

**2023 Battle of Flowers Oratorical Contest First Place Winner**  
“Hortense Sparks Ward: Wins for the Women Who Came After Her”  
by Hailey Pasley

“Well-behaved women rarely make history.” - Eleanor Roosevelt. I feel that most women can agree that this quote is not only true but also empowering. A woman who wholeheartedly embodied this quote was Hortense Sparks Ward. As a champion of women’s rights, suffragist movement leader, lawyer, businesswoman, wife, and mother, Ward blazed the trail for the future women of Texas in countless ways. Throughout her unprecedented legal and political activism career, Hortense Sparks Ward worked tirelessly for the people of her state and her country. Today, I am going to share with you a background about Ward’s humble beginnings, guide you through her massively impressive career, highlighting the major trials and triumphs of Ward’s life along the way, and finally demonstrate what we can take away from the immense legacy that she leaves behind for future generations.

Born Hortense Sparks in 1872 near Simpson, Texas, her roots lay deep in the state. The Sparks family moved to Edna in 1883 where Hortense would attend Nazareth Academy, a Catholic convent school. Shortly after graduating, she returned to teach school at 18 years old. Hortense quickly found her first husband, Albert Malsch, and they had three daughters. The family moved to Houston in 1903 and by 1906, Hortense ditched her husband after describing him as “a lazy, good-for-nothing” in her divorce petition. She may not have yet known that she would make history, however, she was already abandoning the expectation of being a well-behaved woman; the tell-tale mark of a heroine, if you ask me. After her divorce, Hortense didn’t immediately look for another man to take care of her and her daughters like the average woman of her time may have done. Instead, she quickly put herself to work.

While working at a cigar shop in Houston Heights, according to Houstonia Magazine, “she trained herself to be a court reporter [and] began studying law by correspondence course”. During this time, she met and married her second husband William Henry Ward. Houstonia Magazine continues, “In 1910, [she] made headlines when she became the first woman to pass the Texas State Bar exam (with the second-highest grade in her class, no less)”. Soon after passing the exam, Hortense became the first woman admitted to the Texas State Bar and entered practice with her new husband at their firm, Ward & Ward.

As a woman shattering glass ceilings, she of course faced many obstacles. In 1911, after she was admitted to the Texas State Bar, Harris County refused to recertify Hortense as a notary. This was a job that she had already been doing for over six years. Being the hellraiser she was, Hortense fought the refusal and was recertified. This is just one small example of the barriers that she had to face in order to make her own way in a man’s world.

In the same year, Ward dove headfirst into her legal and political advocacy career. Her first chosen challenge was women’s property rights. For some background, at the time, Texas law gave husbands legal power to any property and income that a woman brought into a marriage, and women needed their husband’s permission to enter any type of contract. According to the Tarlton Law Library at the University of Texas Austin, “In 1911 she wrote a pamphlet, Property Rights of Married Women in Texas, and she spearheaded the Married Woman’s Property Rights Law, passed by Texas Legislature in 1913. It became known as the Hortense Ward Act”. Ward completely changed Texas law and forever impacted women’s rights in the state. There aren’t many lawyers, male or female, who have displayed such immense passion and drive to completely change the law in such a short time frame. She did not stop at getting a legendary piece of legislation named after her, though. Rather, she was just getting started.

Hortense would experience many massive trials and triumphs within the next five years of her career in law and activism. Along with women’s property rights, one of her early passion projects was women’s

and children's labor laws. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Hortense "worked for legislation enacting a workers' compensation system and a 54-hour workweek for women, both of which were passed in 1913." Her work in advocacy for the women and children of the state of Texas made an immense impact on the lives millions of Texans. In just her first three years as a lawyer, Hortense Sparks Ward had changed the entire state, specifically impacting the lives of Texas women.

Along with her political activism, Ward also was active as an attorney. Ward was known to have often refused to represent her clients in the court of law due to the bias of an all-male jury against a female attorney. However, according to the Texas State Bar, "in 1915, she represented the plaintiffs in an insurance case, James W. Lawson, et al. v. Supreme Lodge of the United Brotherhood of America. Ward won the case." Even with extreme bias against her as a female attorney in the South in the early 20th century, Ward was proving herself to be perfectly capable of keeping up with the men. In the same year, Hortense became the first woman from the South to be admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court, shattering yet another glass ceiling. The Texas State Historical Association says, "In 1915, Ward became the first Southern lawyer accepted into the Women Lawyers Association and was elected vice president and associate editor of Women Lawyers' Journal only six months later." They say the devil works hard, but Hortense Sparks Ward worked harder and faster. As we can see, Ward quite often was the first and only woman from the South present in these legal and political spaces. She represented Southern women with immense class and strength in every situation from the very beginning of her career.

