

Covering Maine Assessing

March is **Women's History Month!** In honor of women assessors past and present, we dedicate this special edition of the CMA!

A LEAGUE OF HER OWN

Inside:

A League of Her Own, contin'd 2
Old News 2
Maine Chapter by the Numbers 2
Who's On First 3
Other Firsts in the News 3
Quick Takes 2, 4, 5
In the Company of Cats 4
A Funny Thing Happened On My Way to Finish this Newsletter 6
Maine Chapter Committees & Acknowledgements 7
Cryptogram Puzzle 8



In our newsletter from Summer 2023, we printed this photo of the assessors at the State Capitol Building from 1931. If you zoom in on the photo, you will see one lone woman among the group of well-dressed men. While the photo does not contain the names of the attendees who gathered, assumably for the annual assessors' convention, we suspect that the woman pictured is Octavia Moulton Graffte.

You may remember Octavia Moulton Graffte from our Winter 2024 newsletter. She is credited as the first woman assessor in Maine. She was born in Embden in 1868, moved to Dennistown Plantation to teach school in 1889, and married Amos Graffte in 1893. While the Winter 2024 article credits Graffte as Dennistown Plantation's assessor in 1890, I could find no source document verifying this information online. I decided to travel to Lewiston Public Library where they have a complete set of Maine Registers-State Yearbooks (in which the municipal officials are listed for each year, county, and city/town). It was there I discovered that Graffte's name does not appear as "assessor" until 1921.

The Independent Reporter confirmed Graffte's election as "first" assessor for Dennistown Plantation on April 7, 1921. Graffte had been elected on March 18th at the annual town meeting, along with a "second" and "third" assessor. Not to diminish her accomplishment, but Dennistown Plantation had a population of only 120 people, and her husband Amos had already served for many years as town clerk, collector, and treasurer, and was voted again into these positions in 1921. **Continued page 2**

Guest Newsletter Editor,
Barbara Brewer

JATA QUICK TAKE

A League of Her Own, continued

The Maine Chapter of the IAAO provides the names and contact information of seasoned assessors willing and able to answer questions based on their expertise. This initiative is called JATA (Just Ask the Assessor). To access this valuable resource, please visit our website, mechapteriaao.org.



On November 4, 1921, The Kennebec Journal reported that Graffte, the only woman in attendance at the annual assessors' convention and the first woman assessor most attendees had ever met, gave an address on the topic of "Women in Public Affairs". In her address, Graffte emphasized the importance of education and raising responsible citizens. She also pointed out the discrepancies between the sexes when marrying a partner without citizenship. If a woman married a man who was not a citizen, she lost her "hard won" right to vote and became a non-citizen herself. A result that Graffte referred to as "taxation without representation" which she declared was unconstitutional. She was quoted as saying, "It is really a question of whether or not a woman shall stand as an individual, possessing the rights of an adult individual in the eyes of the law, or whether one shall be regarded as a chattel, dependent on her husband for citizenship". She ended her speech with her belief that educating women to become schoolteachers, public servants, and other leaders was key to better equality.

Octavia Graffte served as the Dennistown Plantation assessor again in 1925 and 1931.

OLD NEWS

The Kennebec Journal published a short article (picked up from a Chicago newspaper) on March 27, 1914, on the topic of women assessors. The article "Women Assessors Talk too Much" claims that homeowners living in the "fashionable homes" on Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, were upset with women assessors for openly discussing the décor of their nicely appointed homes and thereby making it public information. As a result, the board of assessors issued an order that anyone disclosing private information to the public would be dismissed but then added "the board wishes it understood than no blame is attached to the women".

MAINE CHAPTER BY THE NUMBERS

In the Maine Chapter newsletter dated December 1998, in which the Chapter was celebrating its 20-year anniversary, the following was noted:

TWENTY YEARS LATER: First, the first woman was elected to IAAO's Executive Board in 1979; in the 1998 IAAO elections three out of the four Executive Board positions were won by women. Second, approximately fifty percent of all chapter members are woman, and are serving as full time assessors. Third, approximately ten percent or less of all chapter members are smokers. Fourth, the Chapter now holds four meetings per year in addition to the participating in the MMA annual conference with the MAAO, and co-sponsoring IAAO courses with MAAO at the annual assessors school. Finally, as I keep telling you all we are averaging seventy five plus members in attendance at each chapter meeting! To paraphrase and old saying "**YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY BABY!**"

Using the 2025 membership list for comparison, today 59% of Chapter members are women, but only 45% of these women hold the title of "assessor" or "assessor's agent" (including retirees). The other 55 % of women either work for the State or hold a supporting position, such as appraiser or assessing technician. To compare, of the 41% of Chapter members who are men, 55% hold the title of "assessor" or "assessor's agent" (including retirees). Another interesting comparison, of the six 2025 Chapter members granted lifetime status, only one is a woman, but of the eleven new CMAs who became members, only four are men.

WHO'S ON FIRST

On March 13, 1939, The Lewiston Sun Journal reported "First Woman Tax Assessor in Maine Dies", however it wasn't a tribute to Octavia Moulton Graffte (who passed in 1943), it was the obituary for Mrs. Ellen G. Fitzgerald in Augusta. Unable to determine when Ellen Fitzgerald served as assessor, I reached out to Kelly Gooldrup, Augusta City Clerk, who then reached out to Kristy Sheehan, Assessor, Loretta Lathe, Executive Assistant, and Sarah Schultznielsen and Nancy Haines of the Lithgow Library. Unable to find any mention of Fitzgerald in the City reports, Roxy LaFrance, Deputy Tax Assessor also searched their commitment books but could not find Fitzgerald's name. Loretta Lathe smartly decided to reach out to Lisa Morin, retired Augusta Assessor, to solve the mystery of Ellen Fitzgerald. Morin shared this news article from April 13, 1923, in which "Woman is Assistant Assessor in Augusta" named Ellen Fitzgerald as the newly appointed assistant city assessor, and stated she was "the first woman to hold such an office in this city". While not the first woman assessor in Maine, she wasn't far behind!



this article as the first woman to be certified by the Maine Bureau of Taxation. Auburn Tax Assessor, John Lochhead, was on hand to present the certificate to Martin. According to Lochhead, only fourteen people had earned their certification at this time. Martin attended classes conducted by the Bureau of Taxation at both Central Maine Vocational Technical Institute and Bowdoin College over a period of four years to meet certification requirements.

