

9-10-2019

# Dorothy R. Crockett Classroom Dedication September 10, 2019

Roger Williams University School of Law

Lorraine Lalli

Bre'Anna Metts-Nixon

Michael M. Bowden

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*Come Celebrate* a Pioneering  
Rhode Island Attorney

*P. Sawyer*  
Be it Remembered,  
*P. Sawyer* Roger Williams University February  
SCHOOL OF LAW our County of Providence  
for admission to the bar, and it appearing that he is a citizen of the United States, that he resides in

Roger Williams University  
School of Law

*Proudly Honors*

**Rhode Island's First  
African-American  
Woman Lawyer**



**Dorothy Russell  
Crockett Bartleson,  
Admitted 1932**

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**A Special Classroom Dedication**  
**Tuesday, September 10, 2019, 4:00 p.m.**  
**RWU Law, Bristol Campus**

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**Keynote Speaker:** The Honorable O. Rogeriee Thompson,  
United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit  
**Special Guest:** Ms. Dianne Bartleson, Dorothy's daughter  
*Reception to follow*

For more information or to RSVP, contact [lawevents@rwu.edu](mailto:lawevents@rwu.edu)


FIRST-CLASS MAIL  
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He is remembered, that on the 29<sup>th</sup> day  
of August  
of 1932  
for admission to the bar, and it appearing that he is a citizen of the U.S.

September 10, 2019

4:00 PM Dedication Remarks - School of Law 283 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
5:15 PM Ribbon Cutting - School of Law 285 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

Reception - School of Law 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Atrium



Roger Williams University  
**SCHOOL OF LAW**  
*Proudly Honors*  
Rhode Island's First African-American  
Woman Lawyer

**Dorothy Russell Crockett  
Bartleson, Admitted 1932**

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*Come Celebrate* a Pioneering  
Rhode Island Attorney

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Roger Williams University  
**SCHOOL OF LAW**

September 2019

## RWU Law Will Dedicate Classroom to RI's First African-American Woman Lawyer

First Circuit Judge O. Rogeriee Thompson will deliver keynote on Dorothy R. Crockett, admitted to the bar in 1932 as one of state's first seven women allowed to practice law.



Dorothy Crockett in the late 1930s.

September 4, 2019

Michael M. Bowden

BRISTOL, R.I., September 4, 2019 – Next Tuesday, Roger Williams University School of Law will dedicate a classroom to an extraordinary woman who, in 1932, became Rhode Island's first African-American woman lawyer.

In a time of widespread racial and gender discrimination, Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson (1910-1955) undertook an astonishing journey to complete law school, pass the bar exam and become, at age 21, the state's seventh female lawyer. Research indicates that she was the sole woman admitted to the state bar in the 1930s, and the only black woman to join until the 1970s.

The classroom dedication event will be held in the Honorable Bruce M. Selya Appellate Courtroom at the RWU Law campus in Bristol, R.I., on Tuesday, September 9, 2019, at 4:00 p.m. The Honorable O. Rogeriee Thompson, United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit will deliver the keynote. Students will speak of the event's meaning for both women and people of color. Citations will be presented by the offices of Congressman David Cicilline (R.I.), Governor Gina Raimondo and Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza. Finally, Crockett's daughter, Diane Bartleson of Surprise, Ariz., will share a few family photographs and personal comments about her mother. A reception will follow.

"The Dorothy R. Crockett Classroom dedication is meaningful for the RWU Law community because there is a through line from Dorothy to our student body, which is now majority female and increasingly made up of students of color," said RWU Law Dean Michael Yelnosky.

"Dorothy is significant to our alumni as well," Yelnosky added. "For example, this year three of our African-American alumni, one a woman, have been sworn in as judges in Rhode Island. And finally, honoring Dorothy Crockett helps all the members of the Rhode Island bar learn more about the history of the profession in this state. Playing a role in exploring that history is a natural for this law school."

*This focus on a woman of color is significant, and I am so delighted that the School of Law is leading in this way by honoring Dorothy's place in Rhode Island legal history.*

*~ Ame O. Lambert, Ph.D., RWU Chief Diversity Officer*

The event's significance to Roger Williams University extends beyond the law school as well.

"Dorothy Crockett's legacy is one I relate to personally, as the only vice president of color here," said Ame O. Lambert, Ph.D., Vice President for Equity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer at Roger Williams. "Being a pioneer or an 'only' often means having no solid frame of reference, or not being able to ever find your true equilibrium. You face unique realities that are hard to articulate to anyone else, because no one else is sharing the experience you are having in quite the same way."

For this reason, Lambert said, it's important to remember and honor pioneers such as Crockett.

