

Betty Marshall Graydon: The Courageous Life of the First Woman Assistant U.S. Attorney in San Diego



“It takes courage to undertake the challenge of being outstanding. Each woman must face criticism or praise for everything she does. She must have the courage to be content in her own heart and mind as to the validity of that criticism or praise and live up to what she believes.”

- Hon. Madge Bradley,
Superior Court of California, County of San Diego

Betty Marshall Graydon was a trailblazing woman who laid the foundation for the Department of Justice’s early presence in San Diego. She lived her life courageously and left an indelible impression on the San Diego community. She continues to inspire public servants, and has been honored by the U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of California.

On October 24, 1891, Clarice H. Marshall, “Betty” was born, in Eureka, California. Her father was a school textbook author, her mother was a teacher, and she was one of their five children.¹

During the lead-up to America’s involvement in the First World War, Betty took the first civil service examination offered to women in 1913.² She married

¹ *Call to Order: Betty Graydon Reardon Named Woman of the Year*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Jan. 26, 1956, at b-4.

² *Id.*

George Windsor Graydon in 1920, changing her name to Betty Marshall Graydon. Thereafter, she started attending law school. While pursuing her degree, Ms. Graydon began her career in public service as a secretary to a Los Angeles Superior Court Judge, then as a statistician for the Los Angeles juvenile court, and later as an appraiser for the probate court.³

In 1930, at the age of 39, she graduated *cum laude* from the University of Los Angeles, Loyola University. The Los Angeles Times announced her graduation with an article titled: “*Girl to Get Law Degree Tomorrow*” and noted her work at the court by explaining that for several years she had been “a familiar and attractive figure as attaché of the Superior Court.”⁴

After graduation, she began her legal career in private practice and served as a leader for multiple organizations of women lawyers.⁵ She was widowed in 1936.⁶

In 1938, she joined the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Los Angeles where she worked on civil and criminal cases.⁷ She advanced in the office, eventually becoming the supervisor of selective service cases.⁸

At that time, the Southern District of California included all of Los Angeles and San Diego, with the U.S. Attorney sitting in Los Angeles. Prior to 1943, Assistant U.S. Attorneys would travel to San Diego to cover matters in the U.S. Customs and Courthouse located at Union and F Street,⁹ downtown San Diego. On April 14, 1943, Robert S. Burch, a San Diego native and son of a Superior Court Judge, became the first Assistant U.S. Attorney to assume a permanent post in San

³ *Id.*; *Girl to Get Law Degree Tomorrow*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, May 31, 1930, at A-1.

⁴ *Girl to Get Law Degree Tomorrow*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, May 31, 1930, at A-1.

⁵ *Portias Will Install Leader*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, June 7, 1934 at A-16 (Women’s Lawyers Club); 15 B. Bull. 97 (1940) (Vol. 15., No. 5 at 112) (Women’s Junior Committee).

⁶ *Betty Graydon’s Court Career Ends*, SAN DIEGO UNION, June 4, 1964, at a-23; *Betty M. G. Reardon Dies*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Feb. 4, 1974, at a-21.

⁷ *Federal Court Gets Woman Prosecutor*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Nov. 23, 1944, at b-7.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Now known as Jacob Weinberger United States Courthouse. *See*

<https://www.casb.uscourts.gov/court/court-location>

Diego.¹⁰ He left approximately eleven months later after receiving his commission as an Officer in the Navy.¹¹

On November 1, 1943, Ronald Abernethy,¹² who had been commuting to cover cases in San Diego, transferred from the Los Angeles Office, to become the new resident Assistant U.S. Attorney in San Diego.¹³ Less than a year later, he resigned to become Deputy District Attorney under Thomas Whelan, District Attorney.¹⁴

In 1944, Betty Marshall Graydon was selected to serve as the sole Assistant U.S. Attorney in San Diego.¹⁵ The local newspaper heralded her arrival to San Diego by reporting that a “feminine prosecutor” had been assigned to the federal court.¹⁶ She quickly proved she was up to the challenges of the assignment and prosecuted a wide range of cases in addition to defending the United States in civil suits.

