

March is Women's History Month

So many aspects of women's lives today were absent until the 20th century. In this area that was home to Susan B. Anthony, the right to vote comes to mind, of course, but that right did not guarantee full citizenship. Even after its passage, there were still questions about women's place in society such as the ability to hold political office, a woman's citizenship after marrying a foreigner, and the right to serve on a jury. Throughout the 20th century, women gradually gained rights formerly closed to them.

Lawfully enacted rights for women began in New York State with the passage of the 1848 Married Women's Property Act that allowed married women to own and control their own property. Becoming a national model for other states, by 1900 every state had passed similar legislation. This Act was a big step toward the expansion of women's rights and it eventually led to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

The right to serve on juries wasn't automatic with the right to vote. The common sentiment was that a woman's place was in the home and that jury service would prevent her accomplishing her primary duties. It wasn't until the 1930s that attitudes toward woman as jurors changed to viewing women as competent, law abiding, and attentive to detail, attributes deemed preferable for jury service. In March 1934, the Mastick-Byrne bill came before the New York State Legislature. This bill that sought to make women eligible for jury service was soon buried in committee, ensuring that it would not be taken up for debate any time soon.

In 1937, a new effort to pass the bill, this time sponsored by men, gained the favor of Governor Herbert H. Lehman. It also received an endorsement by first lady Eleanor Roosevelt who said she was "perfectly delighted" at the passage of the bill by the New York State Legislature in May. Of note is the fact that the bill only pertained to four New York State counties, Erie, Monroe, Oneida, and Westchester, because they had enacted special jury laws.

In Brighton, jury service for women began on June 6, 1937 with a reckless driving case heard by the town court in a room that served by day as work space for the town clerk's staff in the old town hall at 1795 Monroe Avenue. Four women were called but only one, Hazel Dickinson of Palmerston Road, actually sat on the jury of six people. The other three were Pearl Donnelly of Sunset Drive, Elizabeth Knight of Commonwealth Road, and Anna Janos of Warrington Drive. A thirty-year-old coal salesman from the city was charged with going through two red lights at the Twelve Corners and weaving in and out of traffic on Monroe Avenue at sixty miles an hour. The jury retired to a small upstairs room and, in fifteen minutes, decided that the man was not guilty.

When the town offices moved to Elmwood Avenue in 1953, the town court moved into a wood paneled room fitted with church-style pews and a wooden dais. The room was also used for town council meetings. After the Police and Court wing was added to the town hall in 1989, the former court room became the assessor's office.

Today, jury trials still occur in the Brighton Town Court system although not frequently. According to chief court clerk, Lisa Pavlovych, the last jury trial was in January of 2025.

Mary Jo Lanphear
Town of Brighton Historian
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