Biographical Database of NAWSA Suffragists, 1890-1920

Martha Symons Boies Atkinson, 1830-1917

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The single extant image of Martha Symons Boies Atkinson shows a serious, watchful expression that aligns with her role in the history of Wyoming Territory's suffrage story: the first female bailiff in Wyoming, if not the world.

The Territory of Wyoming granted women the right to vote in 1869. In March of 1870, Chief Justice Howe appointed women for jury duty in Laramie, Wyoming, for the three week spring court session. The Judge selected well-known and respected women, anticipating that “the better element” of Laramie would trust the women jurors to convict criminals, since “the usual juries, consisting of men, could not or would not.” While the women took up their new responsibility, the court faced a new responsibility as well, to guard the women jurors “whenever the women were called to sit on the grand and petit juries.”

It is difficult to know why Sheriff Boswell tagged Martha Boies for the position as bailiff. Later newspaper accounts show Martha and her husband as a prosperous, well-loved couple, honored as the first settlers of Laramie. She left no diaries, letters, or reminiscences; her obituary constructed a simple outline of her life as a westward traveler and an intrepid settler in Laramie. Perhaps that was enough to garner her the role.

Martha’s life exemplified the rigors so many immigrants faced in the 19th century. Born in England in 1830, she immigrated to Mineral Point, Wisconsin with her parents while still an infant. As with many immigrants, the family moved again, settling in Treadwell, Wisconsin. There she married her first husband, John Symons, and the couple had two sons; her husband died while their children were still young. Martha married Jerimiah Boies (or Boyes), while still in Treadwell. Sometime in the mid-to late 1850s, the Boies family joined the rush of emigrants moving westward, settling in Kearney, Nebraska and “engag[ing] in the hotel business and later a boarding house.” When construction of the Union Pacific railroad approached Kearney in 1866, they saw economic opportunity; the Boieses moved from camp to camp with the railroad as construction progressed westward, arriving in Laramie in 1868, days ahead of the crews. They liked Laramie and decided to give up their itinerant life and settle, even though they would continue living in a tent, like everyone else in town, for a while longer.

Perhaps her experience living in a tent along with railroad crew, and in Laramie during its first, most lawless years, made Martha Boies a good candidate for bailiff. Grenville Dodge’s crew lived their “Hell on Wheels” reputation, and after they moved on, Laramie remained “a border town in all the word implies…” Two years later, Laramie was still a rough town and as Boies was a woman who proved her mettle and helped settle the town, perhaps Sheriff considered her a solid choice for the first bailiff.

In an 1878 newspaper article, Martha recounted her experiences as bailiff to a Laramie reporter, mentioning that everyone was polite and kind to herself and the woman jurors. The Sheriff even offered to relay messages home to their families, or bring items from home to the hotel to make them more comfortable.
The role of woman bailiff to the first juries that included women lasted for only three terms of court; Martha served as bailiff for all three terms. When Chief Justice Howe retired in September of 1871, women were not called again to serve on juries for decades. Although short-lived, Martha’s role as bailiff illustrates that Wyoming’s decision to offer women unrestricted suffrage opened unexpected and diverse venues for women to engage in civic participation.

Sources


