

WOMEN'S HISTORY SPOTLIGHT

A Civics In Real Life Series

FEMALE FIRSTS

BELVA LOCKWOOD



It took 103 years after the nation's founding before women became eligible to practice law before the [United States Supreme Court](#). The woman responsible for overcoming this gender barrier was [Belva Lockwood](#). Lockwood believed in the power of education as a means of societal advancement for women and championed women's rights. She was a teacher, principal, and [seminarian](#). Widowed at a young age, she raised her daughter for 15 years as the family's sole provider before marrying Ezekiel Lockwood in 1868. After moving to Washington D.C., Belva Lockwood was accepted to the National University Law School (today [George Washington University Law School](#)) in 1871. After successfully completing her studies in 1873, the university refused to award her a diploma. Outraged, Belva Lockwood appealed the law school's decision directly to President [Ulysses S. Grant](#), the [ex officio](#) president of the university, who agreed with her and ordered the law school to award her the diploma. Upon receiving her diploma, Lockwood [applied to several state bars](#) to be eligible to practice law. The District of Columbia Bar accepted her application and admitted her to practice law. However, the Maryland Bar denied her application, with the judge overseeing the process stating, "God himself had determined women were not equal to men and never could be". Beyond the challenges of being admitted to any bar because she was a woman, practicing law was even more difficult. For example, in 19th century society, Lockwood's [legal status](#) as a married woman meant that she did not have the right to enter contracts or earn money unless her husband permitted it. Despite these prejudices, Lockwood opened a law practice in Washington D.C. As she was practicing law in the nation's capital and had met all of the criteria for doing so (be in practice for at least three years and acquire a sponsor), she decided to apply for admission to the Bar of the U.S. Supreme Court. Despite being qualified, Belva Lockwood was denied entry because she was female. Reminiscent of her law school days, Lockwood refused to give up, and drafted a bill, nicknamed the "Lockwood Bill," that would allow qualified women the right to practice law in federal courts and be granted access to Bar of the U.S. Supreme Court. Her legislation was introduced in Congress in 1874, and because of her lobbying efforts over the next five years, her [bill passed](#) in 1879. It was signed into law by [President Rutherford B. Hayes](#), and shortly after, Belva Lockwood became the first woman admitted to the Bar of the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1880, she became the [first woman](#) to argue a case before it in *Kaiser v. Stickney*. In her second case, *United States v. Cherokee Nation* (1906), she represented the Cherokee Nation and winning for them one of the largest financial settlements (\$5 million dollars, over \$16 billion in today dollars) awarded a Native American tribe for land ceded to the national government. In addition to these "female firsts", Belva Lockwood also ran for president in 1884 and 1888 as the [National Equal Rights Party](#) candidate. She is often cited as being the first woman to run for president, despite Victoria Woodhull's run in 1872, because Woodhull did not meet the [constitutional age requirement](#) to be U.S. president when she ran. For the remainder of her life, Belva Lockwood used the law to fight for women's suffrage, equal pay for equal work, legal reforms regarding women's rights, and world peace. Thanks to Belva Lockwood's tenacity, one in three lawyers today are women. Six women have served on the U.S. Supreme Court of whom four [currently](#) serve on this esteemed body.

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First woman admitted to practice law in your state:



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