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The Amazing Dorothy Crockett

How an African-American woman from Providence became, in 1932, the 7th woman ever admitted to the Rhode Island Bar.



Dorothy Crockett in 1937, five years into her Providence law practice.
Image Credit: Dianne Bartleson

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Michael M. Bowden

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Researchers for the First Women attorneys of Rhode Island project have unearthed many pieces of history that might otherwise have been lost forever – but none were more surprising than the story of Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson, an African-American woman admitted to the Rhode Island bar in 1932, to become just the 7th female lawyer in the state’s history.

Born in Providence on July 29, 1910, Dorothy R. Crockett grew up near what is now Roger Williams National Memorial, between the East Side and the Providence River. After graduating from Classical High School in 1927, she attended Boston’s Portia Law School, a women-only institution that has since become New England School of Law. Upon receiving her bachelor of laws (LL.B.) in June 1931, just a month shy of her 21st birthday, she returned to Rhode Island – still living with her mother on the East Side, on the site of what is now the Emery-Woolley Dormitory at Brown University – and secured an internship at the Providence firm of an

established lawyer and prominent voice in the local African-American community, James M. Stockett, Jr., Esq.

On March 1, 1932, Crockett filed an application for admission to the Rhode Island bar, certifying that she had “studied law more than three years in the country” at Portia, and completed a hands-on apprenticeship “in the office of an attorney and counselor in this state,” namely, Stockett, who in turn endorsed her as a person of “good moral character, and, in his opinion, a suitable person for admission to the bar.”

Crockett passed the written portion of the bar examination in April, and the oral portion in May of that year. When her application was approved, it was big news: “Colored Girl Passes RI Bar,” ran a front-page headline in the May 14, 1932 edition of the *Boston Chronicle*. “First Negro Girl in Rhode Island to Enter the Field of Law,” trumpeted the *Providence Journal* in another lead story. The *Chronicle* noted that Crockett was “one of the few women of any race entitled to practice law in the state.” (Indeed, she was the last woman admitted to the state’s bar in the 1930s – Rhode Island’s 8th female lawyer would not be sworn in until nearly a decade later, in 1940; no other African-American women joined the bar until the 1970s.)

Triumph and Trouble

Crockett maintained a busy practice in Providence for five or six years, concentrating on family law and debt collection. Some of her quirkier cases occasionally turned up in the local papers: for example, she once represented a tenant who had donated blood for his landlord’s wife’s surgery – only to be evicted when the wife recovered. The tenant sued to be compensated for his blood (he lost).

During this period, the 1935 Rhode Island census shows Crockett working just two doors down from her mentor, Stockett, on the third floor at 4 Weybosset Street, at what is now One Financial Plaza, home to the offices of Locke Lord LLP in downtown Providence.

From the start, she seems to have been an outspoken voice in the black community: a 1932 article from the *Newport Mercury* finds a 21-year-old Crockett already addressing a large gathering of women, passionately advocating for the Republican presidential candidate, incumbent Herbert Hoover – whom she endorsed as “a careful, firm man and a great leader” as well as “the greatest power in our great land since the Civil War” – over the upstart Democratic challenger, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

A few years later, she turns up in the *Journal*, delivering an address to the “Juliette Derricotte Club” of Providence, named for an educator and political activist whose 1931 death in Tennessee, after being refused treatment by a whites-only hospital following a car accident, had sparked outrage in the African-American community.

Trouble struck in July of 1937, when a “sweeping grand jury investigation into the activities of collection agencies” resulted in indictments against a dozen defendants, including Crockett and three other attorneys involved in collection work, on a range of charges. All entered not guilty

pleas, and the charges were ultimately dismissed – “wiped off the books in open court,” in the words of a contemporary *Journal* article – and never resurfaced.

Still, the experience would have been traumatic and frightening for Crockett: at the age of 27, she was arrested, jailed – at least overnight – and indicted, along with the other attorneys charged. But the case quickly disappeared from the headlines, and those involved went on to enjoy long, successful careers in Rhode Island (Frank Wildes, the senior attorney among those charged, retired at age 90, and his glowing obituary a few years later notes only that he had been Brown’s oldest living alumnus, and that his tenure in the legal profession spanned 67 years).

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1938, Crockett married one Irving “Abe” Bartleson. Though living in Providence at the time, he gives his occupation as the “hotel business” in Los Angeles on their marriage license application. The following year, the couple would pack up and move to San Diego. But as late as December of 1938, Crockett was still practicing law in Providence– when she appears in a *Journal* legal roundup (alongside Wildes, once again), winning a routine default judgment for a local dairy.

From Attorney – to Maid?

That case, however, may well have been one of her last jobs as a lawyer.

A few years after Crockett’s move to the West Coast comes a sobering revelation: 1940 U.S. census records show Abe employed at a country club in La Jolla, a wealthy seaside suburb of San Diego. And Attorney Dorothy Crockett? She’s listed as a “maid”; another local history describes her as a “domestic” with a private family. Whether that position was permanent or long-term is unknown. But there is no evidence that Crockett ever practiced law in California or even tried to take the bar exam – indeed, such a course seems exceedingly unlikely: records reveal that the first black woman admitted to the bar California, in 1929, could not find legal employment in the state until 1939.

