



## MYRA COLBY BRADWELL

1831 - 1894



Myra Bradwell

Myra Colby was born in Manchester, Vermont on February 12, 1831 and at the age of 12 moved to western New York and then on to Chicago. Educated as a teacher, she married James B. Bradwell, a law student, in May 1852 and moved with him to Memphis, Tennessee, where they taught and then operated their own private school. In 1854 they returned to Illinois and settled in Chicago, where in 1855 James Bradwell was admitted to the bar. He enjoyed considerable success, rising to the Cook County bench in 1861 and to the state legislature in 1873.

Myra taught herself law and in 1868 launched her own distinguished legal career by founding and operating the weekly Chicago Legal News, which became the most important legal publication in the western United States. In 1869 she helped organize Chicago's first women's suffrage convention, and she and her husband helped found the American Woman Suffrage Association in Cleveland.

In that same year Bradwell passed the qualifying examination and applied to the Illinois Supreme Court for admission to the state bar. The court denied her admission and the court's refusal, *on the grounds that she was a woman*, was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in April 1873. (See Bradwell v. State of Illinois.) Meanwhile, the State of Illinois passed a law prohibiting gender discrimination in admission to any occupation or profession except the military in 1872, but *after* her appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court had been denied.

Although Bradwell did not renew her application for the bar, in 1890 the Illinois Supreme Court, *on its own initiative*, took up her 1869 application again and admitted her to the bar; and in March 1892 she was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. **It is the correction of the denial of her 1869 application that leads many to consider her the first female lawyer admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court bar.**

As editor of the Chicago Legal News, Bradwell supported women's suffrage, railroad regulation, improved court systems, zoning laws, and other reforms. She helped write the Illinois Married Women's Property Act of 1861 and with the aid of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Livermore, and others, secured passage of the Earnings Act of 1869 that gave married women the right to retain their own wages (which were controlled by their husbands until then) and protected the rights of widows. She and her husband secured legislation making women eligible to serve in school offices and as notaries public and to be equal guardians of their children.

Bradwell was a representative of Illinois at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 and helped win the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 for Chicago. Bradwell was followed into the law and the Chicago Legal News by her daughter, Bessie Bradwell Helmer.

**Myra was a trailblazer for women in the law profession and her work directly secured rights for women to have control over their wages, possessions, and children.**

But Wait, There's More...



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## **MYRA COLBY BRADWELL**

### **The Rest of The Story**



Myra Colby Bradwell

In the summer of 1864, First Lady Mary Lincoln visited Manchester, Vermont with her sons Robert and Tad to trade the summer heat of Washington (and no doubt, the stress of the Civil War) for the cool mountain breezes of southern Vermont. They stayed at the Equinox Hotel; and enjoyed it so much that the family made plans to visit again the following summer — this time with the President.

According to the hotel's history, a special suite was constructed in anticipation of the President's visit, but it was not to be. He was assassinated the following April.

40 years later, Abraham Lincoln's son Robert Todd Lincoln purchased 500 acres in Manchester and built his summer home estate, Hildene.

In the late 19th century, it was relatively simple to have women committed to mental institutions, and this is what happened to Mary Todd Lincoln in 1875. Her only living son, Robert, took her to court where a trial was held. Though Mary had a defense attorney, he did not call a single witness; while the prosecuting attorney brought forward seventeen people to testify against Mary. Mary Todd Lincoln was declared "of not of sound mind," and she was placed at Bellevue Place, an asylum for "genteel women."

While historians and clinicians continue to discuss what Mary's condition might actually have been, there is no doubt that Mary Todd Lincoln's life had been filled with trauma. She was holding her husband's hand at the theater the night he was assassinated, and she had lost three sons (two during infancy and one, Tad, four years before the trial in 1875). As a result, the question as to whether she needed to be institutionalized will always be debated.

This is where Myra comes in...

Mary managed to get one important letter out of Bellevue Place, and that letter was to Myra Bradwell, a friend and neighbor from Chicago, who took up her cause. The letters between Mary Todd Lincoln and the Bradwells would become a matter of some controversy generations later, as the Lincoln family heirs sought to prevent their publication.

Bradwell immediately published stories of what had occurred in her law review journal. She also had a few stories she ran about Robert that he would rather not have had known. Bradwell made an appointment to visit Mrs. Lincoln at Bellevue Place and took members of the press with her. The press reported that Mary seemed perfectly sane. Robert Lincoln was publicly embarrassed.

After the whole scandal died down, Robert relented and allowed his mother to be freed.

### **History Alive!**

Be sure to visit Robert Todd Lincoln's beautiful Hildene here in Manchester during your visit, as it is a museum, gardens and operating farm.

*[www.hildene.org](http://www.hildene.org)*

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