SPECIAL FEATURE

JULIA C. ADDINGTON FROM STACYVILLE, IOWA:
FIRST WOMAN ELECTED TO PUBLIC OFFICE IN THE UNITED STATES? THE WORLD?

By Sally J. Kenney
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

In 1869, 51 years before women won the right to vote in national elections, Mitchell County Iowa voters elected Julia C. Addington Superintendent of Schools. Addington had been doing the job following an interim appointment to the post, but faced vigorous electoral opposition in the form of a notable local attorney, a man, Milton M. Browne, a graduate of Dartmouth College, an attorney, and a teacher.

Forty-year-old Addington had moved to Iowa from Wisconsin, owned land in and around Stacyville, and had taught in Waterloo, Cedar Falls, Des Moines, and at the Cedar Valley Seminary, a private high school in Osage. The intrigue over the continuing dispute over whether the town of Osage or Mitchell should be the county seat eclipsed the gender issues in the election, a controversy fueled by the newspapers of each town. For those in Osage, Addington’s supporters were “bolters” who favored Mitchell as the county seat and who ran a rival slate of candidates for the Republican ticket. The drama concluded with Addington and Browne each receiving exactly 633 votes. Browne demurred, and offered to let Addington take the seat.

Addington refused, and the election was settled by the practice of the time by a coin toss in Addington’s favor.

Before Addington assumed office, however, at her request Iowa’s Attorney General, Henry O’Connor, issued an opinion stating that since no express provision made male citizenship a test of eligibility, “there is no provision in the law preventing women from holding the office of county superintendent of common schools” (quoted in Mullenbach, 2007, 6).

It is surely no coincidence that also in 1869, Iowa bar examiners, upheld by the Iowa courts, admitted to the first woman to the bar in the United States, Belle Babb Mansfield, a 23-year-old from Mt. Pleasant Iowa (Morello 1986, 11-12). Mansfield had graduated from Iowa Wesleyan College and passed the Iowa Bar exam. Both escaped the fate of Myra Bradwell of Illinois whose state refused to admit her to the bar (upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in the notorious case of Bradwell v. State). Bradwell, and many women in other states, would have to change state statutes before they could practice law. Perhaps if Susan B. Anthony had first tried to vote in Iowa, history would be different?

New York suffragists reported Addington’s election in their newspaper, The Revolution, in November and December of 1869. Addington appeared to languish in obscurity, however, until local historian Cheryl Mullenbach stumbled across Mitchell County women’s contribution to a pamphlet for the Women’s Columbian Souvenir of Mitchell County, Iowa, 1892-1893 in the Iowa State Historical Society library as she was writing the history of Stacyville for its sesquicentennial. It noted simply without fanfare that “Julia C. Addington of Stacyville, Iowa was the first woman elected to an office in the United States.” Mullenbach is now part of a group of Iowans trying to win for Addington the renown she has so long deserved.

References


http://www.stacyville.com/pdfs/Addington.pdf

12