

Michigan Lawyers in History

Theresa Doland

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

At a celebration on September 10, 1926, at the Edgewater Club in St. Joseph during the Michigan State Bar Association Annual Meeting, Burritt Hamilton, the event's toastmaster, welcomed a "sister in law" to speak before the assembled audience. Theresa Doland was "the first woman member of [the] Association to be called upon to take part in the program..."¹ She was representing the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan and well aware of the "very great honor" to be the first. She had been the first in many areas already.

Theresa was born sometime between 1879 and 1883 to Stephen and Margaret (Murray) Doland—their first child or, at the very least, the first of their children to survive to adulthood. Both Stephen and Margaret were born in Canada to Irish immigrants, and either married and immigrated to Michigan or met in Michigan. They were early pioneers of Gratiot and Midland counties and settled in St. Louis, a town of about 2,000 inhabitants. Stephen farmed and Margaret raised children: Theresa was followed by Elizabeth, William, Katherine, and four others who died young.

Theresa Doland was probably the first member of her family to get a higher education. She completed high school and went on to Michigan State Normal College, graduating in 1901.² After earning her degree, she taught for several years in Midland and Gratiot county schools.

Doland was unmarried and in her mid-20s when she decided to leave Michigan to enter government service and work as a teacher in Native American schools. Until about 1912—presumably when she returned to Michigan to attend law school—she moved from Montana to Texas to Indian Territory (specifically, what would become Oklahoma), teaching at various schools. A brief biographical blurb in a later issue of *Bench & Bar of Michigan* mentions "Bloomfield

Seminary, a School for Indian Girls...Wapanucka Academy, a School for Indian Boys."³

Doland's experience teaching in Native American schools compelled her to return east to enroll in law school. While in Indian Territory, "she became interested in Indian laws and their relation of land ownership..."⁴ She got a job as a secretary with the law firm of Anderson, Wilcox & Lacy and attended the Detroit College of Law. After graduating in 1915 (she wasn't the first woman to graduate from that institution; that was Lizzie J. McSweeney in 1893), Doland formed a practice in Detroit and was soon known "as a most capable representative of the profession."⁵ At the same time, she continued her education at the University of Detroit Law School and earned a masters of

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law degree in 1917. Not only was she the first woman to graduate from that university, but she was “also the first woman in Michigan to receive the masters of law degree.”⁶

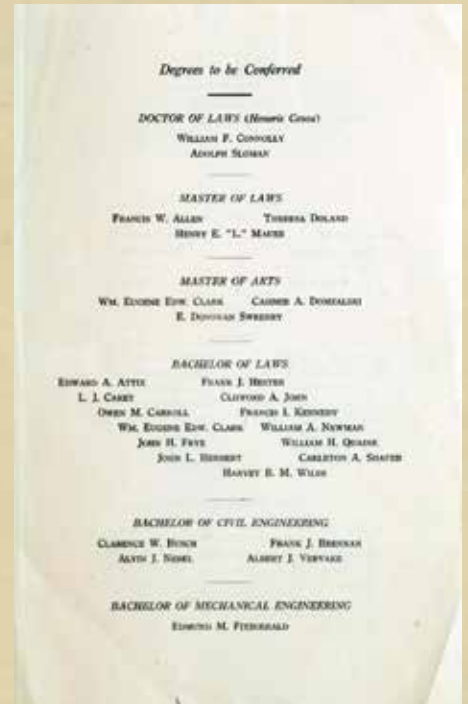
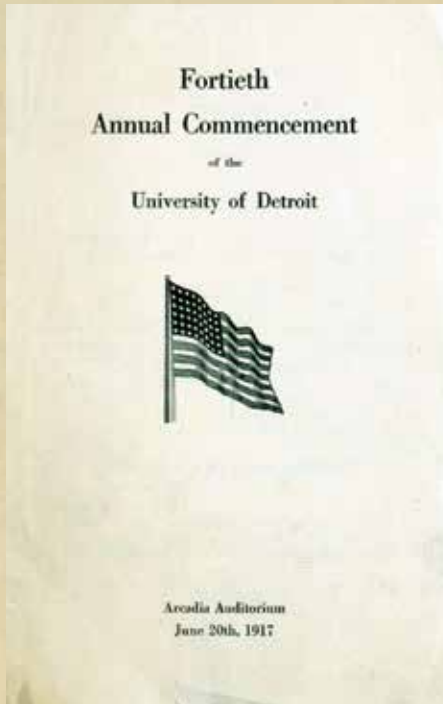
Doland believed that attorneys should offer value to their communities and she joined various organizations and causes. Of course, one of the largest at that time was the women’s suffrage movement; Doland became a member of the Wayne County Suffrage League,⁷ serving as a precinct captain in the First Ward. She firmly believed that:

