

Michigan Lawyers in History

Martha W. Griffiths

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

In the early 1970s, *Parade* magazine polled “law school deans, prominent law association members and experienced judges” about possible women President Nixon might appoint to the United States Supreme Court if a seat opened up during his term of office, and profiled six who were frequently mentioned.¹ One of the women on that short list was Rep. Martha W. Griffiths.²

Her nickname on the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee was “Madam Justice,”³ so her inclusion in the *Parade* article wasn’t much of a surprise, but it was a long way from the 1930s when Griffiths was denied entry to Harvard Law School because of her gender.

Martha Edna Wright was born on January 29, 1912, into a family of strong women. Her paternal grandmother, Frances Jenette, raised three boys on her own after her husband was killed while working as a night watchman.⁴ Jenette worked as a seamstress,⁵ clerk, and hotel manager to provide for her family, and when her boys were old enough to help with family finances, their mother encouraged them to finish high school.

The middle son, Charles Wright, became a postal carrier and married Nelle Sullinger. When Martha was born in 1912, the Wrights had been married five years and had a nearly four-year-old son, Edward. Nelle worked outside the home occasionally—at one point “as a substitute postal carrier”⁶—but was generally known as “a very fine cook”⁷ and was greatly involved in her children’s lives.

Charles had no trouble believing that girls were just as smart as boys—at the very least, Martha could outshoot the boys at squirrel-hunting⁸—and perhaps assumed that both Martha and her brother would attend college. However, when the Great Depression intervened, Martha was told there was only enough money to send one child to college and that would be Edward.⁹ Nelle intervened; Martha wasn’t going to “marry and find then that husbands [didn’t] come with a guarantee that they will live forever,”¹⁰ and she “took in boarders”¹¹ to help pay for her daughter’s education.

Martha enrolled at the University of Missouri in 1930. She studied political science and economics and joined the debate team, an extracurricular activity she excelled in as a high school student. She also met Hicks Griffiths, who had transferred to Missouri from New York. He, too, was interested in political science and debate—but was especially interested in Martha.

The couple married on December 29, 1933, to “continue to argue politics,”¹² as Hicks later said. It would be one of the more successful political marriages of its time, and Griffiths always supported his wife. Martha Griffiths would later say, “[I]f every man were like her husband[,] there would be no need for an equal rights amendment, and she would not have to work so hard on behalf of women.”¹³

Once the Griffiths graduated, they made plans to attend law school together. This was Hicks’s idea; he wanted to make sure

Martha had the means to support herself in case something unexpected happened to him.¹⁴ Fortunately for Michigan, Harvard Law School, which had accepted Hicks, did not admit women and the couple looked for a university that would take both of them. They moved to Ann Arbor and enrolled in the University of Michigan Law School.

The couple initially took classes together until “they found themselves entertaining the class by arguing conflicting opinions”;¹⁵ Martha never backed down, not even to Hicks, and the couple rearranged their schedules to take classes separately. They graduated together in 1940—the first married couple to graduate from the University of Michigan Law School.¹⁶

The Griffiths worked together at the American Automobile Insurance Company before Hicks was hired by Michigan’s Office of Price Administration and Martha joined the Army Ordnance Department as its first female contract negotiator.¹⁷ After World War II ended, they founded the Detroit law firm of Griffiths & Griffiths and were joined by one of Hicks’s Office of Price Administration colleagues, G. Mennen Williams.

Griffiths & Griffiths may have continued in that vein if Phoebe Munnecke, “an old-time suffragette who was practicing law in Detroit,”¹⁸ hadn’t suggested that Martha run for political office in the 1946 election. Martha and Hicks had become more involved in politics, having founded the Michigan Democratic Club. Martha thought running for office was silly, but her husband



Congresswoman Martha Griffiths of Michigan

encouraged her to give it a try.¹⁹ She lost that year, but didn't give up, and was elected to Michigan's House of Representatives in 1949.

Once Griffiths was elected to office, she couldn't be stopped. She served as a state representative for two terms, after which she was appointed to the Detroit Recorder's Court by G. Mennen Williams, her former law colleague who was then Michigan's governor. Shortly after, she ousted the incumbent in the 17th Congressional District to earn a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Griffiths wasn't the first woman in the U.S. House, nor was she the first woman that Michigan sent to Congress, but Washington, D.C., hadn't seen anything like her before. She didn't back down from a fight and refused to fit into any preconceived mold.²⁰ When a substantial highway bill she supported did not pass, she handed "each House member a 10-inch model of a Ford Thunderbird," noting that soon the models would be the only cars able "to get on our highways."²¹ If she felt a department was overspending, she expressed her views publicly.²² When she felt Congress was shirking its duty by considering a tax cut, she didn't hesitate to tell the House of Representatives to "face up to its responsibilities" and act like the "co-equal branch of government" it was.²³

Even after she was mugged while walking home from her office one evening, Griffiths didn't back down. She chastised the D.C. police for the unsafe environment on Capitol Hill and requested more officers

patrol the area. She also tested a gas pistol her husband sent her; she returned it, noting her preference for a "safety razor blade" and "a piercing scream"²⁴ should a repeat incident occur.