At this point, I want to pause for a moment and acknowledge that the piece of Hortense Sparks Ward's career that I have guided you through thus far is exactly that: a piece. Everything that I've told you up to this point happened within five years of Ward being admitted to the Texas State Bar. All of these amazing achievements were only the beginning of her unprecedented career.

After making remarkable changes in women's rights so early on in her career, Hortense continued fighting for what she believed in. Another passion for her was women's suffrage. In 1917, Hortense led a lobbying campaign for the federal woman suffrage amendment, which passed the U.S. House in January of 1918. According to the Texas Bar Association, "In 1918, Ward became president of the Houston Equal Suffrage Association and lobbied Governor W.P. Hobby and the Legislature to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the right to vote and for a bill allowing women to vote in primary elections." She took her new role as president of the HESA with pride and hit the ground running. Not only did she advocate for the ratification of the 19th amendment and a bill for women's primary suffrage, but she is also credited with drafting the primary suffrage bill in 1918. As one of the only women in law in Texas during this time, Hortense Sparks Ward advocated, lobbied, campaigned, and literally wrote the bill that would begin the domino effect for the women's suffrage movement in Texas.

In the following year, Texas became the ninth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. Then, in June of 1918, Hortense became the first woman in Harris County to register to vote. She knew that the voices of women across the state needed to be heard, so she wrote and published pamphlets and articles that resulted in about 386,000 women across Texas registering to vote in just 17 days. Hortense played an immeasurable role in taking the voices of women in Texas from being completely unheard to rapidly amplified. Without her absolute determination and persistence, the state of Texas would not have been able to experience such rapid, undeniable progress in women's rights.

The 1920s included many challenges and triumphs for Hortense. Retired Harris County District Judge Mark Davidson said, "She diligently, and perhaps more than anybody else, fought the Ku Klux Klan when they ran in the Democratic Primary in the late '20s. Ward was an avid opponent of the Klan and worked diligently to combat their political power. She campaigned all across the country against political figures

who were associated with the KKK often going as far as Washington, D.C. She worked hard to campaign for Miriam A. Ferguson, who was in opposition to the Ku Klux Klan. Ferguson went on to become the first woman governor of Texas, taking office in January of 1925. The success of this campaign would have been impossible without Ward's early steps in becoming one of the first women with an instrumental role in Texas politics and breaking down barriers for the women after her.

While Ward achieved many incredible feats throughout her career, one of her most remarkable accomplishments came in 1924 when the Texas Supreme Court was faced with a challenge. There was a case involving the fraternal organization Woodmen of the World, which many Texas men belonged to at the time, including men of the courts. To avoid a conflict of interest, Governor Pat Neff appointed three women to serve as justices for the case, with Hortense being appointed Chief Justice. This was the first all-woman high court in the United States. This made Hortense the first and only woman to date to serve as Chief Justice of the Texas Supreme Court. Ward authored the unanimous decision in this case, and according to UT law, the case has since been cited in Texas courts over 30 times to this day.

Houstonia Magazine christened Ward as "Houston's original nasty woman." In all that I have learned about her remarkable life, I must agree that she is a true Texas Hero. Ward worked her entire career to improve the lives of future Texans. She lived in a society that deprived women of their rights, and she worked her way into a career in law, literally rewriting Texas law along the way. To fight her way through the obstacles of her time, she needed persistence, dedication, and some absolute spunk. From becoming the first woman to be admitted to the Texas State Bar, to permanently changing Texas law, to advocating for the rights of women, children, and those without a voice, Ward undeniably altered the future of our state. She may not have lived to see women achieve the full freedoms that she worked so hard for, but her efforts paved the way for generations of Texas women and hell-raisers after her. In her historic race for judge in 1920, Hortense Sparks Ward coined a slogan about her impact on future Texas women which calls to us all to this day. She said, "I want this position very much, but if I lose, I will win for the women who come after me."