



• *Lawyer*

## *Viola Ross Napier*

1881–1962

### ***Inducted 1993***

Viola Ross Napier was ...

- the first woman ever to hold elected office in the State of Georgia,
- the first woman lawyer ever to argue before the Georgia Court of Appeals or the Georgia Supreme Court,
- the author of bills for the health, safety and education of underprivileged children, and
- the President of the Macon League of Women Voters when Georgia women first gained the right to vote.

Why, then, was Viola Ross Napier so little recognized in her lifetime as a person of remarkable achievement?

Because she was a woman barely five feet tall, quiet, unassertive, doing homely, necessary public service that was far below the level of her ability. Portraits of her now hang in the Macon City Hall and in the State Capitol in Atlanta, but these honors were not bestowed in her lifetime.

Viola Ross was born in Macon in 1881. Her maternal grandfather was one of the city's original founders. She attended Gresham School on Forsyth Street and the Old Wesleyan on College Street and the Elam Alexander Normal School. Like other young ladies of her day with little choice of career, she began teaching school.

In 1907, she married the dashing, ebullient young lawyer, Hendley Napier, Jr., and they had four children. In spite of a very busy home life, she wanted to study law even then. Her husband, however, wouldn't even let her drive a car, much less become a lawyer. One of her children recalled, "Daddy was a very impatient person. He was certain she'd run off the road. Mother finally said, 'It's not worth it.'"

This conventional Southern woman's way of life came to an abrupt end in 1919. The terrible flu epidemic took Viola's husband and father-in-law within just two weeks. She was left without support with four children, one newly born. She had to find work, and she knew that a schoolteacher's wages would not be enough. So she started studying law at Judge "Lije" Maynard's night

school. Working at her dining room table with the baby in her lap, she managed to pass the bar in 1920.

None of Macon's established law firms would take her as an associate, so she had to go it alone. Most of her clients were women and needy people who could pay very little in fees. It was a hand-to-mouth existence, but still she was able to argue before the State Court of Appeals and the State Supreme Court. She was the first lawyer in Georgia to win a pardon for a convicted client before he served even a day in jail.

The election of 1922 was the first in which the women of Georgia could vote. The Editor of the Macon News urged Viola to run for the General Assembly and take advantage of women's new rights. She took the challenge, put up \$48 for campaign expenses, and won a seat. She was the first woman ever to be sworn into the State House of Representatives. Her legislative career

***"I hate to say that the [General] Assembly needs cleaning, but I see no way getting around it."***

– Viola Ross Napier

was notable for some pioneering bills on children's rights. She secured adoption of laws requiring better fire protection in orphanages and children's hospitals, better education for the blind, the handicapped, and the underprivileged. In trying to

pass stricter child labor-laws, she was only able to gather two votes other than her own.

She won a second term, but was defeated for a third. Mayor Luther Williams of Macon then offered her the job of City Clerk. It was a job far beneath her qualifications and abilities, but it offered a steady salary, better than she could do as a solitary woman lawyer. She held this position for the next twenty-seven years. She kept minutes of City Council. She issued business licenses of all kinds. She sold dog tags and oversaw the City Pound. When the city went broke in the Depression, she wrote scrip checks for the city employees. She was unofficial legal counsel for five mayors, and tactfully steered the City Council to stay within the law. When she retired in 1954, at age 72, it was without fanfare.

After living at peace for eight more years, she died in 1962. Her son, Hendley Napier, III, has said of her, "She never seemed to resent what happened to her. She just said, 'I did what I had to do.'" Today we honor Viola Ross Napier as a Georgia Woman of Achievement.

### **Additional Resources**

Copyright ©2005 Georgia Women of  
Achievement, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

**Washington Memorial Library**  
Macon, GA 31201  
(478) 744-0800