Esther Hobart McQuigg was born in 1812 or 1814 in Tioga County, New York. (Her headstone and obituary claim 1812, but several respected historians have used August 8, 1814.) Orphaned at the age of 14, she supported herself as a milliner until, at age 28, she married Artemus Slack, a civil engineer. Mr. Slack died not long after the marriage, leaving Esther with an infant son, Edward. She moved to Peru, Illinois in 1842, where she married John Morris, a merchant. In 1869 Esther, additionally blessed with twins, Robert and another Edward, moved with her three sons to South Pass City in the newly created Wyoming Territory, joining her husband who had opened a saloon there the previous year.

In February 1870, on resignation of a justice of the peace, Morris was appointed to that office, the first woman to hold that position in the territory of the United States, and perhaps in the world. (Two other female appointees apparently did not serve.) She was 55 and had been living in South Pass City for less than a year. Her job wasn’t easy. Although South Pass City’s population peaked at only about 2,000 in 1869, the town was home to two breweries, a dozen saloons and several brothels. During Morris’s eight and a half months in office, she proved to be an efficient public servant. By her own reckoning, she tried about 30 civil actions, and only one of her rulings was appealed (and a higher court affirmed that one).

In April 1870, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, recounted her first day in court, focusing primarily on what she wore (“a calico gown, worsted breakfast-shawl, green ribbons in her hair, and a green neck-tie”). A few months later, the same publication called Morris “the terror of all rogues” and said she offered “infinite delight to all lovers of peace and virtue.”

In 1871, after she finished her term, she wrote a letter to the prominent suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker that was read at a national suffrage convention in Washington and printed in The Laramie Daily Sentinel in Wyoming. "Circumstances have transpired to make my position as a justice of the peace a test of woman’s ability to hold public office," Morris wrote. "I feel that my work has been satisfactory." Morris described some of her responsibilities — assisting in picking juries, depositing a ballot, canvassing votes after an election — and said that "in performing all these duties I do not know as I have neglected my family any more than in ordinary shopping."

When Wyoming became a state nearly two decades later, Morris, "honored and respected for her great ability and heroic womanhood," was given a prominent role in the accompanying celebration, The Cheyenne Daily Sun reported. In July 1890, retired at 75, Morris presented Wyoming’s state flag to Gov. Francis E. Warren "on behalf of the women of Wyoming, and in grateful recognition of the high privilege of citizenship that has been conferred upon us." In later years, she appeared at numerous women’s rights gatherings and political affairs, though she was apparently not comfortable with making speeches. She died in 1902 in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Morris eventually became a symbol for the women’s rights movement, and stories of her independent attitudes and support of women's issues spread. The claim that she obtained a promise at a tea party from Bright, also a South Pass City resident, to introduce the suffrage bill surfaced decades after the fact. Though any direct involvement by Morris in the drafting and introduction of the suffrage bill cannot be substantiated, Esther Morris is commonly regarded a heroine in the women's suffrage movement. She was chosen as Wyoming’s
representative in Statuary Hall in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., her statue presented in 1960. In 1963, a replica of this statue was placed in front of the Wyoming State Capitol Building.

Sources

