Arabella Mansfield: The Nation’s First Woman Lawyer

Belle “Arabella” Aurelia Babb was born in 1846. Her family lived in Des Moines County at the time of her birth but moved to Mount Pleasant after her father’s death.

Belle attended Mount Pleasant High School, then Iowa Wesleyan University.

After she graduated, she taught at Simpson College in Indianola for a short time. Belle returned to Iowa Wesleyan to pursue a master’s degree and married John Mansfield in 1868.

Source: Historical Sketch and Alumni Record of Iowa Wesleyan College from Iowa Wesleyan University, Mount Pleasant
She did not attend law school but became the first woman lawyer in the United States when she passed the bar examination in Henry County in 1869.

Judge Francis Springer certified Belle Mansfield in the Henry County courthouse following the Iowa Supreme Court decision to admit Mansfield to the practice of law.

Mansfield had studied for two years in her brother's law office in Mount Pleasant to prepare for the exam. She received her LL.B. from Iowa Wesleyan in 1872.

Mansfield was a pioneer in the Iowa suffrage movement, chairing the first Iowa Suffrage Association state convention in 1870. She campaigned for equal educational opportunities for women as well as voting rights.

Iowa Judicial Branch Website:

The Nation's First Woman Lawyer

The supreme court's fundamental concern for equal treatment for all reached beyond case law into other aspects of the court's authority, including its authority to admit lawyers to the practice of law in Iowa. In 1869, the court ruled that women may not be denied the right to practice law in Iowa and admitted Arabella A. Mansfield. Ms. Mansfield was the first woman admitted to the practice of law in any state in the nation.
Mansfield's admission to the bar did not change her desire to teach, and she spent all of her professional life in education. She was professor of English at Iowa Wesleyan College and, later, dean of the school of art and music at DePauw University in Indiana.
Belle and her husband had no children. After she retired she moved to her brother’s home in Aurora, Illinois, where she died within a few months. She is buried in the Forest Home Cemetery in Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

Further Information:
https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arabella-Mansfield

Statue of Belle Mansfield on the Iowa Wesleyan Campus dedicated 2008