

A Lytle Woman Lawyer: One of the first women to earn a law degree, the first and only female law professor in the world in 1898, the first African American woman admitted to the Tennessee bar, the first African American woman admitted to the Kansas bar, the first African American woman to be a member of a national bar, now known as the Negro Bar Association, a woman known then and known now is Lutie A. Lytle.

The times they were a'changing, it often has been said, but it also could be said it was women such as Lutie A. Lytle who, often went about a'changing the times. A timeline from her time follows.

1857 *Scott v. Sanford* U.S. Supreme Court upholds Dred Scott a slave (property)
not a citizen (person)

1863 Emancipation Proclamation signed

1865 Civil War ended-April 9th

President Abraham Lincoln assassinated-April 14th

1875 Lutie A. Lytle born in Tennessee-a Confederate state during the Civil War

1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* U.S. Supreme Court decision upholds separate but equal-
now the law

1897 Lutie A. Lytle earns her law degree from Central Tennessee Law School

Lutie A. Lytle passes her bar exam and is admitted to the Criminal Court in Memphis

Lutie A. Lytle becomes the first African American woman admitted to the Kansas bar

1898 Lutie A. Lytle becomes the first and only woman law professor in the world

1913 Lutie A. Lytle becomes the first African American woman to be a member of a national bar

1950 Believed to be the year of Lutie A. Lytle's death but unconfirmed

1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court strikes down separate but equal-
no longer the law

Lutie was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee a Confederate state just ten years prior to her birth in 1875. When she was seven, her family moved to Kansas from their home in Murfreesboro where her father's family had lived for some time. Many other black families of the time were relocating from Tennessee to Kansas forming a movement that would come to be known as the Exoduster movement. It was the first general migration of blacks to pursue the greater freedom of Emancipation Proclamation legal rights outside the southern greater social confines of Jim Crow, KKK, and White League.

In Kansas, Lutie and her three brothers attended elementary school and Topeka High School. Her father was active in the Populist Party. He ran as a candidate for the position of city jailor, but was unsuccessful. His involvement in politics led to Lutie's appointment as the Populist Party's assistant enrolling clerk for the state legislature. Additionally she worked for one of the African American newspapers in Topeka and it was in this position where she dreamt of higher pursuits.

At the age of 21 Lutie moved back to Tennessee, where she taught school in Chattanooga to earn funds to pay her law school tuition. She attended Central Tennessee College Law School in Nashville, where she was one of only two law students, the only girl, and graduated in 1897. That same year she passed her oral bar exam and was admitted to the Criminal Court in Memphis.

Lutie was a pioneer both in her chosen field of study and in her birthright field of gender pursuits. Newspapers reported she was the first African American woman to be licensed to practice in Tennessee, and only the third woman in the United States licensed to practice law. Later that month, she returned to Topeka and became the first African American woman admitted to the Kansas bar.

During a 1897 interview, now herself being interviewed for newspaper copy that others would read, she said: "I conceived the idea of studying law in a printing office where I worked for years as a compositor...I read the newspaper exchanges a great deal and became impressed with the knowledge of the fact that my own people especially were the victims of legal ignorance. I resolved to fathom its depths and penetrate its mysteries and intricacies in hopes of being a benefit to my people."

Lytle went on to say: "In connection with my law practice I intend to give occasional lectures, but not in any sense for personal benefit. I shall talk to my own people and make a sincere and earnest effort to improve their condition as citizens. I believe in efficacy of reason to bring about the best results."

For the next year, Lytle lived in Topeka and became involved in the Interstate Literary Association with members from Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas communities and did lecture to women's groups and local colleges on law related to domestic issues. Lytle continued to dream of helping other African Americans through the legal system, and spoke of establishing a practice in Chicago or New York. But in fall of 1898 Lytle announced that she would join the faculty at Central Tennessee College of Law. Newspaper accounts claimed that she was the only woman law instructor in the world. She served one session in that faculty position.

By 1910 Lytle was living in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband, Alfred C. Cowan, also a lawyer. In 1913, the couple attended the annual convention in Philadelphia of what is now known as the Negro Bar Association. There, along side her husband, she became the first African American female to become a member of a national bar organization, and the first to participate on a gender equal status with a spouse.

Few accounts of her life and records of her legal career have been discovered. But, from the few accounts known, it is known that in 1925, she returned to Topeka and spoke at her childhood church, where she shared her experiences as a black female lawyer and spoke about contemporary issues.

And, albeit little is known about her, what has prevailed is that as an African American woman in the field of law, her courage and determination has inspired legions of African American women lawyers, and has become a beacon of hopes and dreams for African American women when determining their role in American society and their contributions to society as a whole and the African American community in particular.

In 2006, fulfilling her dream in a 21st century way she never could have dreamt, the Lutie A. Lytle Black Women Writers Conference was established. It is an annual workshop for current black women law faculty and black women who are considering law teaching. The workshop is a safe space in which participants can express scholarly activity and struggles in an intimate and informal setting.

The 2012 Conference was held in Boston through the Suffolk University Law School, registration was free, and the University of Denver Sturm College of Law offered travel grants. The annual Conference records the legal achievements of Lytle, a woman lawyer, and confirms that her legal field of dreams came true.

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