

IMPORTANT NORTH CAROLINA WOMEN

SUSIE SHARP (1907–1996)

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ♦ *Describe the ways that Susie Marshall Sharp broke new ground as an attorney and a judge.*



Susie Sharp

In 1975, Susie Marshall Sharp, a native of Rocky Mount, North Carolina, became the first female chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court — a choice that was widely applauded throughout the state. Ms. Sharp had always been a pioneer in women's activities, starting with her acceptance to the University of North Carolina Law School as the only woman in the class of 1929. She graduated at the top of the class.

Ms. Sharp was the first city attorney in North Carolina, the first female judge on the North Carolina Superior Court, and the first female justice on North Carolina Supreme Court — in addition to being its first female chief justice. During her years on the Supreme Court, from 1962 to 1979, she wrote “459 majority opinions, 124 concurring opinions, and 45 dissenting opinions.”¹

Ms. Sharp grew up in Rockingham County; her father was an attorney in the town of Reidsville. She attended the North Carolina College for Women in Greensboro (which is now called UNC-Greensboro) for just two years before entering law school. She passed the North Carolina bar exam in 1928 before entering her third year of law school. After graduation, she returned to Reidsville to work with her father. They changed the name of the firm to Sharp & Sharp. At that time (1929), a woman would have had a hard time finding a job as an attorney elsewhere. That year, Ms. Sharp argued a case before the North Carolina Supreme Court, an impressive achievement for a recent law school graduate.

Ms. Sharp's biographer, Anna Hayes, says that Sharp was an “**icon**” (a powerful symbol) who “hurdled every barrier to reach the pinnacle of the legal profession.” At the same time, she was “proudly feminine,” says Ms. Hayes.²

Ms. Sharp disappointed some women by not supporting the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This proposed change to the U.S. Constitution was designed to end discrimination on the basis of sex. It was passed by Congress in 1972, but not enough states ratified it to make it part of the Constitution.

Susie Sharp is believed to have been influential in persuading members of the North Carolina General Assembly not to **ratify** (approve) the ERA. Some women like Ms. Sharp, who understood the law very well, opposed this proposed amendment for several reasons. First, it might have required women to be drafted into the armed services. Moreover, it might have required the government to change laws and government programs that specifically benefit women since laws that give benefits to women that men do not receive are, technically, not treating men and women equally.

While Ms. Sharp held some traditional attitudes, Ms. Hayes says, “She was a tireless crusader in her courtroom remarks and public speeches for the rule of law as the foundation of democracy, and for active, informed citizenship.” That respect for the law also overcame what appears to have been a traditional

southern attitude toward race. As historian Ronnie W. Faulkner writes, Ms. Sharp was “an old school Southern Democrat.”³

She is known, Ms. Hayes explains, “as a legal scholar whose opinions were models of lucidity, and who undertook on occasion to bring about needed changes in the law.” As an example, Ms. Sharp wrote an opinion that allowed a patient to sue a charitable hospital if he or she had been treated negligently. Before that, the court had not allowed such a suit against a not-for-profit hospital.

Ms. Sharp never married. According to Mr. Faulkner, Ms. Sharp once said, “The trouble comes when a woman tries to be too many things at one time.” All in all, says biographer Anna Hayes, Susie Sharp was “a woman far more complicated and interesting than I had expected to find.”

READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Using information from the reading, describe four things that Susie Marshall Sharp was the first woman to do as a lawyer and judge.

Explain why Susie Marshall Sharp did not support the Equal Rights Amendment.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ronnie W. Faulkner, “Susie Sharp (1907–1996),” North Carolina History Project, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/susie-sharp-1907-1996/>.
- 2 University of North Carolina Press, “Author Q&A with Anna Hayes” (author of *Without Precedent: The Life of Susie Marshall Sharp*, Chapel Hill: 2008), <https://uncpress.org/author-qa/9781469641942/14477-anna-r-hayes/14477-anna-r-hayes/>.
- 3 Faulkner, “Susie Sharp.”