

# Lavinia Goodell's Eternal Legacy

**Lavinia Goodell's pioneering spirit and persistence paved the way for thousands of Wisconsin women to enter the legal profession and become not just lawyers but also judges and even Wisconsin Supreme Court justices.**

BY CHIEF JUSTICE ANNETTE KINGSLAND ZIEGLER

June 17, 2024, marks the 150th anniversary of Lavinia Goodell becoming the first woman admitted to practice law in Wisconsin. Her admission garnered well-deserved national attention at the time, but looking back from our vantage point her achievement is all the more impressive and improbable.

**The strategy that led to [Goodell] opening the legal profession to Wisconsin women can serve as an example for anyone embarking on a bold undertaking.**

Goodell's family was not affluent. Unlike some early women lawyers whose husbands were also lawyers, she had no role model close at hand and made all of her own decisions. The strategy

that led to her opening the legal profession to Wisconsin women can serve as an example for anyone embarking on a bold undertaking. Let's consider how she was able to succeed.

First, Goodell dreamed big. She broached the thought of becoming a lawyer in the late 1850s, nearly 10 years before the United States had its first female attorney.

Next, she set a goal and worked tirelessly to achieve it. She began her legal studies soon after moving to Janesville in 1871. She routinely read law books four, five, or six hours each day. She studied even when she wasn't feeling well. When a bad cold affected her eyes, she enlisted her father to read 40-50 pages of legal treatises to her daily so she would not fall behind.

In addition, when Goodell encountered roadblocks, she always found a way around them. Janesville law firms would not employ her as a clerk, but they did lend her law books, answer her questions, entrust her with copying work, and occasionally even put her in charge of the office in their absence. Although she was

disappointed that they would not offer her a formal position, she made the most of the opportunities that did come her way.

Finally, Goodell was always thinking several steps ahead. She had hoped to be admitted to practice in the summer of 1874, but it was not clear until the afternoon of June 17 that Judge Harmon Conger would allow her to be examined. If Conger balked, she planned to seek admission in other county circuit courts. If that failed, she would have a bill introduced in the Wisconsin Legislature. She said, "I am bound to get in if I climb up the roof and go down the chimney."

Goodell's pioneering spirit and her refusal to let anyone stand in the way of her goal paved the way for thousands of Wisconsin women to enter the legal profession and become not just lawyers but also judges and even justices of the Wisconsin Supreme Court. I wonder what Goodell would say if she knew that six of the seven seats on the court that initially denied her admission in 1876 are now occupied by women. I suspect she would be both stunned and rightfully proud.

All women lawyers stand on Lavinia Goodell's shoulders and are greatly in her debt.

Well done, Lavinia. Well done. **WL**



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