

# Famous Female Legal Trailblazers

Gregory Peterson, JD

From the late 19th Century until the present day most women-of-the-law have quietly earned respect and position through daily acts of distinguished service to clients, colleagues, and constituents. Unfortunately, many of the true heroines in the legal profession will remain unsung. But today — International Women’s Day — is a fitting time recall some of the legal profession’s trailblazing women.

By definition, a “trailblazer” is one who goes first — exploring unknown territory. “Blazing a trail,” however, also means marking that path — making it easier for others to follow in that leader’s footsteps. At the risk of neglecting so many other worthy contributors, we mention several of these meritorious legal leaders — giving a brief synopsis of their exemplary career paths.

## **First female U.S. Supreme Court Justice | Sandra Day O’Connor**

Born in Texas, [Sandra Day O’Connor](#) spent part of her youth on her family’s Arizona cattle ranch, far from the glamor of the Supreme Court. Although she graduated third in her Stanford Law School class, O’Connor soon found that female lawyers faced limited opportunities in the legal job market. Undaunted, she worked without pay for a county attorney (in California) and earned a position as deputy county attorney. Her career path led her into private practice and back into the public sector — where she served as an assistant attorney general, a state senator, and a judge. O’Connor’s noteworthy service caught the attention of President Ronald Reagan — who appointed her to the Supreme Court in 1981, where she served with distinction until 2006. In 2009, President Obama presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America’s highest civilian honor.

## **Supreme Court Justice, and founder of first U.S. legal periodical dedicated exclusively to women’s rights law | Ruth Bader Ginsburg**

[Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) launched her high-achievement career at Cornell University, where she graduated at the top of her class. She married, started a family, and then took degrees at both Harvard and Columbia law schools. After clerking and serving as a legal re-

search associate, Ginsburg became a professor — teaching at Rutgers Law School, Columbia Law School, and Stanford. At the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) she was a driving force behind its Women’s Rights Project, and then served as the ACLU’s General Counsel. Ginsburg was appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals in 1980, where she served until 1993 — when President Clinton nominated her to the Supreme Court.

### **First Latina to serve on U.S. Supreme Court | Sonia Sotomayor**

A summa cum laude graduate of Princeton University, Sonia Sotomayor went on to Yale Law School. Her legal service began in the New York County District Attorney’s Office. Moving into the private sector, Sotomayor became a litigator for international commerce — earning her a law firm partnership. She served on the U.S. District Court and the U.S. Court of Appeals until President Obama nominated her to the Supreme Court in 2009.

### **First female U.S. Attorney General | Janet Reno**

When Janet Reno entered Harvard Law School in 1960 she was one of only 16 women in a class of about 500. While pursuing a J.D. she sought summer employment with a prominent law firm — but was turned away because of her gender. In that era’s male-dominated legal world, Reno had a steep hill to climb...

Janet Reno’s career path wove between law firm practice and public service. In public service she helped revise Florida’s court system and criminal code, later serving as assistant state attorney. She served as Dade County prosecutor before President Bill Clinton nominated her for U.S. Attorney General — the first woman to hold that position — in 1993.

### **Civil Rights Activist, Educator & Congresswoman | Barbara Jordan**

Barbara Jordan’s talents for oratory and debate were apparent at an early age — and she did not waste them. A graduate of Texas Southern University, she went on to become one of the few African-American students at Boston University School of Law. After setting up a law practice in her home town of Houston, Jordan became active in the presidential campaign for John F. Kennedy. Her passion for political causes drove her to seek a seat in the Texas legislature. After two losing campaigns she prevailed — becoming (in 1966) the first woman elected to the Texas Senate, where she worked tirelessly to promote fair employment practices and other civil rights.

In 1972, Jordan was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. She became nationally renowned for her eloquent criticism of President Nixon’s “Watergate” scandal and her

moving keynote speech to the 1976 Democratic National Committee. At Barbara Jordan's death Texas Governor Ann Richards observed: "There was simply something about her that made you proud to be a part of the country that produced her."

### **A Good Time To Say "Thank You"**

If you think back on your career (however long or short it has been) you'll recall women whose trailblazing made a difference for you. Perhaps she encouraged you to apply for a higher position. Or gave you advice on how to overcome a difficult career problem. In any case, know that you have benefitted from women-of-the-law who took a chance, followed a dream, and pressed ahead despite hardship or prejudice. Through their work, achievement and encouragement these women helped make possible what you are today.

This is a day for gratitude and respect. Hmm... How about making a call — or writing a thoughtful "Thank You" note — to the women who have helped you find your way?

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