"It is very helpful to look to, and learn from, those who dealt with larger and more intense challenges than you will ever face," Lambert observed. "I can only imagine the inner fortitude [Crockett] must have had to make it through obstacle after obstacle. I hope that, somewhere along the line, she had a sense that her work mattered and that she was making it better for others."

### **An Enduring Legacy**

Researchers at the Roger Williams Law Library first unearthed Crockett's story while digging through records for the First Women Attorneys of Rhode Island project in 2017-18. In the months since then, they have gradually filled in the details using court records, genealogical

resources and newspaper archives. Daughter Bartleson finds it heartening that her mother is receiving this honor some nine decades after her groundbreaking achievement.

“I would like my mother to be remembered as a pioneer, a trailblazer,” she said. “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 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.”

Lambert, however, argued that Crockett's impact is indelible.

“Change always requires courage,” she said. “Someone to step into the fray and carry the load. This classroom dedication will remind the many who will [in the future] courageously step into the fray that they are not alone, even when it feels like they are. Others have come before them, done their part and carried their share of the load – and now it is their turn.”

It is also significant, she noted, that Crockett represents an important step forward for both women and people of color.

“Women of color often get lost in a single-identity focus,” Lambert explained. “They are overlooked in the ‘women’ conversation *and* overlooked in the ‘people of color’ conversation. So this intersectional focus on a woman of color is significant, and I am so delighted that the School of Law is leading in this way by honoring Dorothy’s place in Rhode Island legal history.”

September 6, 2019

Dear Students, Faculty and Staff:

Roger Williams University School of Law will dedicate a classroom to Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson, an extraordinary woman who, in 1932, became Rhode Island's first African American woman lawyer.

On Tuesday, Sept. 10, you are invited to attend the dedication of the Dorothy R. Crockett Classroom (Law 285), featuring a keynote address by the Honorable O. Rogeriee Thompson of the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. Students will reflect on the meaning of Crockett's achievement for both women and people of color. Citations will be presented by the offices of Congressman David Cicilline (R.I.), Governor Gina Raimondo and Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza. Crockett's daughter, Dianne Bartleson of Surprise, Ariz., will share some family photographs and personal observations about her mother. A reception will follow.

In a time of widespread racial and gender discrimination, Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson (1910-1955) undertook an astonishing journey to complete law school, pass the bar exam and become, at age 21, the state's seventh female lawyer. Research indicates that she was the sole woman admitted to the state bar in the 1930s, and the only black woman to join until the 1970s. For more information about her life, read the full story [here](#).

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"Dorothy is significant to our alumni as well," Yelnosky added. "For example, this year three of our African American alumni, one a woman, have been sworn in as judges in Rhode Island. And finally, honoring Dorothy Crockett helps all the members of the Rhode Island bar learn more about the history of the profession in this state. Playing a role in exploring that history is a natural for this law school."

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**Dorothy R. Crockett Classroom Dedication**

Tuesday, Sept. 10, 2019

4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

Bruce M. Selya Appellate Courtroom 283

RWU School of Law

Bristol Campus

Please join all of us at Roger Williams University and the School of Law in sharing an exciting celebration of Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson. The event is free and open to the public. Please RSVP to [lawevents@rwu.edu](mailto:lawevents@rwu.edu).

*Dorothy R. Crockett*  
Classroom Dedication  
Room 285



Tuesday, September 10, 2019

Roger Williams University  
SCHOOL OF LAW

## *Acknowledgments*

We would like to offer a special thank you to those who helped recover the amazing story of Attorney Dorothy R. Crockett:

*At the RWU Law Library:*

Assistant Dean Raquel Ortiz, and law librarians Nicole Dyszlewski, Jessica Silvia, and Lucinda Harrison-Cox

*Also at RWU Law:*

Dean Michael Yelnosky; Assistant Dean of Admissions Michael Donnelly-Boyles; Assistant Dean of Students Lorraine Lalli; and Director of Communications Michael Bowden

Deborah Johnson, Assistant Teaching Professor,  
Northeastern University School of Law

Rhode Island Judicial Records Center,  
especially Andrew Smith

New England Law Boston Library,  
especially Karen Green

RWU Law Board of Directors

First Women Steering Committee

Dianne Bartleson and Harold Lewis

*Dorothy R. Crockett*  
**Classroom Dedication**

**Opening Remarks**

Dean Michael Yelnosky

**Introduction**

Lorraine Lalli '01, *Assistant Dean of Students*

**Comments**

Bre'Anna Metts-Nixon, *Black Law Students Association*

Jessica Ryan, *Women's Law Society*

**Keynote**

The Honorable O. Rogeriee Thompson,  
*United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit*

**Presentations**

Citation, Office of Congressman David Cicilline (R.I.),  
U.S. House of Representatives

