

Susan Cecelia O'Neill

1871 - 1935

"By heritage she was destined to be a leader in the community. Endowed with an unusual intellect, she embraced the law as her profession, and in its practice displayed exceptional ability."

- Atty. John H. Cassidy

Attorney Susan Cecelia O'Neill was the second woman admitted to the Connecticut Bar, the first woman in Connecticut to practice law in the courtroom, and the first woman to argue a case before the Connecticut Supreme Court.

Born on July 8, 1871, she was the daughter of John O'Neill, Dean of the Waterbury Bar, and Mary Elizabeth Fitzpatrick O'Neill. Her family, a mixture of Irish and Yankee, lived on Cooke Street for many decades.

O'Neill was educated at the Convent of Notre Dame in Waterbury. Her first career plan was to become a teacher, but after a few days as a substitute teacher, she decided to try something else. After working a year at the Silas Bronson Library, O'Neill enrolled at the New York University School of Law in 1895, only five years after it began to admit women. She graduated with distinction in 1897, and was admitted to the Connecticut Bar on June 19, 1898. The *Bridgeport Herald* called her a "Modern Portia" after she passed the bar exam, a reference to Shakespeare's character in *The Merchant of Venice*, who disguised herself as a man when she apprenticed as an attorney.

O'Neill joined her father and brother in their law firm, O'Neill, O'Neill, and O'Neill, which was located on Bank Street. In 1901, O'Neill became the first woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court of Connecticut, assisting her father with one of his cases. In 1904, she was admitted to and practiced before the Supreme Court of the United States in a case involving a suit against the Berlin Iron Bridge Company.

As one of a small number of women practicing law in the United States, O'Neill received media attention from around the country. The *Indiana Weekly* magazine published a review of her performance before the Connecticut Supreme Court in 1901, declaring that she "made an excellent impression." The *New Jersey Law Journal* wrote in 1907 that she was "the most remarkable woman lawyer in New England, as well as one of the youngest."

On occasion, O'Neill's cases made the state newspapers, such as with a 1901 case in which she helped a young mother regain custody of her child following a severe bout of post-partum depression, a health condition that was not understood at the time. As the state's only practicing female attorney, she was especially appealing to female clients, again making state headlines for her defense of the "Flapper" before the Connecticut Supreme Court in 1922. She argued that compared to traditional floor-length skirts, knee-length skirts made it much easier to walk up stairs or get into cars. O'Neill also pointed out that the Flapper's shorter skirt was more sanitary than floor-length skirts, which carried germs and dirt from the street into the home.

O'Neill also defended the Flapper's bobbed haircut as a sign of progress, and predicted that more women were likely to start wearing pants.



She also took an interest in juvenile law, advocating in 1913 for a separate court system. Speaking two years after women won the right to vote, O'Neill expected that more women would join the legal profession.

Susan O'Neill began her legal career at a time when women were expected to stay home, defer to the opinions of men, choose marriage over a career, and never speak in public. With the support of her family, she blazed a trail for other women to follow, and lived long enough to see women's legal rights become greatly expanded.

She died on July 14, 1934.