

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

KATE E. NEVILE FELTHAM

September 22, 1914

(1859 – 1936)



Kate E. Nevile Feltham was born on December 20, 1859, in Adams, New York. Her father was born in England and her mother was born in Georgia. After graduating high school, Feltham was a teacher in Ackley, Iowa. In 1893, she moved to Nampa, Idaho. On September 21, 1893, she married Lot L. Feltham, an attorney born in New York in 1858. Lot Feltham served as city attorney for Caldwell from 1893 to 1895. During this time, Kate Feltham taught English at the College of Idaho in Caldwell and became active in the women's suffrage movement.

Being active in the Caldwell community, Feltham was chosen to serve as the president of the Caldwell branch of the Idaho Equal Suffrage Association. In that capacity, she attended a statewide meeting of women's suffragists in Boise on November 20, 1895. Feltham was named to the advisory board of the statewide movement and by way of telegram from Susan B. Anthony was told to "Educate the rank and file of voters through political party newspapers and meetings." She, and others, did that just that and by May of 1896 their efforts had caught the attention of the National American Women Suffrage Association and its leaders, including Laura M. Johns of Kansas and Emma Smith DeVoe of Illinois. A convention was called in Boise on July 1-3, 1896, at which time officers were elected. Feltham and Helen L. Young, Idaho's only woman attorney at the time, were chosen as vice-presidents. As noted in *The History of Woman Suffrage*, "Thus organized, the association conducted the final campaign." The campaign was successful when, in November 1896, the Woman's Suffrage amendment to the Idaho Constitution, Art. 6, § 2 was adopted.

Having gained some notoriety for her work in the suffrage movement, in 1898, while working as a clerk in a Caldwell election, Feltham received "about 9 [write-in] votes for city engineer." Lina Gipson described Feltham at the 1914 dedication for the Carnegie Library Building in Caldwell as "a woman of public spirit and executive ability." Feltham founded the first free public reading room in Caldwell and was the founding president of the Progress Club, a forerunner of the Future Club in Caldwell.

By 1910, Feltham and her husband were living in the Weiser area and she was listed by the 1910 census as a "fruit farmer." During this time Feltham was doing more than farming, however, she was also preparing for a career in law by training at the law office of her husband. At the time, law-office study or "reading for the law" was an alternative form of legal education allowed by the Idaho State Bar, although a candidate for admission needed to produce "strong testimony" as to their capabilities and character before the Idaho Supreme Court. In 1914, Feltham did just that, being admitted to the bar in Idaho on September 22, 1914, as its fifth woman.

Feltham practiced law in Weiser for thirty years and shared an office with her husband (whom she later divorced) at 32 Commercial Street. In 1926, Feltham was elected to serve as prosecuting attorney for Washington County, the first woman to hold a prosecuting attorney position in Idaho.

On her death on August 28, 1936, the Weiser newspaper paid her tribute:

Gifted with a mind of unusual power and with determined will and pioneer spirit she entered upon the study of law, and was admitted to the bar at time when this was considered exclusively a field for the activity of men. She won her place in the legal profession . . . Many incidents are reported of her spirit of fairness and of kindness, particularly in dealing with girls who had run afoul of the law.

In recognition of Feltham's many accomplishments, Idaho Women Lawyers, Inc. established an award in the early 1990s in her honor. The Kate Feltham award is given annually to an individual "who has advanced the frontier of opportunity for women in Idaho."