Citation, Office of Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo  
*Presented by Deputy Chief of Staff Nicole M. Verdi '11,*  
*President, Law Alumni Association*

Citation, Office of Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza

**Reflections**

Dianne Bartleson, *daughter of Dorothy Crockett*

**Concluding Remarks**

Dean Michael Yelnosky

**Ribbon-Cutting and Dedication**

**Reception**



## The Dorothy R. Crockett Classroom

Dedicated on September 10, 2019

Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson (1910-1955)  
Rhode Island's First African-American Woman Lawyer  
Admitted to the Bar in 1932

In a time of widespread racial and gender discrimination, a young African-American woman from Providence undertook an astonishing journey to complete law school, pass the bar exam and become - at age 21 - Rhode Island's seventh female lawyer. Research indicates that she was the sole woman admitted to the state bar in the 1930s, and the only black woman to join until the 1970s.

*"I would like my mother to be remembered as a pioneer, a trailblazer. 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 rely on what our ancestors have done in the past."*

- Dianne Bartleson, daughter of Dorothy R. Crockett

Roger Williams University  
SCHOOL OF LAW

This past year, beginning with the first women project, we have spent time reflecting on the women who led the way in Rhode Island. Women who looked beyond the traditional barriers and boundaries placed on them by society and dared to dream bigger and push harder. These are women whose names were unfamiliar to many of us, but who now have their rightful place on our walls and in our halls at Roger Williams Law School – and who we celebrate for their accomplishments.

Today, we highlight Dorothy Russell Crockett, the first African-American woman admitted to the Rhode Island Bar. She was admitted in 1932 as only the 7<sup>th</sup> woman permitted to practice in Rhode Island.

*From the RWU Law Magazine:*

*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.)*

An occasion like this forces one to pause and reflect on how someone else's journey, how someone else's courage had enabled your own success or helped you forge your own path.

I began law school in 1998, over 70 years after Ms. Crockett began at Boston's Portia Law School. Like Ms. Crockett, I had grown up east of Providence's downtown and attended Classical High School in Providence. I began law school as a young black woman and wondered how my gender, and more specifically how my race might impact my ability to succeed. I wondered if it would be a barrier to success, or the fuel to my fire. Unlike Ms. Crockett, however, I had mentors and examples to follow – at least one of whom – Judge Thompson – you will hear from tonight. While I did not know of Ms. Crockett at the time, had not heard her name – I knew instinctively that there must have been an Ada Sawyer (the first female attorney in RI) and a Ms. Dorothy Crockett, because I while I didn't know who had blazed the trail – I could clearly see the path that they laid out before me.

I am so pleased that we are here today to give appropriate honor to Ms. Dorothy Crockett who showed us the way.



September 10, 2019

Speech given at Roger Williams University School of Law for the classroom dedication in honor of Dorothy R. Crockett.

Good Evening, my name is Bre' Anna Metts- Nixon and I am a third-year law student and also the President of the Black Law Student Association.

I first want to say that I am proud of Roger Williams University School of Law for making this dedication to Mrs. Dorothy Russell Crockett happen. Representation matters. For students like myself this is more than just a room named after someone. This is a constant reminder that nothing, no matter how hard this journey through law school may be, Black and Brown students, are recognized and will make it too.

This academic year I decided I wanted to be the President of the Black Law Student Association or as we call it here at the law school BLSA, for two reasons. First, to help build a stronger community amongst our Black and Brown law students and second, to help change the narrative of our students from "we can" to "we will".

While I am dedicated to my goals as the BLSA President, the task is not easy. It is stories like that of Ms. Crockett that inspire me to continue to push through the obstacles of achieving my goals. Like Ms. Crockett, I was born in Providence, Rhode Island. I grew up on the East side and South side of Providence. For me, Attorney Crockett's story was personal. It was inspiring to hear a story about a Black woman who defied the odds, but it was ground shaking to know that every day I waited for a city bus, mingled with friends, and passed by the exact location where a phenomenal woman started her journey as the first black female attorney in my little state. If you have never heard of or understood the meaning of the term black girl magic, Attorney Crockett is that definition.

While learning about the journey of Attorney Crockett, I took away 3 key lessons.

First lesson, support.

Ms. Crockett was a leader in her community. She showed people we must not be afraid to demand change, and we must move forward as a community to make that change happen. In BLSA we push our students to understand that when one of us falls we all fall. We push them to understand that we are a community and at times we must be able to count on one another for support when we may need it. As

a leader of BLSA I work to change the mindset of our students from competing with one another for a “seat at the table” and instead into a mindset of inviting one another to the table and when necessary, building their own.

Second lesson, resilience.

