

Closing the Celebration but Continuing the Evolution:

150 Years of Wisconsin Women in the Law

We've come a long way since Lavinia Goodell became Wisconsin's first woman lawyer in 1874. But we can do better. Let's harness the energy and joy of these anniversary celebrations and link arms with our colleagues to move forward.

BY MARY E. BURKE

As 2024 closes, so do our commemorations of the 150th anniversary of Lavinia Goodell's admission to practice law in Rock County and the ensuing 150 years of Wisconsin women lawyers. The State Bar of Wisconsin, specialty and local bar associations, the Wisconsin Supreme Court, and many other offices and individuals have collaborated to recognize these milestones. Reenactments, speeches, displays, stickers and buttons, a continuing legal education program at the State Bar's Annual Meeting & Conference, *Wisconsin Lawyer* articles, and renaming the State Law Library acknowledged these significant anniversaries. Much has been accomplished, but more remains to be done.

Since 1874, when Attorney Goodell was admitted to practice law in Rock County, there has been tremendous progress. Six of the seven Wisconsin Supreme Court justices now are women, including the third woman chief justice. Ten of the 16 Wisconsin Court of Appeals judges now are women, including the chief judge. The numbers of women circuit court judges and court commissioners, municipal judges, administrative law judges, federal judges and magistrate judges, elected officials, lawyers, and law students all exhibit continuous growth and diversity. Some women are well known for their legal accomplishments; others quietly made their way.

This historic progress is not only a story of numbers, however. Substantive legal issues affecting women have evolved in family law, employment, criminal law, property rights, and many other areas. Women lawyers often have led the way.

To learn more about Attorney Goodell, Wisconsin women lawyers, and legal issues affecting women, visit lavinagoodell.com and "Women in Wisconsin Law: A Historical Timeline" at <https://wilawlibrary.gov/topics/legalprof/wiwomenlaw.html>.

In direct or subtle ways, some women lawyers continue to be dismissed, discounted, ignored, or excluded. The climates in many courts and practice settings have improved – but we can do better. Let's harness the energy and joy of these anniversary celebrations to keep moving forward.

There is no one way to be a good lawyer, and there are many ways to contribute to the continued evolution of our profession. Share your story, and those of other lawyers you know, to provide examples and role models. Be a mentor; the State Bar and many firms and specialty and local bar associations offer formal or informal mentoring programs. Speak up when something isn't right. Encourage and support women lawyers. Acknowledge and celebrate their success. Just as we all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, let's link arms with our colleagues of today. Let's continue to follow Lavinia Goodell's brave example. As we say in Wisconsin, "Forward!" **WL**



Mary E. Burke, U.W. 1989, retired in 2022 after 33 years in private practice and state service. She helped organize the commemorative events of the 150-year anniversary of Wisconsin women in the law.
attmaryburke@gmail.com