

The Changing Face of Justice



A Look at the First 100 Women Attorneys in North Carolina

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Artist rendering of
Cornelia McKimmon Trott



BORN TO JAMES McKimmon III and Willa Norris McKimmon in Raleigh, North Carolina, on September 6, 1911, Cornelia McKimmon was the oldest of five children. Just before the Great Depression began her father died, leaving the family in difficult financial straits. The double loss of her beloved father and of the family's means of sustenance had a deep and lasting effect on the young Cornelia McKimmon.

Cornelia McKimmon attended Peace College in Raleigh and the Women's

Cornelia McKimmon" for what the editors clearly saw as a thankless task: "From here, her new job looks pretty dreary. It consists of digging back through the statutes enacted since 1919, and sorting them out so they will be less confusing to lawyers who try to use them."

The *News and Observer* piece concludes with a rousing endorsement of her sporting abilities: "Miss McKimmon's coming to the department will dethrone Attorney General Harry McMullan as the best golfer in his department. The Attorney General does well enough on the links, but the department's one and only woman lawyer shoots in the lower 70s — which is good in anybody's game. It comes natural with her. She played golf, basketball and hockey at school, and is at home in the saddle."

Though being hired by the Attorney General's office was certainly an accolade, it did preclude other opportunities. Her son William noted: "On occasion late in life she mentioned the fact that traditional law firms did not seek to hire her. But she was never bitter about discrimination."

Mrs. Trott once told an interviewer, "People used to put me on a pedestal just because I was a little different. 'You must be mighty smart,' they'd say. But it was an unfounded pedestal. They just didn't realize [that] women are as smart as men."

CORNELIA MCKIMMON TROTT

LICENSED 1938
(1911-1994)



College of the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, working her way through school. She was graduated in 1931 with a bachelor's degree in English. After graduation, she was a school teacher in Franklin, North Carolina, and in Raleigh.

In 1934, she began working for the North Carolina Department of Revenue as head of the filing system for the sales tax division. Around that time she began the bar review course taught by Wilbur Royster, a noted lawyer in Raleigh. After several years of night courses, she took and passed the bar examination in August 1938. She met her husband, Graham Foard Trott, while taking the bar review. The two were married in 1942.

When her son was born in 1946, Cornelia McKimmon left the Attorney General's office. But shortly thereafter she returned to work, taking a part-time job with the Commercial Standard Title Insurance Company. (Her father had been a principal in McKimmon & McKee, a Raleigh general insurance company.) Later she became president and co-owner of Lawyers Title Insurance Company of North Carolina. During most of her career at the company, she worked all day on Monday and one-half to three-fourths of the day during the rest of the week, a schedule that permitted her to balance professional, personal, and family pursuits.

She worked closely with James Poyner, a well-known and respected attorney in Raleigh who owned the majority of the stock in the company. An expert in real property law, Cornelia McKimmon developed and maintained friendships with real property lawyers all over the state. At the time of her retirement in 1973, Lawyers Title wrote the overwhelming majority of title insurance in the state.

"I know I got a lot of my business in the beginning out of curiosity," Mrs. Trott recalled. "They just wanted to see if a woman had any sense.... Frankly, I have always thought women had as much brainpower as men in the business world. And I have seen some great brains go down the drain because of convention-bound women."

Choosing to pursue a career in law was a bold step for her. She said, "When I finished school at Greensboro, women had three options. They could be secretaries, caseworkers, or school teachers. I tried teaching school but loathed and despised it." Instead, she decided to become a lawyer.

In 1939, Cornelia McKimmon became the second woman attorney — after Gertrude McGee Upchurch — to work for the State of North Carolina. She was hired as a law clerk by the Attorney General's office to assist in a new effort to codify the state's statutes. An article in the *Raleigh News and Observer* that year noted the hiring of "tall, athletic

She believed firmly in equal pay for equal work, saying, "I have always believed that women should be paid according to their ability." Though she supported the women's liberation movement, she had certain reservations: "I still believe in the family and do not agree with the freedom of illegitimate births. I have strong feelings about children being thrown around without proper care."

Mrs. Trott was an outstanding athlete. She won a Raleigh tennis championship, and once scored forty points in a city league basketball game. But she was best known for her skills as a golfer, winning state championships many times in an over fifty-year career on the links. She had four holes-in-one. Perhaps her most notable golf accomplishment was the rare double eagle she once carded in a tournament. She also served on the boards of various community and golf-related organizations, and was noted for her good sportsmanship.

She was proud of her choice of law as a career, and recommended it highly. Late in life she told a reporter: "I just can't say enough about the opportunities for young women in law. It's a terrific field for women. It's wide open and getting better and better. And if I can be an example in helping another young person choose this profession, then I have accomplished something."

Cornelia McKimmon Trott died on August 28, 1994.