One of Ms. Graydon’s major cases occurred in 1947 when she charged an affluent couple with transporting an African-American woman from Berkeley to Coronado for the “purpose of keeping her in slavery.”¹⁷ The victim, Dora Jones, had been forced to work without pay for 30 years in the couple’s home, while being subjected to physical abuse and threats of imprisonment.¹⁸ In an impactful and dramatic display during trial, Ms. Graydon called Ms. Jones down from the witness stand to show her hands to the jury, asking them to decide whether “they are the hands of a person who was a member of the family . . . or whether they are the hands

¹⁰ *Burch Assumes Attorney Post*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Apr. 14, 1943, at p.7.

¹¹ *Son of S.D. Jurist, Burch Becomes Navy Officer*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Nov. 11, 1943, at p.5.

¹² See SAN DIEGO COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION, CRIMINAL JUSTICE MEMORIAL, Hon. Ronald Abernethy, available at <https://www.sdcba.org/index.cfm?pg=CriminalJusticeMemorial#abernethy> (last visited Oct. 7, 2020).

¹³ *Assistant U.S. Attorney Joins Whelan’s Staff*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Oct. 26, 1944 at p.10.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Mrs. Graydon Assumes Duties*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Nov. 28, 1944, at b-12.

¹⁶ *Federal Court Gets Woman Prosecutor*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Nov. 23, 1944, at b-7.

¹⁷ *Maid Testifies on ‘Slave’ Trip*, SAN DIEGO UNION, July 10, 1947 at p.1.

¹⁸ *Id.*

of a slave.”¹⁹ Ms. Graydon secured convictions as well as an award of back-pay for Ms. Jones.²⁰

Ms. Graydon was well-respected by the legal community. It was reported in the newspaper that during her tenure as a prosecutor, Ms. Graydon was often described as one “who never lost sight of her duty to protect the accused, but was always a vigorous prosecutor.”²¹ After conviction and serving their sentence, defendants often “appealed to her for assistance in rehabilitation.”²²

Ms. Graydon was also well-regarded for her philanthropy. She donated much of her time to charities that benefitted Mexican and Native–American families as well as homeless children, and she founded a year-round collection to benefit the underprivileged in San Diego, Tijuana, and Ensenada.²³

It is also clear that Ms. Graydon was beloved by the law enforcement community. In an article published by the San Diego Union in 1950, it was reported that a “husky marine” stationed in San Diego, who later became a Deputy U.S. Marshal, had “adopted” Ms. Graydon as his mother.²⁴ After the birth of the Deputy U.S. Marshal’s baby girl, the newspaper pronounced that Ms. Graydon had become a “grandmother.”²⁵ This personal tale highlights the genuine rapport between Ms. Graydon and the law enforcement community.

After serving as San Diego’s only Assistant U.S. Attorney for eight years, Ms. Graydon was appointed as U.S. Commissioner for the federal court, a position that somewhat preceded the Magistrate Judge appointments of today. Her elevation to

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ ‘*Slave*’ Trial Defense Witness Says Maid Was ‘Willing Worker’, DAILY BOSTON GLOBE, July 9, 1947 at p.6; *Slave Acquittal Motion Denied*, SAN DIEGO UNION, July 18, 1947 at p.1; *Ingalls Maid May Receive Back Wages*, SAN DIEGO UNION, July 25, 1947 at a-13.

²¹ *Betty Graydon’s Court Career Ends*, SAN DIEGO UNION, June 4, 1964, at a-23.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Children’s Day Set for Tuesday*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Feb 16, 1939 at p.A-16; *Golden West Group Plan Benefit*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Jan. 28, 1940 at p.E-6; *Call to Order: Betty Graydon Reardon Named Woman of the Year*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Jan. 26, 1956, at b-4.