It [was] impossible to overestimate the importance of giving women the proper education, of protecting them from those who would exploit them, and of placing in their hands the power of recording their opinion of the laws of the land which so vitally color their lives and the lives of their children.⁸

Doland joined the Detroit Business Women’s Club and spoke of “the eight-hour law” for workers.⁹ She addressed the Detroit Progressive Civic League about the “need of a public defender in the local courts appeals”¹⁰ for “the man who for the first time runs foul of the law, with the one who is perhaps a victim of circumstances over which he had little if any control....”¹¹ She provided legal services to the Women’s Citizens’ League, drafting the articles of association.¹² She joined the Detroit Bar Association and served as a department editor for the Lawyers’ Club of Detroit regarding women lawyers in Michigan.

For all of Doland’s “firsts,” there were other female attorneys in Michigan at that time—10,¹³ maybe more—and while each could join the American Bar Association and the Detroit Bar Association, those were dominated by males. Doland and others saw the need for their own separate organization.

On March 24, 1919, five female Detroit lawyers—Doland, Mabel Rix, Harriet Marsh,



Theresa Doland was the first woman in Michigan to obtain a master of laws degree, as shown in this pamphlet from the University of Detroit’s 40th Annual Commencement in 1917.

Henrietta Rosenthal, and Mary Wetsman¹⁴—met for two hours at the Penobscot Building and founded the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan.¹⁵ Doland served as its first president,¹⁶ and the association was her greatest legacy.

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ENDNOTES

1. *Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting Michigan State Bar Association*, 6 Mich St B J 44 (1926).
2. Burton, et al, *The City of Detroit, Michigan 1701–1922, Volume IV* (Detroit: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co, 1922), p 807.
3. *Bench and Bar of Michigan* (Detroit: Bench and Bar Publishing Co., 1918), p 84.
4. *Woman Lawyer is Admitted to Bar*, Detroit Free Press (June 19, 1915), p 5.

5. *The City of Detroit, Michigan*, p 807.
6. *Patriotic Activities of Michigan Women*, Detroit Free Press (September 7, 1917), p 7.
7. *Bench and Bar*, p 84.
8. “Womanhood is Keystone of Nation,” *Affirms Miss Doland, Seeking Suffrage*, Detroit Free Press (July 14, 1918), p 40.
9. *Detroit Business Women*, Detroit Free Press (February 20, 1921), p 52.
10. *Regarding “A Public Defender,”* Detroit Free Press (January 27, 1922), p 6.
11. *Id.*
12. *Mere-Man Jury Has No Chance: Attorney Doland’s Suit Against Women’s League Never Even Gets to Them*, Detroit Free Press (May 4, 1922), p 1.
13. Pope, *Henrietta E. Rosenthal*, Detroit Legal News (October 1995), p 77.
14. Frost & Weiner, *Women Lawyers Association of Michigan: Who, How, Why*, 63 Mich B J 465 (1984).
15. *Detroit’s Women Lawyers*, 1 Bench and Bar 8 (January 1921).
16. *Women Lawyers Association of Michigan: Who, How, Why*, 63 Mich B J at 465.
17. The 1930s were filled with charges of embezzlement, a divorce, and an eventual disbarment. See \$1,304 Theft Charged, Detroit Free Press (September 15, 1932), p 14; *Woman Lawyer Barred From Practice in State*, Battle Creek Enquirer (February 15, 1933), p 2. Perhaps Theresa was the first female lawyer of Michigan to be permanently disbarred. Not surprisingly, her obituary from 1943 whitewashes a little bit and notes that she retired in 1934. *Mrs. Theresa Cornelius*, Lansing State Journal (January 7, 1943), p 8.