

Louise Rebecca Pinnell: Florida First Woman Lawyer **Celebrate 100 Years of Women in the Florida Law**

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Nineteen hundred ninety-eight is an important year in women's history, because it marks the 150th anniversary of the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. This year is particularly significant for women lawyers in Florida, because it saw the second woman appointed to the Florida Supreme Court, Justice Barbara Pariente, and the second woman sworn in as President-Elect of The Florida Bar, Edith Osman. It is fitting that women are making such great strides this year in Florida's legal profession, because 1998 also marks a special anniversary in women's legal history. It is the 100th anniversary of the first woman being admitted to practice law in the state of Florida and that woman is Louise Rebecca Pinnell.

Until recently, little has been known about Florida's first woman lawyer. Louise Pinnell was born in Cuba, Missouri, on March 31, 1877. She was one of five children born to Ethan Allen and Frances Collier Pinnell, and she enjoyed a rich ancestral history. On her father's side, she had a Revolutionary War veteran. Her own father, who served as a captain in the Confederate Army, fought against his father, a captain for the Union Army, during the Civil War. The family name was originally spelled "Pinel," and distinguished French physician Philippe Pinel, who was the first to introduce humane treatment of the insane in France, was her ancestor.¹ On her mother's side, she descended from Jeremy Collier, an English bishop and political writer.² "Independence of thought and action were passed to Ms. Pinnell through her ancestral line of men who stood firm for religious and political freedom, and for new and unbiased conviction; to be first in some unique way was in her blood."³

Many of America's early women lawyers were fortunate to be aided by "enlightened" men in powerful positions, and Ms. Pinnell appears to be no exception. Her first mentor was obviously her father. Ethan Allen Pinnell studied law for several years in Illinois. He was admitted to the Missouri bar in 1873 and practiced in Cuba until 1882, when he moved to Steelville. In that same year, he was elected probate judge, a post he held for four years.⁴ While studying the law, he may well have heard of Myra Bradwell, America's first woman lawyer who was denied admission to practice law in Illinois in 1869 based on her gender.⁵ In fact, he may have even subscribed to Mrs. Bradwell's newspaper, The Chicago Legal News, which documented the struggles of early women lawyers.

Ms. Pinnell received her early education in the public schools of Crawford County, Missouri, and she later attended Steelville College in that state, from which she graduated. In the 1890's, the Pinnell family moved to Bronson, Levy County, Florida, where Judge Pinnell practiced law for many years. At that time, one could be admitted to the bar after completing law school or apprenticing with a practicing attorney. As there were no laws schools in Florida prior to 1900, Ms. Pinnell studied law in her father's office for two years. She had to wait until she was 21 to take the oral bar examination, which she did in May 1898. It was an unusually severe examination, the severity of which was probably occasioned by the fact that women were not encouraged to enter the practice of law.⁶

Following the bar examination, Ms. Pinnell had to wait five months while the Florida Supreme Court decided her fate. “They just didn’t know what to do with me,” Ms. Pinnell said of the justices, who could have changed the entire course of her life with just one word.⁷ No woman had ever applied to take the bar examination before in Florida. Even though she passed the oral examination, which lasted for hours, the justices were still puzzled over the unique problem of admitting a woman to practice law in Florida. From May until October she waited for the justices’ approval to begin her legal career. Finally, in October 1898, the Florida Supreme Court approved Ms. Pinnell’s admission to the bar and she thus became Florida’s first woman lawyer.

Ms. Pinnell never considered any other profession than the law. “My whole family was made up of lawyers,” she declared. “My father, my brother, and my mother encouraged me to enter the field. Mother felt that ability was what determined the profession you choose, not which sex you happened to be.”⁸

Unfortunately, research to date has not yet uncovered any legal work directly attributed to Ms. Pinnell, but much is known of her legal career, which spanned over half a century. For the first three years, she practiced law with her father in Bronson, Florida. Although little is known of Judge Pinnell’s legal work, one of his clients, Florida Central & Peninsular Railroad Company,⁹ appears to have led to Ms. Pinnell’s next employment in the law office of Major Alexander St. Clair-Abrams, because he also represented that railroad.

