

SYBIL HOLMES



Born in West Bridgewater, MA, Sybil Holmes moved to Brookline where she became a lawyer specializing in contracts, automobile insurance, industrial accidents, and probate law. Admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1911 at the age of 21, she became the youngest woman lawyer in the United States. She was elected president of the Massachusetts Association of Women Lawyers in 1919.

Holmes first began her political career as a Brookline Town Meeting member. She was also a member of the committee that reviewed appropriations and articles on the annual Town Meeting warrant, now known as the Town's Advisory Committee. She was an active member of the Massachusetts Republican Party and the Brookline Republican Town Committee. From 1930 to 1934, Holmes served as an assistant attorney general for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In 1936, she became the first woman elected to the Massachusetts State Senate. Holmes served for two years as a representative of the Town of Brookline.

In 1937 and 1938, Holmes chaired the state's Special Commission to Investigate the Activities within the Commonwealth of Communistic, Fascistic, Nazi and other Subversive Organizations. The work of the commission included interrogating people suspected of being Nazis, communists, or "anti-religious," and publishing a 559 page report that implicated members of the American Civil Liberties Union, labor activists, and members of local churches. The report also named specific individuals as being communists, resulting in repercussions for those individuals and the organizations and businesses with which they were connected.

Holmes, apparently influenced by the commission's proceedings, introduced a number of bills aimed at slowing the perceived rapid spread of communism. The most prominent of these bills called for the establishment of "a division of citizenship" based on a person's political views or activities and the formation of an ongoing commission that would identify such "subversives." While these bills were ultimately defeated, they did serve to introduce the notion of a division of citizenship and stronger sedition laws, and the commission itself was a precursor to the federal government's House Committee on Un-American Activities that would begin in 1938. Due in part to Holmes involvement on the commission and the bills she sponsored, she was not re-elected.

She served as the recorder of the Massachusetts Land Court from 1948 until 1959 and ran unsuccessfully for state treasurer and Boston City Councilor.

Sources:

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