Opportunities,” *Pennsylvania Bar News*, Dec. 18, 2023.

### Women Bar Leaders

The number of women holding leadership roles in bar associations continues to grow. Roberta Cooper Ramo, a New Mexico lawyer, was the first woman to serve as the ABA president, in 1995. Paulette Brown, a New Jersey lawyer, became the first woman of color to lead the ABA, in 2015.

In the PBA, Leslie Miller was the first woman president, followed by Gretchen Mundorff, Sara Austin, Sharon López (the first Latina president), Anne John, myself and Nancy Conrad. In May 2025, Kristen Hamilton will be the 8th woman PBA president. As of January 2025, 12 women chancellors will have led the Philadelphia Bar Association, and the Allegheny County Bar will have been led by 11 women presidents. Across Pennsylvania, the number of women presidents of county bars continues to grow.

PBA President Nancy Conrad, a partner at the White & Williams LLP Lehigh Valley office, served as the president of the Bar Association of Lehigh County, a woman governor on the PBA Board of Governors and held other bar leadership roles. She offered the following advice to women lawyers:

Your journey in the profession of law will be a long one with many twists and turns. Consider the following practices:

- Work hard, attend to the details and produce quality work.
- Identify a trusted mentor who can provide an objective view, kind support and wise counsel.
- Show respect to all, no matter the circumstance.

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“... try and spend less time stressing and more time living. That is my advice to my younger self.”

Stephanie Latimore,  
assistant director,  
Legislative  
Reference Bureau  
of Pennsylvania

- Be available and set proper boundaries to maintain your well-being.
- Define your path to success and enjoy it all.

Stephanie Latimore, assistant director of the Legislative Reference Bureau of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, is the current woman governor to the PBA Board of Governors. She has held many leadership positions in the Pennsylvania and Dauphin County bar associations, including on the Minority Bar Committee and the Commission on Women in the Profession. Latimore advises women entering the profession, “It will all work out [...] try and spend less time stressing and more time living. That is my advice to my younger self.” For women attorneys of color, Latimore recommends “finding an environment that you can thrive in, not just any position.” In describing the biggest changes she has seen in her over 33 years in the profession, she says, “We started in an era when I believe we felt like we had to do it all to be successful and accomplished in our careers. Now [...] I see us accepting help and putting our mental health first. We are no longer afraid to say no! We take advantage of the technology and services out there to make

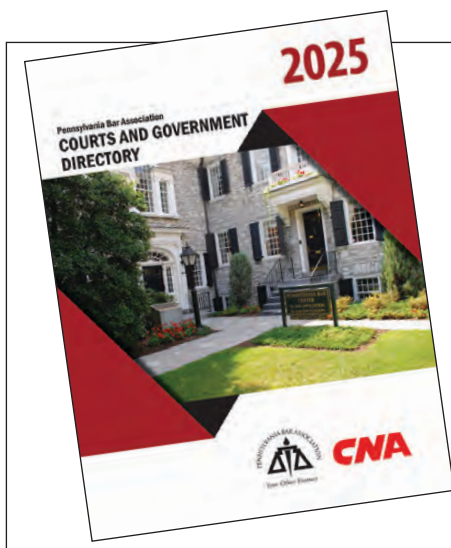
our load a little lighter.” She also counsels that as women attorneys, “we insist that there is room at the table for us and that we speak up.”

Women have made and continue to make excellent contributions in the legal profession and in the judiciary. There are many women lawyers and judges who are role models through their actions and words and who demonstrate outstanding leadership. We all should aspire to their examples of professionalism and civility. Bar associations will continue to play an important role in helping women lawyers succeed while trying to balance quality of life, wellness and well-being. ☒



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