²⁴ *Mrs. Betty M. Graydon Now Proud ‘Grandma’*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Oct. 5, 1950, at a-15.

²⁵ *Id.*

the court created a vacuum for the Department of Justice and it was reported in the local newspaper that: “It took two men to replace Betty Marshall Graydon when she left the U.S. Attorney’s Office.”²⁶

A few years after her appointment to the court, on June 18, 1954, Ms. Graydon married Thomas Reardon, but kept her name while on the bench.²⁷

She continued her admirable federal service and it is no surprise that she was equally well-regarded as a U.S. Commissioner. For example, Ms. Graydon was named 1955’s “Woman of the Year.”²⁸ The Hon. Madge Bradley, who was the first woman to serve as a judge in San Diego,²⁹ spoke at the ceremony presenting Ms. Graydon with the prestigious award.³⁰ Judge Bradley cited Ms. Graydon’s courage as the “prime characteristic” qualifying her for the honor and explained: “It takes courage to undertake the challenge of being outstanding. Each woman must face criticism or praise for everything she does. She must have the courage to be content in her own heart and mind as to the validity of that criticism or praise and live up to what she believes.”³¹

At the age of 72, after twelve years of service to the federal court, Ms. Graydon’s appointment was not renewed due to a federal policy in place prohibiting re-appointment of commissioners over the age of 70, so she retired.³² The legal community mourned the completion of her service and the San Diego Union newspaper announced: “The brilliant, dramatic 34-year long career of U.S. Commissioner Betty Marshall Graydon, grand dame of San Diego’s courts, has

²⁶ *Age Stands in Way of Job, Point of Law Forces Commissioner Out*, SAN DIEGO UNION, June 11, 1964.

²⁷ *Betty M. G. Reardon Dies*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Feb. 4, 1974, at a-21.

²⁸ *Call to Order: Betty Graydon Reardon Named Woman of the Year*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Jan. 26, 1956, at b-4.

²⁹ SAN DIEGO COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION, CRIMINAL JUSTICE MEMORIAL, Hon. Madge Bradley, available at <https://www.sdcba.org/index.cfm?pg=CriminalJusticeMemorial#bradley> (last visited Mar. 2, 2020).

³⁰ *Call to Order: Betty Graydon Reardon Named Woman of the Year*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Jan. 26, 1956, at b-4.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Betty Graydon’s Court Career Ends*, SAN DIEGO UNION, June 4, 1964, at a-23.

ended.”³³ She died on February 3, 1974, at the age of 82.³⁴ Her husband Thomas Reardon died just over a month later on March 20, 1974.

On January 6, 2021, U.S. Attorney, Robert S. Brewer, Jr., honored Betty Marshall Graydon’s legendary life by dedicating a conference room within the U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of California, to her memory, with an inscription that reads:

Graydon Conference Room
Dedicated to Honor
Betty Marshall Graydon
Assistant United States Attorney
Old Southern District of California, Southern Division
1944 – 1952

In 1944, Betty Marshall Graydon became the first woman to serve as an Assistant United States Attorney in San Diego, when it was part of the old Southern District of California. Graydon’s tenure laid the foundation for the Department of Justice’s permanent presence in San Diego. She was a tenacious advocate who was revered by the legal community and beloved by law enforcement. She admirably served as an Assistant United States Attorney until she was appointed as a U.S. Commissioner in 1952. She served as a U.S. Commissioner until her retirement in 1964.

Betty Marshall Graydon’s bold life laid a groundwork for others to follow. She is remembered for her courage, charity, and competence. Her contributions to the San Diego community continue to benefit and inspire the federal bar.

By: Rebecca G. Church,
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Special Emphasis Program Manager,
Federal Women’s Program

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Betty M. G. Reardon Dies*, SAN DIEGO UNION, Feb. 4, 1974, at a-21.