

Vermont's First Woman Lawyer

Jessie Lafountain Bigwood 1874-1953

John Fisher #2 March 2008
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While surfing the Internet, I accidentally came upon this website of the “Vermont Book of Days” for October 4 at: <http://www.vtbookofdays.com/months/october/october04.html> and I read about the first woman lawyer in Vermont who was admitted to the Bar on 4 Oct 1902. Her name was Jessie Lafountain Bigwood. LaFountain! Wow! The first woman lawyer in Vermont was of French-Canadian descent!



I had to find out more about this woman. At the Vermont Bar Association's next meeting, she was introduced as “Our Sister in the Law.” She stated, “Woman is being emancipated; she is no longer harnessed to a plow nor locked within four walls, but can now be a companion in learning and culture to her father, brothers and husband.” It would be a decade before another woman would be admitted to the Vermont Bar, and 18 years until women won the right to

vote. Jessie was a woman ahead of her time! The website showed a photo of Jessie LaFountain in front of a roadside marker in South Royalton, VT; home of the Vermont Law School.

After more searching, I also found a writeup on Jessie Bigwood in the book “Vermont Encyclopedia” which contained about the same information; and then I found an article at <http://womenslegalhistory.stanford.edu/profiles/BigwoodJessie.html> for the “Women’s Legal History Biography Project” at Stanford University. Next, I found the largest amount of information at the Vermont Historical Society where their collection contains a .25 of a linear foot of papers about her in their manuscript vault. See <http://www.vermonthistory.org/arccat/findaid/bigwood.htm>. Now I was really interested in researching this woman. Many excerpts from these sources have been used for this article.

The information in the VHS indicated that Jessie was born in 1874 and that she was the daughter of Frank LaFountain and Helen Payette of Plattsburgh, New York; and that information about her life was sketchy. According to the “*Burlington Clipper*,” April 30 1904, “she graduated from the local high school at the young age of 16. Subsequently, she attended the Burlington Business College for a few terms, did stenography and bookkeeping and was a government “reporter” at Fort Ethan Allen. This is interesting because she may have been in the present building that our VT-FCGS Library now occupies at Dupont Hall at Fort Ethan Allen. She was married in 1898 to Frederick Herrick Bigwood of Winooski and shortly

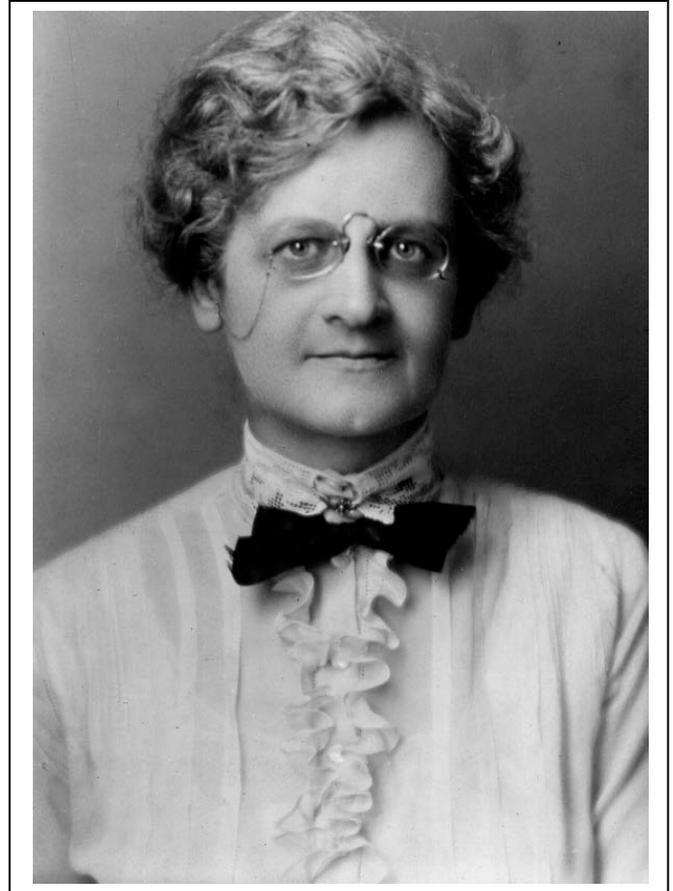
thereafter entered the office of V. A. Bullard, a Burlington Attorney. We find them in the 1900 Census of Winooski in the town of Colchester, VT, which was taken on the 9th of June. They were living on Main Street. He was born on 17 Nov 1870 and they were married for 2 years. Frederick was a Shipping Clerk at the Screen Shop and she was a stenographer. They had no children and rented their home. In 1900 she took a special law course at Boston University. She was admitted to the Vermont Bar after completing the examination successfully, in October, 1902.

About 1908, Jessie and Frederick moved to Toronto, Ontario, Canada. After Jessie was widowed, she lived in a modest Toronto apartment, and supplemented her pension working as a nurse's aid. She died in September of 1953.

