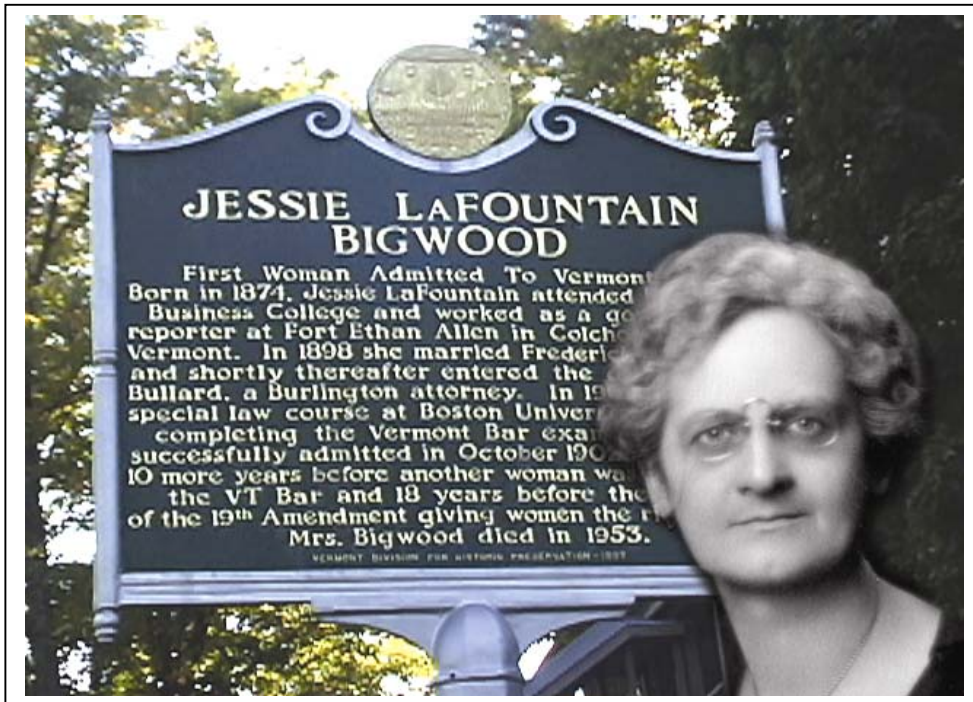


# Vermont's First Woman Lawyer

## Jessie Lafountain Bigwood 1874-1953

John Fisher #2 March 2008

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 9<sup>th</sup> 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.

The family surname in Quebec is Fontaine, which is translated in English to Fountain; so we find them in the New York and Vermont civil records as Fountains or LaFountains, but as Fontaine in the church records which typically use the correct Quebec surname if the parish has a French priest. Jesse also has chosen to use the English given name of Jessie which was probably more common in the United States.

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. Also listed are Joseph's parents Baptiste (Jean Baptiste) age 94 (I believe he is really 84) and Marie Anne his wife who is age 70. What luck to find 3 generations listed on a census!

Joseph Fontaine was born about 1815 and he would have been 22 years old when the "Patriote Rebellion" took place in the Richelieu Valley in 1837. At age 22, he would be a prime candidate to participate and upon its failure he would have been compelled to move to the United States to avoid incarceration or hanging. Was this a factor in his moving to Northern, NY? Because there were very few Catholic Churches at that time, he may have been married in a Protestant church in NY, as many Canadians did in those days.

Looking at the St Peter's Parish Census of 1857 and 1865 we find Baptiste Fontaine and Marieanne Boubrisse. (Actually Boulrice in Quebec) In these 2 censuses we also find Francis Fontaine (Jessie's father) at age 11 and 19. Next, in the Blue Drouin we find the 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage of Jean Baptiste Fontaine at St Constant, Laprairie and the 1<sup>st</sup> marriage at St Philippe, Laprairie. The remaining generations are found equally in the Blue Drouin and PRDH (Research Program in Historical Demography), and the earlier data is also in the specific parish repertoires and Jette and Tanguay.

<p>The map shows the island of Île d'Yeu in the Atlantic Ocean. Key locations marked include Port-Joinville, La Citadelle, Le Vieux Château, Saint-Sauveur, Port de la Meule, and various points and beaches. A legend indicates different types of beaches (sable, découvert, depths) and a scale bar shows 1 km. An inset map shows the island's location in the Vendée department of France.</p>	<p>Saint Saveur parish is in the middle of the island. The Ile d'Yeu is a commune of the Vendee Department, France. The 1999 population was 4,788.</p>
<p>île d'Yeu - Vieux château</p>	
<p>The two harbors of the island, Port-Joinville and Port de la Meule are famous for Tuna fishing and Crawfish. The Vieux Chateau was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.</p>	



Etienne Fontaine, the pioneer of this surname and lineage, was born on 24 Feb 1659 to Jacques Fontaine and Jeanne Colinet in Saint-Sauveur on Ile d'Yeu or Isle Dieu (Island of God) in the district of Les Sables-D'Olonne in France. At their marriage, Etienne was 22 years old and his wife, Marie Conille was 17 years old and the daughter of Pierre Conille and Marie Giton. She was from St Nicolas Parish, in the Diocese of LaRochele, France. When they were married at St Laurent church, on the Ile d'Orleans, her father had died earlier and her step-father Andre Bernard attended the wedding.