“Despite her incredible achievements, we cannot forget the time in which Attorney Crockett was living,” notes Deborah Johnson, RWU Law’s Director of Diversity & Outreach, explaining that race and gender certainly played a role in changing her career trajectory. “The fact that it was an African-American male attorney who sponsored Attorney Crockett’s admission to the bar in Rhode Island suggests that was likely the only way she could have been admitted to the bar at that time. It stands to reason that, without a similar contact in California (this is admittedly an assumption, but one that seems to be supported by the evidence), practicing there as a ‘colored’ woman in the 1940s and 1950s would have been out of the question.”

Johnson adds, “While we don’t know the facts, it seems fairly safe to assume that, given the time and era, and the blatant and subtle discrimination that African-Americans and other people of color and women were facing, Attorney Crockett’s ability to practice was probably severely limited. There is no reason to believe the discrimination of the time did not extend to the legal profession, which to this day remains one of the slowest to diversify.”

Crockett and her husband seem to have thrived nonetheless, purchasing land in La Jolla Shores area of San Diego (Crockett occasionally turns up in quasi-legal guise in city records, arguing for an easement or objecting to a city paving project) and setting up a household. A photo from those years shows Crockett in her garden, wielding a hoe and wearing a broad smile. A second depicts her out on the town, stylishly dressed in a fashionable hat and sunglasses. In yet another image, she poses with a large group of black women outside the vast Art Deco façade of the then-brand-new Radio City West building in Hollywood. Had she continued her role as an outspoken voice in the African-American community? It's an unanswered question – and one that may ultimately be beside the point.

“What Attorney Crockett achieved is amazing – then and now,” Johnson says, “I have been fascinated learning about Dorothy R. Crockett, and pieces of her life and career. I am also mesmerized by many of the photos of her that I have seen. She was clearly a woman of education and intellect, style and grace, and also one of grit and tenacity. Knowing the struggles and hurdles I have faced and had to overcome as a black woman attorney in the 21st century, I can only begin to imagine what her experiences were as the first black woman attorney in Rhode Island in the 1930s. I am in awe of and have tremendous respect for her.”

A Living Legacy

In 1947, Crockett gave birth to a daughter, Dianne Bartleson, her only child. But just seven years later, on February 27, 1955, she died of cancer at the age of 44.

This year, First Women researchers at RWU Law located Bartleson, now 72, in Surprise, Ariz. Only seven when Crockett passed away, she regrets being unable to shed much additional light on the mystery of her mother's life: “I did not even find out she was a lawyer until later in my own life,” Bartleson says. She had been told, however, that her mother was a “very elegant and very nice person,” and that she looked just like her.

“Then one day I was at a funeral and an old woman who'd been a friend of my mother told me, ‘You know, Dorothy was an attorney’ – which was a really big deal,” Bartleson recalls. “Finding this out made her so much more human and real to me — and made me sad. I am so sorry that she died so young.”

Bartleson and her husband, Harold Lewis, were both born in La Jolla.

“This was a very small, tightly knit community of African-Americans who were maids, chauffeurs and butlers,” Lewis explains. But while such jobs provided a comfortable, middle-class living in those days, Lewis recalls his parents' generation as being comparatively tight-lipped about their personal lives, though they always stressed the value of learning.

Bartleson finished high school near the top of her class and went on to graduate from the University of California, Berkeley. Both she and Lewis became public-school educators. “If there's such a thing as a gene of intelligence, Dorothy must have passed it down to Dianne,” Lewis says.

Nicole Dyszlewski of the Roger Williams University School of Law Library, who led the team that first researched Crockett's story, agrees that education seems to have been one of her defining principles.

"It seems so clear that education was important to Dorothy Crockett," she says. "She seems to have had an amazing impact on her daughter, without even knowing it. And that is a great legacy."

Johnson adds, "In fact, she created an indelible impact that aided the paths of black women, women of color and, indeed, all women attorneys through her monumental feat of 'rising to the top' and becoming the first black woman and the 7th overall – which still blows my mind! – to be admitted to practice in Rhode Island."

Bartleson echoes her sentiment.

"I would like my mother to be remembered as a pioneer, a trailblazer," she says. "Any time a black person is the first to do something it is important, because all of the advances that are possible for us in this day and age — they all rely on what our ancestors have done in the past. Becoming an attorney is an accomplishment, and to have become the first black woman in the state to do so, that's an accomplishment. So I'm really glad this research is being done."

Still, her sense of loss is palpable.

"I wish my mother had lived long enough to influence me," Bartleson mused. "I probably would have been encouraged to obtain a law degree myself. I think I would have become an ACLU style lawyer; and I can see my mother taking that direction as well. I just wish I could talk to her about it – to find out how it all happened, what motivated her. But there's nobody to ask. That part is kind of sad."

Johnson, however, is confident that Attorney Dorothy R. Crockett's influence will endure.

"Although I am not a member of the Rhode Island bar," she says, "I have to believe that my legal education and admission to practice in three states, including California, were possible because of Attorney Dorothy R. Crockett and the other First Women, who paved the way. I am privileged and honored to be a part of Attorney Crockett's legacy, and I am indebted to her success and her willingness to champion the rights of others."

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This September, RWU Law will honor Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson and her groundbreaking legacy by naming a classroom in her honor. Dorothy's daughter Dianne Bartleson will be present for the event. Watch law.rwu.edu for details.