



The Precious Heritage of the Armenian Woman

Leading Ladies & Legal Legacies

Throughout Armenian history, the Armenian woman has been the anchor of family, the iron ore of stability, and the eagle of inspiration. It is she who has knitted and mended blankets of security and cemented and reinforced fortresses of survival for the Armenian people for thousands of years.

Simply said, without her, we could not be, we would not be. The Armenian woman is Queen Parandzem, she is Diana Apcar, just as she is Zabel Yesayan, Sose Mayrig and Silva Kaputikyan. She is, perhaps most of all, your mothers and grandmothers who have given everything so that we could emerge unscathed, unburdened, unrestrained. As they would often say, Abrek, Payts Mez Bes Chabrek (Live, But Do Not Live Like We Lived).

Each March, during **Women's History Month**, the legal profession reflects on the pioneers who surmounted barriers and expanded opportunities for the generations that followed. Within the Armenian-American legal community, the story of early women attorneys is still being uncovered, clarified, and preserved. Among these pioneers stands Stella Ajamian Edward, whose life represents determination, service, and devotion to both her profession and her community.

Early Life and Family Roots

Stella Ajamian was born on July 14, 1897, on her family's farm in Selma, California, to Manoog Ajamian and Marina Ajamian (Bartavian). Like many Armenian families of the era, her parents' journey to the United States was shaped by hardship and resilience.

Her father had immigrated to America to learn modern boot-making using the then-new technology of the sewing machine. Her mother arrived after escaping the Hamidian Massacres in Western Armenia in the late 19th Century, a period of violent persecution against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Having witnessed the brutal killing of her six brothers in her hometown, Marina carried with her both trauma and extraordinary strength—qualities that shaped the values of the family she built in California.

From an early age, Stella displayed remarkable maturity and intellectual curiosity. By the age of five, she was already translating for her father at the bank, helping him navigate English-language transactions. By ten years old, she rode horse-and-buggy to school, pursuing her education in rural California with determination.

One formative moment occurred when a teacher recognized Stella's talent for debate and told her: "You would make a good attorney." That encouragement would change the course of her life.

A Trailblazer at the University of California

Stella pursued higher education at the University of California, Berkeley, at a time when it was the only University of California campus and when women were still a rarity in legal education.

She enrolled at Boalt Hall School of Law and faced a daunting environment. Among more than one hundred male law students, Stella was one of very few women in her class. Support was scarce and the barriers facing women in the profession were significant.

Yet she persevered. In 1922, Stella Ajamian graduated from Boalt Hall with a Juris Doctor, entering a profession that was only beginning to open its doors to women.

A Life in Law and Family

While studying at Berkeley, Stella met Leo Edward Keshishian, a gifted engineer and inventor who had served in World War I. Due to a clerical error on his military discharge papers, his name was recorded as Leo Keshish Edward, a spelling he later retained because they were the only official documents he possessed.

Stella and Leo married and had one daughter, Marna Belle Edward, whom they raised in Piedmont, California. Their family life reflected both professional achievement and deep cultural roots.

Stella went on to practice law for decades, continuing well into her late eighties—a remarkable career spanning much of the twentieth century.

Service to the Armenian Community

Throughout her career, Stella was widely known for her commitment to community service. Much of her legal work focused on family law matters, including wills and trusts, often assisting families regardless of whether they could afford legal representation. She also volunteered her time teaching U.S. citizenship classes to newly arriving immigrants, helping others navigate the same legal and cultural systems that her own family had once struggled to understand.

Her Armenian identity remained central to her life. Stella was an active member of St. Vartan Armenian Apostolic Church in Oakland, and she rarely missed the church's annual Armenian Bazaar Food Festival, a community tradition dating back to the church's founding in 1927.

Her professional achievements were recognized in her lifetime when she was included in the publication *Who's Who in California*, acknowledging her contributions both to the legal profession and to public life.

A Continuing Historical Conversation, Correcting the Record

For many years, Norma Karaian, admitted to the bar in Massachusetts in 1925, had been considered the first Armenian-American woman attorney in the United States. The Armenian Bar Association itself honored Karaian in that capacity at a past Annual Meeting in Boston, near her home in Watertown.

However, it should also be acknowledged that comprehensive historical research on early Armenian-American women in law is a work in progress. Records from the early twentieth century can be fragmentary, and new information continues to emerge from family archives, local bar records, and university histories.

Subsequent information shared by members of the Edward family and by retired attorney Paulette Janian, a legal trailblazer herself from California's Central Valley, indicates that Stella Ajamian Edward graduated from Boalt Hall in 1922 and was admitted to the California State Bar the same year, three years before Norma Karaian's graduation from Boston University Law School at the age of 20. We are,

therefore, proud to acknowledge Stella Ajamian Edward's singular placement in the history of Armenian-American lawyers in the United States.

As with many questions of early professional history, further archival research—including bar admission records, law school documentation, and historical bar association materials—may help clarify the precise chronology of these and other pioneering figures.

Honoring the Pioneers

Regardless of the final historical determination of “firsts,” what is clear is that women like Stella Ajamian Edward and Norma Karaian were extraordinary pioneers. They entered the legal profession at a time when both women and Armenian immigrants faced significant discrimination and structural barriers. Their achievements laid the groundwork for the generations of Armenian-American women lawyers who followed.

During Women's History Month, the Armenian Bar Association celebrates these early trailblazers—women whose courage, perseverance, and commitment to justice strengthened both the legal profession and the Armenian-American community.

Their stories remind us that history is not static. It evolves as new voices, families, and records help illuminate the contributions of those who came before.