As her reputation in Washington grew—she was the first woman appointed to the powerful House Ways & Means Committee—Griffiths didn't forget where she came from. Remembering her postal-worker parents who put her through college, she pushed for better pay for postal workers and testified before the House Post Office & Civil Service Committee.²⁵ Remembering her grandmother, who had fought for women's suffrage and "wanted to live long enough to vote for a woman president,"²⁶ she became a huge proponent for women's rights.

Griffiths pushed for the 1964 Civil Rights bill to prohibit discrimination based on sex, and many credited her for its successful passage.²⁷ She also championed the Equal Rights Amendment, which had floundered in a House committee for almost half a century. A successful discharge petition and House vote made her a household name across the country. An election intervened before the final passage, but Griffiths reintroduced the resolution at the next session. It passed both chambers, was endorsed by the president, and moved to the state legislatures for ratification.

Two years into that ratification process and one year after the *Parade* article touting "Madame Justice," Griffiths retired from Congress. Her announcement made headlines across the country and shocked her staff, but she was ready to return home to Michigan. She picked up where she left off, practicing law with her husband. She also took some seats on corporate boards.

Griffiths eventually returned to politics, serving as lieutenant governor for James Blanchard for two terms in the 1980s.

By the time she died on April 22, 2003, Griffiths had amassed a number of titles: state representative, Detroit Recorder's Court judge, congresswoman, "Mother of the Equal Rights Amendment," and lieutenant governor, to name a few. One of the titles she held the longest was member of the State Bar of Michigan. ■

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ENDNOTES

1. Barth, *If a Seat Opens: Will Nixon Choose a Woman for the Supreme Court?*, *Parade* (January 7, 1973).
2. The others were Dorothy Nelson, University of Southern California Law School dean; Federal District Judge Cornelia G. Kennedy; United States Court of Appeals Judge Shirley Hufstедler; Soia Mentschikoff, professor at the University of Chicago; and Representative Rita Hauser (R-NY).
3. *If a Seat Opens*, p. 10.
4. Missouri Law Enforcement Memorial <http://www.missourimemorial.com/roll/pierce/1891_EdgarWright/> (accessed September 17, 2017).
5. George & Ingersoll, *Oral History Interview with Martha W. Griffiths* (December 1977–April 1978 and October 1979), *The Martha Griffiths Papers* (2003-57, 69/3/9-10, 67/7/5), Box 9, p. 5.
6. *Id.* at 3.
7. *Id.* at 3.
8. Daubenmier, *Martha Griffiths: Stalwart Supporter of Equal Rights*, *The Blade* (April 9, 1989).
9. *Oral History Interview*, p. 3.
10. *Id.*
11. *Id.*
12. *Congressional Husbands a Varied Breed*, *Times-News* (June 15, 1972).
13. *Oral History Interview*, p. 4.
14. *Id.*
15. *Congressional Husbands a Varied Breed*.
16. I've seen this fact quoted in a number of news articles, not the least of which is *Congressional Husbands a Varied Breed*, *Times-News* (June 15, 1972), p. 14. However, if anyone has information to refute that, I'd love to know.
17. *Oral History Interview*, p. 5.
18. Hammel, *A Congresswoman's Special Husband*, *St. Petersburg Times* (November 12, 1968).
19. *Id.*
20. Fogel, *Martha—'a Powerful Chick' In Congress, a Cook at Home*, *Detroit Free Press* (September 13, 1970), p. 41.
21. *Martha Gives House the Bird*, *Detroit Free Press* (July 29, 1955), p. 23.
22. Haswell, *Agriculture Dept. Put on the Griddle: Rep. Griffiths Lists Complaints*, *Detroit Free Press* (August 9, 1959), p. 9.
23. *A Lady Tells Congress to Stand Up for Itself*, *Detroit Free Press* (October 11, 1963), p. 6.
24. Branson, *Hoodlum Crimes Rising Menace To Capitol Hill Women Workers*, *Battle Creek Enquirer* (March 15, 1962), p. 23.
25. *Mrs. Griffiths Asks Raise for Postmen*, *Detroit Free Press* (February 16, 1955), p. 6.
26. Blumenthal, *Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX: The Law That Changed the Future of Girls in America* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2005), p. 16.
27. Robinson, *Martha Wins Day For Gals*, *Detroit Free Press* (February 11, 1964), p. 1.