Jessie's parents, Francis Xavier LaFontaine and Helene Payette were married on 16 August 1869 at St John the Baptist Church in Keeseville, New York; and his parents were Joseph Fontaine and Julie Garand.

Joseph and Julie had children baptized at St Peter's during the years 1855, 1856, 1858, 1859, 1862 and 1865, but Francis Xavier lived from 1844 until 14 Feb 1875 according to his headstone in Plattsburgh. [Source: Robidoux Headstones Vol II.]

[Helen Payette-LaFountain later married Albert Gebo and they had a daughter Cora Gebo, a step sister to Helen and Jessie Lafountain. Cora married Dr. Chauncy Munsell of South Royalton, VT.]



Francis Xavier (Frank) and Helene had two daughters;

1. Helene Emma Fontaine, born on 3 Sep 1870 and baptized on 5 Sep 1870 at St Peter's Church in Plattsburgh, NY. Her godparents were Joseph Fontaine and Odille Dalpe.

Helen Emma married Bertram Dealing and they had a daughter named Hazel Evelyn Dealing who, in 1890, married Willard Phipard, a doctor who graduated from UVM Medical School. Hazel and Willard Phipard had a daughter named Helen who married Robert Dumville in 1947. Their son is John Dumville of the Royalton, VT Historical Society. John Dumville has donated much of the family information on Jessie, Emma and Cora to the Vermont Historical Society.

2. **Jesse Delima Fontaine**, born on 15 Apr 1874 and baptized on 19 Apr 1874 at St Peter's Church in Plattsburgh, NY, Her godparents were Joseph Payette and Delima Gendreau

Frank was a stone cutter, as was his father Joseph. When Jesse was ten months old, her father died. We find her next in the 1880 census of Plattsburgh. At the age of 6 years, Jessie Fountain was a boarder at the De Youville Boarding School at the De Youville Convent. The Convent was run by the "Grey Sisters" or "Grey Nuns", an order founded in 1745 at Montreal, Quebec by Madame D'Youville. In 1860 this Boarding School and Academy was founded at Plattsburgh, NY.

I have not yet found the marriage of Joseph Fontaine and Julia Garant but the 1870 Census for Plattsburgh provides a great deal of information. Joseph LaFountain is age 55, born Canada and a Stone Cutter; and his wife Julia is age 50, also born in Canada. Besides listing 4 of their children from age 19 to age 5, they list Frank and Ellen (Helene) who are age 24 and 21 and who were married on 16 August 1869 but who were living in the house with his parents.

UPDATE: In October of 2018 I received an email from Dan Fountain who has done the Fontaine / Fountain family genealogy. He clarified that Joseph Fontaine who wed Julie Garand (no marriage found yet) was actually the son of Joseph Quintal. I will let him explain it. I have verified it also.

*“Joseph Quintal, the widower of Marie Raymond, married Marianne Boulerice at St. Phillippe in LaPrairie on 23 Oct 1815. They had four children; the oldest child, **Joseph**, was born on 11 Feb 1816. Joseph Quintal (the father) died on 27 Oct 1824. Meanwhile, Jean Baptiste Fontaine and Marie Anne Gagne married and had 6 children, and then Marie Anne Gagne died. The widower Jean Baptiste Fontaine married the widow Marianne Boulerice on 18 Feb 1828 at St. Phillippe in LaPrairie. Marianne brought her 4 children to the marriage, and John Baptiste brought his 6 children to the marriage. John Baptiste and Marianne then had three children together. John Baptiste, Marianne, and many of the children (including Joseph) moved to Plattsburgh in or around 1835. When John Baptiste and Marianne became elderly, they lived with her oldest son and his wife: Joseph Quintal-dit-Fontaine and Julia Garant.*

Church records at St. Peter’s in Plattsburgh show Joseph sometimes called Quintal, sometimes Fontaine, and on at least one occasion, Quintal-dit Fontaine. Like you, we have been unable to find the marriage of Joseph Quintal-dit-Fontaine and Julia Garant in any church records. Their oldest children were baptized at St. John’s in Plattsburgh, but the book for the time frame during which they would likely have been married was missing when we visited the church office. An interesting side note is that Joseph Fontaine was one of the founding trustees of St. Peter’s Church in Plattsburgh in 1853. Another interesting tidbit is that after Joseph’s death in 1881, his aged mother Marianne moved back to LaPrairie to live with her son Pierre Quintal. She died in 1883 and is buried in the basement of L’église La Nativité-de-la-Vierge-Marie à La Prairie. Even the tour guide was surprised to find her grave down there with all the priests!

We have traced the Quintal line all the way back to Francois Quintal, who was born in 1644 or 1646 in La Rochelle, St-Saveur, Maritime, France, and died 3 Feb 1715 in Boucherville, Quebec. The Quintal house, much remodeled, still stands in Boucherville.”