In 1901, Ms. Pinnell began working with Major St. Clair-Abrams, who was a Civil War veteran, prominent attorney, seasoned politician, and founder of the town of Tavares, Lake County, which he developed on lands he purchased and to which he brought the railroads.¹⁰ He moved to Jacksonville in 1895 and practiced corporate defense. Not surprisingly, his practice included a substantial portion of railroad litigation, which was a “hot” area in the law. The late 1800’s saw the initial building of Florida’s railroad completed. By the turn of the century, the focus was on regulating the railroads. Major St. Clair Abrams represented numerous railroad companies in various regulatory actions, from rate challenges to the establishment of stations at various locations.¹¹ He also represented railroads in personal injury actions.¹² Over the 19 years that Ms. Pinnell worked with Major St. Clair Abrams, one must assume that she worked on many of these railroad cases, because railroad law is the common thread in her career.

It appears that Major St. Clair Abrams was general counsel to Florida East Coast Railway Company from 1909-1916, because he represented the railway in numerous cases during that period. Ms. Pinnell’s work on those cases probably led to her next employment, which was with Florida East Coast Railway.

Ms. Pinnell began working for Florida East Coast Railway in St. Augustine, Florida, in October 1920 as an attorney in the law department and assistant secretary of the company. While working for Florida East Coast Railway, she was associated with William Alexander Blount, Florida’s first president of the American Bar Association, as he was general counsel to the railway in 1920 when she joined the law department. Ms. Pinnell also worked with Scott M. Loftin, who succeeded Blount as the railway’s general counsel, and who was Florida second American Bar Association president.¹³ The 1920’s were a decade of tremendous expansion for the railroads in Florida. Consequently, one can assume that Ms. Pinnell’s work during this time included land

acquisitions by Florida East Coast Railway. Ms. Pinnell worked for the railway for 25 years, after which she worked in private practice until 1958.

In describing her work, Ms. Pinnell said: “Law is something you never really stop studying if you hope to be a credit to the profession. Until I retired . . . I studied constantly. You have to. Each case is different from every other one.”¹⁴ Ms. Pinnell said that she helped prepare many cases for criminal court, but she never argued one in her legal career. “I always preferred real estate title work, it seemed more suited to me. That has seemed to be true of many women lawyers who just don’t care to go into court. But they may find a special niche in the field that is perfect for their abilities.”¹⁵ That Ms. Pinnell preferred real estate work is not surprising considering that many early women lawyers found the least resistance in areas like wills and estates, family law, and real estate. Her interest in real estate also explains why she worked in the area of railroad law.

Although Ms. Pinnell remained the only woman in Florida’s legal circles for many years after her admittance to the bar, she stated that she never once ran into discrimination from fellow lawyers or clients. “I’ve always practiced in Jacksonville and found no prejudice here, “ she said. “In fact, only one man was ever rude to me in my life. But he was not a lawyer, judge or a client.”¹⁶

Many of her male colleagues spoke warmly of her. For instance, in 1958, Harold Clark, president of the Jacksonville Bar Association, said that he had heard of Ms. Pinnell’s work in legal circles long before he began his practice in Jacksonville in 1942. “She has been referred to as the dean of women lawyers in Florida,” he said. “She is well-known and recognized throughout the state for her legal abilities.”¹⁷

J. Henry Blount, county attorney and past president of the Jacksonville Bar Association, stated in 1958: “I have known her [Ms. Pinnell] since I was admitted to the bar in 1914. She is highly respected and well thought of both as a citizen and a fine lawyer.”¹⁸ Mr. Blount also noted that Ms. Pinnell was honored at the Jacksonville Bar Association’s June 1958 meeting for having practiced 50 years or more in Florida. Ms. Pinnell was the only woman in the group of 12 who were so honored, and she was the only one of two who had practiced 60 years.

Ms. Pinnell died, following a lengthy illness, at the age of 89 in Jacksonville on May 22, 1966.

