

## OPINION

**Iowa has a long tradition of being a leader in civil rights**[Print Page](#)

By 'Elaine Eschman and Sara Riley

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Board of Governors of the Iowa Association for Justice

Rarely is Iowa considered a trendsetter. Traditionally, the latest fashion trends, and popular movements begin on the east or west coasts and slowly work their way to Iowa. But, when it comes to civil rights, how many of us realize that Iowa sets the curve?

It's true. Before our state was even born the high court of the Iowa territory established an atmosphere of equality for residents of this state.

It began in 1839, seven years before our statehood, when a Missouri slave owner attempted to seize a former slave named Ralph who had come to find work in Iowa with his permission. The Iowa justice system thwarted the Missouri slave owner's effort. Our territorial Supreme Court ruled that equal treatment under the law extended to "men of all colors and conditions." Iowa's highest court came to this decision seventeen years before the US Supreme Court's infamous Dred Scott decision.

In 1868, 12-year-old Susan Clark was denied admission to an Iowa grammar school - just because she was African American. Again, our courts intervened. Iowa schools were legally integrated after the Iowa Supreme Court declared, "All youth . . . equal before the law." It took the United States Supreme Court 86 more years to reach the same conclusion in the groundbreaking Brown v. Board of Education decision.

In 1869, Arabelle Mansfield was admitted to the practice of law in Iowa. She was the first woman in the country to become a licensed attorney. In many states, laws prevented women from practicing law - but not Iowa.

In 1873, an African American teacher from Illinois was traveling by steamboat through Iowa. Despite having a first class dining ticket, Northwest Union Packet denied her access to the boat's dining room because of the color of her skin. What did our courts say about such segregation? They called it "gross injustice"- "positive wickedness." Rosa Parks had not even been born.

This month, a sculpture will be dedicated on the Iowa Supreme Court grounds in Des Moines. Its purpose: To commemorate our tradition of groundbreaking civil rights decisions. The sculpture is aptly named, "Shattering Silence." It is aptly timed, too - right on the heels of yet another landmark civil rights decision, the Iowa Supreme Court's ruling in the case of Varnum v. Brien.

A precedent of justice and equal treatment for all Iowans was set by our courts 170 years ago, and it continues through our courts today. We should be proud of Iowa's leadership in the field of civil rights - even if our decisions go against the grain. Because while we may not all be trend setters in high fashion, we have our civil rights and if history repeats itself, our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren will, too.

Elaine Eschman and Sara Riley are practicing attorneys in Ft. Madison and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, respectively. They are both members of the Board of Governors of the Iowa Association for Justice.

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