

Eleanor Dean Acheson

Eleanor Dean (“Eldie”) Acheson grew up during the 1950s and ‘60s in Washington, DC, where her lawyer father served in the Kennedy administration and her historian mother wrote books about American history, including the Supreme Court. She caught the law, justice, and excitement of public service bug early. She is a 1969 graduate of Wellesley College and, following in the path of her father, both grandfathers, and two uncles, decided to become a lawyer.

She is a 1973 graduate of George Washington University Law School. After law school, Ms. Acheson served as the first woman law clerk to Judge Edward T. Gignoux in the U.S. District Court for the District of Maine. She then joined the litigation department of the Boston, Massachusetts law firm Ropes & Gray as its very first woman associate. Later, she became the first woman to make partner in the firm’s litigation department.

During her 19 years at the firm, Ms. Acheson distinguished herself not only as a great litigator, but also as a revered mentor and the leader of the firm’s widely celebrated *pro bono* program. She took many *pro bono* representations personally, often for women denied rights and protections, and served as the director of the Volunteer Lawyers Project in Boston and as a director of Women Incorporated in Roxbury. In addition, she was an active participant in several Boston Bar Association projects that tackled improving access to legal representation and balancing parenting with working in the profession. Ms. Acheson also represented women challenging Massachusetts’ civil service absolute preference for veterans in the case of *Feeney v. Commonwealth*, litigating with her colleagues at the firm all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In the late 1980s and early ‘90s, she was active in raising awareness and money for political causes important to women and female candidates for office. *Boston Magazine* profiled Ms. Acheson and those activities in a 1993 article about emerging leaders in the Boston community.

In 1993, President Clinton appointed Ms. Acheson assistant attorney general for the Department of Justice’s Office of Policy Development, where she served for eight years. In that role, among other responsibilities, she advised the President and Attorney General Janet Reno on matters of legal policy and managed the department’s work in the evaluation, nomination, and confirmation of federal judges and federal prosecutors. Her policy legacy at the department includes work on a number of key civil rights issues, in particular work to support passage of and then implement the Violence Against Women Act.

Ms. Acheson’s greatest legacy in her Justice Department role may be her work in reshaping the face of the federal judiciary during President Clinton’s two terms. She was instrumental in attaining the President’s goal of making the federal bench “look more like America.” To achieve this objective, she assembled a remarkably talented,



diverse, and, productive team to work on vetting judicial candidates, preparing nominations, and securing confirmations and established that excellence—and not ideology—was the primary qualification for candidates for the bench. Under Ms. Acheson’s watch, the percentage of women on the U.S. district courts almost doubled between 1992 to 2001, growing from 10.5% to 19.9%. During the same period, the percentage of women judges on the U.S. courts of appeals increased some 59.1%, growing from 13.2% to 21%, and the number of women on the Supreme Court doubled with the addition of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Overall, during Ms. Acheson’s tenure, the percentage increase in women judges on the federal bench was 83.5%. In raw numbers, the federal judiciary grew from having 91 women judges to 167.

For this work, the National Association of Women Judges honored Ms. Acheson in 1995, and in 2001 she received the Edmund J. Randolph Award for Outstanding Service, the Department of Justice’s highest honor. Among other awards, she received the Women’s Bar Association of the District of Columbia’s Woman Lawyer of the Year Award in 2000 for her leadership in professional activities and—most specifically—for her mentoring of and creating opportunities for young lawyers.

Since serving in the Department of Justice, Ms. Acheson has worked on Senator John Kerry’s primary and general election campaigns for president as an advisor on law and policy concerning judicial appointments, reproductive rights, civil rights including LGBT rights, matters relating to women and families, and voting rights and access to the polls. She also has served as the founding director of the Public Policy and Government Affairs Department at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Since early 2007, she has been vice president, general counsel and corporate secretary of the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (“Amtrak”). In that position, she serves on Amtrak’s executive committee, manages its in-house law department, and advises the board of directors on matters of corporate governance.