

Clara Shortridge Foltz and The Woman Lawyer's Bill

Clara Shortridge Foltz was born in 1849 in Indiana. Later, she settled in San Jose, Calif., with her husband and five small children. The year was 1874.

Soon after, Foltz and her husband divorced. She had to support her family. She wanted to become a lawyer. But she was told, "A woman's place is in the home."

Foltz did not take "no" for an answer. California law, however, only allowed white males to practice law. Foltz wrote a bill that replaced the term "white male" with "any citizen or person."

With help from a state senator, she got her bill into the California legislature. It was called the Woman Lawyer's Bill. Senators debated it. Foltz wrote that opponents of her bill "grew red as turkey gobblers mouthing their ignorance."

In 1878, Foltz won. The state Senate passed the bill. Then the state Assembly passed it. The governor needed to sign it. Foltz pushed her way into his office to persuade him to sign it. And he did. Now women could become lawyers in California.

Her work was not done. One year later, she sued the University of California to allow women to study law there. In 1910, she became the state's first female district attorney.

In 1911, she helped change California's Constitution to give women the right to vote — nine years before women won the right to vote nationally.



Clara Shortridge Foltz was the first female lawyer in California. (Wikimedia Commons.)