When Attorney Crockett was admitted into the bar her accomplishment was celebrated with headlines like “Colored Girl Passes Bar” and “First Negro Girl in Rhode Island to Enter Field of Law”. While others may have read this as exciting news, all I could think about were all of the comments and opinions Ms. Crockett must have had to endure from both her male and female counterparts. Those who were not in agreeance with her passing and being admitted to the bar. Through all of that struggle, she still pushed forward. One of my role models here at the law school once told me to, “stop trying to change the way some people may feel about me. They will always feel a way, but the best way to beat that is to leave them speechless. You do that by winning.” You become the only student of color to make trial team, you become the President of the Black Law Student Association, or you become the first Black woman to be admitted to the Rhode Island Bar.

Final lesson, focus.

It’s not enough to just have a goal, but like Ms. Dorothy Crockett, you must have a plan, and actively take the steps necessary to complete that plan.

I want to leave you all with two challenges. The first is for the women in the room.

We would be lying to ourselves if we sat here and said the struggles of all women are the same. If you believe they are let me remind you that Ms. Crockett was the first Black woman admitted to the bar in Rhode Island in 1932. It took roughly 38 years for another Black woman to be admitted to the bar in comparison to the next female joining in 1940.

With that, I challenge all of the women in the room to this. I challenge you to do more than just talk the talk. To do more than just attend events like this or say we want the legal community to be more diverse without action. Instead acknowledge the advantage you may have over others and use that as a way to support those who have a different struggle than you. Attorney Crockett’s legacy can only live on if continue to support one another and actively fight for change.

The second is specifically for my women of color. When someone finds the courage to tell you to your face you can’t do something, I want you to take all of that fear and nervousness you have built up in the moment and ball it into one hand. Then I want you to take all of that Black girl magic you were born with

and ball it up into the other hand. Then I want you to tap into your inner Dorothy Crockett, and with a slight smirk on your face I want you to say just this, "Watch me."

Attorney Crockett accomplished what was seen to be the impossible. She was an intelligent, determined, and resilient woman. She opened the door not only for Black women like me from little old Rhode Island, but for women across the nation. If you're doubting that, stop it. I feel honored to continue her legacy.

Thank You



























*Citizen Citation*  
In Memory of  
**Dorothy Russell Crockett**

COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PROVIDENCE  
In honor and appreciation for the lifetime  
achievement of Dorothy Russell Crockett as the  
first African American woman selected to the Rhode Island Bar Association,  
a dedicated public servant, whose selfless  
dedication and strong contributions to the residents of the City of Providence  
afforded for the strengthening administration and respect of many.  
The people of Providence give Dorothy Russell Crockett's family, friends, colleagues and  
community members in celebrating the life and legacy of a beloved and extraordinary  
individual.

Given under the Seal of the Mayor of the City of Providence  
this 30<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2024

  
Mayor of Providence















**Dorothy R. Crockett Classroom**

Dedicated on September 30, 2019

Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson (1910-1953)  
Rhode Island's First African-American Woman Lawyer  
Admitted to the Bar in 1932

...and gender discrimination. A young African American woman journeyed to complete law school, pass the bar exam, and launch a career. Fewer than 100 women had done so in the 1930s, and she was the only Black woman to be remembered as a pioneer, a trailblazer. ... it is important, because all of the ... are only an what our ancestors have done. ... daughter of Dorothy R. Crockett

Williams University  
SCHOOL OF LAW













## The Dorothy R. Crockett Classroom

Dedicated on September 10, 2019

Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson (1910-1955)  
Rhode Island's First African-American Woman Lawyer  
Admitted to the Bar in 1932

In a time of widespread racial and gender discrimination, a young African-American woman from Providence undertook an astonishing journey to complete law school, pass the bar exam – at age 21 – Rhode Island's seventh female lawyer. Research indicates that she was the first African-American admitted to the state bar in the 1930s, and the only black woman to join until the 1980s.

"I would like my mother to be remembered as a pioneer, a trailblazer. Any person is the first to do something it is important, because all of the advances possible for us in this day and age rely on what our ancestors have done."

~ Dianne Bartleson, daughter of Dorothy R. Crockett

Roger Williams University  
SCHOOL OF LAW



















The Dorothy R. Crockett Class

Dedicated on September 10, 2019

Dorothy Russell Crockett Bartleson (1900-1984)  
Rhode Island's First African-American Woman  
Admitted to the Bar in 1932

Special and gender discrimination, a strong African American woman to complete law school, graduate from the University of Massachusetts, Boston in 1936, and the only Black woman to be remembered in a journal, a trail blazer. It is important because all of us rely on what our ancestors have done for us.

Williams University  
SCHOOL OF LAW



















**Crockett Classroom**

September 10, 2019

Crockett Bartleson (1910-1955)  
African-American Woman Lawyer  
... in 1932.

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