

ELLA KNOWLES HASKELL (1860–1911)

“THE PORTIA OF THE PEOPLE”

from the very beginning, Ella Knowles Haskell set precedent. Born in Northwood, New Hampshire, in 1860, she was schooled at Northwood Seminary and Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. At Bates she was the first woman to receive honors in oratory and composition, and she became one of the school’s first female graduates in 1884.

After starting to read law in New Hampshire, she moved to Helena, Montana Territory, in 1888 for her health. Ella’s strong will and determination led her successfully to lobby the 1889 Territorial Legislature to permit women to practice law in Montana. Then she dedicated herself to reading law in the office of Helena attorney Joseph W. Kinsley. Late in 1889, Ella Knowles became the first woman admitted to the Montana bar—and the fledgling state’s first female notary public.

She immediately became a partner in the firm of Kinsley and Knowles. Methodically Ella built a reputation as a attorney committed to fair play, the finer points of law, and courtroom eloquence. In 1892 (22 years before Montana women received the vote) she ran a vigorous campaign as a Populist Party candidate for state attorney general. Thus Ella became the first woman in the nation to run for such an office, earning the nickname of “*the Populists’ silver-tongued orator.*”

Although she lost to Republican Henri Haskell, the victor recognized her outstanding abilities and hired his opponent as an assistant state attorney. Soon thereafter the couple married. In 1896 Populist Ella Knowles Haskell became the first Montana woman elected as a delegate to a national political convention. For years she stumped Montana to promote the suffrage movement and converted hundreds of recalcitrant men to the cause of equal franchise.

In 1902 Ella divorced Henri and relocated in Butte. There she built a solid, lucrative practice based on the intricacies of Butte mining law. She also became the owner/operator of several local mining properties and participated in the International Mining Congress. In 1906 Ella Haskell was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., where she demonstrated her consummate powers of legal argument and public eloquence.

Upon her untimely death in Butte in 1911, accolades abounded for Ella Knowles Haskell’s remarkable career. Much more than just an eloquent speaker for the cause of women’s rights, she personified Montana’s trend-setting movement for gender equality and courageously broke gender barriers throughout her life.