One can now probably understand why Etienne Fontaine lived on Ile d'Orleans, since he had lived at Ile d'Yeu and he probably appreciated the extra safety and security of living on an island, especially with the constant threat of attacks by the Iroquois.

It is not known exactly when he arrived in Nouvelle France. On 04 Feb 1683, he filed a marriage contract before the notary public Vachon. He married Marie Conille on 08 Feb 1683 at Saint Laurent church on the Ile d'Orleans in the Saint Lawrence River, East of Quebec City. At the birth of their second child, Jeanne, the couple was living in Saint Jean on Ile d'Orleans. In 1689, the family is still in Saint Jean on the Ile d'Orleans in an established residence. They occupied 3 arpents of land. [An arpent is about .8 of an acre] In 1708, he was working as a boat master. He was the owner of a brigantine called "Saint Louis." Upon a consent and enumeration on 25 Aug 1725, the boat occupied the same ground with a house, barn, cattle shed and now 50 arpents of arable land. In 1730, in front of the notary public Pichet, he bequeathed his land to his two sons. Etienne lived a long life of approximately 80 years and died in the presence of two of his sons in May of 1739. His wife Marie had passed away two years earlier. They are buried on the parish burial grounds of Saint-Jean on the Ile d'Orleans.

His son, Etienne Fontaine and M. Marthe Daniau-Laprise were married in 1737 and lived at St Francois du Sud and St Pierre du Sud, Montmagny, just across the river from St Laurent, Ile d'Orleans. However about 1754 or 1755, at the start of the French and Indian War, we find that they have moved into the Richelieu Valley at St Charles, and then the families move to Chambly, L'Acadie and St Mathias, where Jean Baptiste was born, which is just opposite Chambly, across the Chambly Basin.

The following page contains eight generations of the ancestry of Jessie LaFountain Bigwood, the First Woman lawyer in Vermont.

Credits: Thanks go out to Gloria Pratt for assistance on the genealogy, and to Paul Carnahan of the Vermont Historical Society (VHS) for permission to use the photos, and to Michael Thurston of the "Vermont Book of Days" for his work on overlaying the photo of Jessie and the roadside marker in South Royalton.

## Lineage of Jesse Delima Fontaine / Jessie D. Lafountain

<b>Jacques Fontaine</b>	St Saviour, Ile D'Yeu Poitou, Vendee, France	<b>Jeanne Colinet</b>
<b>Etienne Fontaine</b> Born & Bap. 24 Feb 1659 St Saviour, Ile D'Yeu, France Died 22 May 1739, St Jean, I.O.	Married 8 Feb 1683 St Laurent, I.O.	<b>Marie Conille</b> Pierre Conille Marie Giton From St Nicolas, Larochele
<b>Etienne Fontaine</b> Born 17 Aug 1686 St Jean, I.O.	(m#3) Married 19 Aug 1737 St Francois de la Riviere du Sud, Montmagny Just across the St Lawrence River from St Laurent, I.O.	<b>M. Marthe Daniau-Laprise</b> Jacques Daniau-Laprise Marie Louise Destroismaisons-Picard
<b>Rene Fontaine</b> Baptized 9 May 1752 at St Pierre de la Riviere du Sud, Montmagny	Married 10 Jan 1774 Chambly, Quebec	<b>Marguerite Sansoucy-James</b> Joseph Sansoucy Catherine Lionnard
<b>Jean Baptiste Fontaine</b> Twin - Born 6 Dec 1785 Pt Olivier (St Mathias), Quebec Died 12 Feb 1871 (1)	Married 14 Oct 1805 St Constant, Quebec  Married 18 Feb 1828 St Philippe, Quebec	(m#1) <b>Marie Anne Gagne</b> Paul Gagne Marie Anne Longtin (m#2) <b>M. Anne Boulerice</b> Joseph Boulerice M. Anne Primeau
<b>Joseph Fontaine</b> Born 1815 Canada - 1870 census  Died 21 Feb 1881 Plattsburgh, NY (1)	Married abt 1845 NY Baptiste age 94 (84?) M. Anne age 77 (Boubrisse) Frank born 1845? Ellen born 1849 (Payette)	<b>Julie Garant</b> Born 1820 Canada -1870 census
<b>Francois Xavier Fontaine/ LaFountain</b> Headstone: Born 1844 Died 14 Feb 1875	Married 16 Aug 1869 St John, Keeseville, NY	<b>Helen Payette</b> Born May 1852 Theophile Payette Odille Dalpe-Pariseau
<b>Jesse Delima Fontaine / Jessie D. Lafountain</b> Born 15 Apr 1874 Plattsburgh, NY Baptized 19 Apr 1874 St Peter, Plattsburgh, NY GP: Joseph Payette, Delima Gendreau	Married 26 Jan 1898 1 <sup>st</sup> Baptist Church, Burl. VT	<b>Frederick H. Bigwood</b> Born 17 Nov 1870, VT Samuel Bigwood (England) Mary Abigail Herrick (m#1) John W. Granger
<b>Jessie D. Lafountain (Bigwood) - First Woman Admitted to the Vermont Bar on 4 Oct 1902</b>		

Source (1) – Online info, probably from Keeseville or Plattsburgh records; not verified