Sixty years is quite a career for Florida’s first woman lawyer. During this time, Louise Rebecca Pinnell was a role model for other women lawyers. She felt that women would do well to consider the law as a profession. In 1958, she said: “Women have made wonderful progress in this century. They have proved that they can go into almost any field and be successful if they work at it. Law practice is hard work and demands a lot of study, but it’s a fine field for a woman and offers many rewards. If I could pass the bar examination studying in my father’s office and reading his books, a woman today shouldn’t have any trouble. She has the advantage of modern courses of study at fine schools. And there are more women in the field now to keep her professional company.”¹⁹

Ms. Pinnell was obviously a woman dedicated to the principle of women’s equality. She worked toward that goal by demonstrating that a woman could perform a job formerly considered

a “man’s profession” for 60 years. She also pursued that goal by accepting leadership roles in legal and civic organizations. For instance, during the First World War, Ms. Pinnell worked in the Red Cross Office, as well as with the Registration Boards, involved in draft questionnaire work in Duval County. She was a charter member of the Jacksonville Y.W.C.A.; president of the Jacksonville Business and Professional Women’s Club; member of the American Bar Association; Florida State Bar Association, which later became The Florida Bar; Jacksonville Bar Association; and the National Association of Women Lawyers, for which she served as State Vice President of the Florida Council in 1938-39.

Louise Rebecca Pinnell laid the groundwork for women to enter the legal profession in Florida. Through her example, women were empowered not only to enter the law, but to enter other fields formerly considered “male professions.” She was a wonderful example of self-determination of women, based not only on her chosen profession, but also on her private life. She never married and lived in the Mandarin area of Jacksonville, which was rather remote, with her two sisters in a home they owned on the water. She was a woman in control of her life and her assets, and she firmly believed, as her mother had taught her, that it was ability that determined the profession a person chose, not gender.

Lucy Worthington Blackman aptly stated the tribute to be paid to this trailblazing woman:

Louise Rebecca Pinnell should . . . be cited for bravery, for it took no small degree of courage to fly in the face of tradition in a conservative Southern society, and to open up a masculine field of activity to women, proving that women may be successful and useful in that sacrosanct profession of the law. To all such pioneers among women, honor and glory! [²⁰]

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1. Pleasant Daniel Gold, History of Duval County Florida 493 (1928); Lucy Worthington Blackman, The Women of Florida 69 (1940).
 2. Id.
 3. Lucy Worthington Blackman, The Women of Florida 69 (1940).
 4. From an unpublished history of the Pinnell Family provided to me by Linda Pinnell Worthington.
 5. See Jane M. Friedman, America’s First Woman Lawyer: The Biography of Myra Bradwell 17-33 (1993); In re Bradwell, 55 Ill. 535 (869); Bradwell v. Illinois, 16 Wall 130 (1873).
 6. IV, W. T. Cash, The Story of Florida 513 (1938).
 7. Pearl Adams, The Florida Times Union, “Florida’s First Woman Lawyer,” Nov. 2, 1958, p. 55.
 8. Id.

9. See Florida Cent. & Peninsular R.R. Co. v. Mayberry, 43 Fla. 596, 35 So. 1027 (1901); Florida Cent. & Peninsular R.R. Co. v. Mooney, 45 Fla. 286, 33 So. 1010 (1903).
10. The Florida Times-Union, “Maj. Alex St. Clair-Abrams, Longtime Resident of State, Taken in Death at Home Here,” June 6, 1931.
11. See, e.g., State v. Florida E. Coast Ry. Co., 72 Fla. 379, 73 So. 171 (1916); State v. Florida E. Coast Ry. Co., 69 Fla. 165, 67 So. 2d 906 (1915).
12. See, e.g., Florida E. Coast Ry. Co. v. Knowles, 68 Fla. 400, 67 So. 122 (1914).
13. William Alexander Blount and Scott M. Loftin were presidents of the American Bar Association in 1920-21 and 1934-35, respectively. ABA Journal (1921) & (1935).
14. Pearl Adams, The Florida Times Union, “Florida’s First Woman Lawyer,” Nov. 2, 1958, p. 55.
15. Id.
16. Id.
17. Id.
18. Id.
19. Id.
20. Lucy Worthington Blackman, The Women of Florida 69 (1940).