On September 18, 1973, The Lewiston Daily Sun reported "Auburn Staffer is First Certified Woman Assessor". Mrs. Patricia D. Martin, listed as a member of the staff in Auburn's Tax Assessor's Office, is credited in

OTHER FIRSTS IN THE NEWS

While researching notable women assessors in Maine, I ran across the names of two assessors who were first in their municipality and worthy of mentioning.

In 1982 Pamela White was profiled in The Lewiston Daily Sun. White was Rangeley's first woman assessor (and code enforcement officer) and was taking courses towards her certification. In the article White stated that she enjoyed field work the most and that "she has found the woods full of former assessors from out of state and each encounter elicits the comment, 'Assessors don't have many friends' and 'Wait until the tax bills come out'". The article ends with the comment, "Even the male taxpayer will find her helpful and knowledgeable".

In Tremont, Maine, the first woman assessor was notable author, Eleanor Mayo. Mayo published five novels, all set in Maine, one of which was made into a movie titled *Tarnished* (released in 1950 and based on Mayo's 1945 book *Turn Home*). Mayo, born in 1920, grew up in Southwest Harbor and spent most of her life on Mount Desert Island. She was also the first woman on the select board and an amateur photographer.

Mayo may be best known as the life partner of more famous author, Ruth Moore. In 1947, they built a home on Lighthouse Road, Tremont, which, in 2004, was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places for its construction in the "vernacular" style. The house was built using salvaged materials, driftwood, and "beach-combed" lumber. Moore and Mayo were together until Mayo's death in 1981.



This photo of the couple is from the Rebel Satori Press website (Mayo is on the right).

IN THE COMPANY OF CATS

A Sleep Deprived Ruminator

It's 4:30 on a Saturday morning and I'm already out of bed and feeding my clowder of cats as a couple of them have already been asking, in their very impolite way, "you 'wake?" (you may know the drill, a paw in the face, a wet nose in the ear, a meow that sounds like a cry for help). As I put four small plates containing their fancy breakfasts on the kitchen floor and watch them eat, I am reminded that I am probably one cat away from being labeled a "crazy cat lady". If not for my husband and kids, I might be considered one today (I am generally not allowed to visit animal rescue shelters unaccompanied by a more responsible, less emotional, family member, but, in all fairness, a couple of the cats were my daughter's idea).

The term "crazy cat lady" has some interesting historical origins. It is rumored to stem from medieval times when women who failed to meet acceptable societal standards (those pesky independent, free thinking, unmarried types) were labeled as witches, and witches were assumed to have trusted feline familiars (bonded creatures to aid them in "magic"). This negative image of a "crazy cat lady" even resurfaced in anti-suffrage propaganda, posing the narrative that only a bitter, middle-aged woman, most likely without the "sensible" influence of a husband and children, could possibly want to vote on political issues that affected her directly. Cats, often seen as independent, indifferent, detached, and mysterious creatures, were used to emphasize ideas of nonconformity and chaos. But I beg to differ, I believe that my cats keep me grounded. When they show me affection, it's from a place of belonging and genuine affinity. When I'm sick, they sleep next to me, when I get home, they greet me, when I'm having a tough day, well... ok they don't really seem to care, but they do distract me and remind me not to sweat the small stuff. It's no surprise that it has been proven that pets help you live healthier, longer lives (or maybe it just seems longer when you're

woken up at 4:30 on a regular basis.) And while dogs make wonderful companions, too, they generally need more time and attention than your average cat, which is probably why if you own two cats, you can easily add another, and another...and before you know it you are sending Christmas cards to your vet because you see them more often than you do your own extended family.



Today the term "crazy cat lady" can conjure up images of Eleanor Abernathy from the TV show *The Simpsons*. Eleanor is a prime example of an old stereotype. Eleanor is a woman of a certain age, covered in cats, who cannot seem to make a coherent word, let alone a well-informed decision. I picture Eleanor as I feed my cats early on a weekend morning, and reflect, hmm, she sort of looks like me and, when I get out of bed in the morning, I sort of sound like her. Then I think, I sure hope my kids find me a good retirement home that allows cats.

I HEARD IT THROUGH THE PODCAST *QUICK TAKE*

Shout out to Rebecca Lambert and Amanda Campbell, hosts of **Potholes & Politics: Local Maine Issues from A to Z!** They announced on their January 13, 2026, podcast that they are now heard in 739 cities across 37 countries. In 2025, their podcast was downloaded 2,700 times. If you have not yet given them a listen, please visit the Maine Municipal Association website or find them on Apple Podcasts. They welcome comments and suggested topics, too!

WOMEN SUPPORTING WOMEN QUICK TAKE



The **Women's Initiative Network (WIN)** is an affinity group within the International Association of Assessing Officers (IAAO) dedicated to connecting and empowering women in the property assessment profession. Its primary purpose is to build a supportive community through several key pillars:

- **Growth & Success:** Fostering professional advancement for women at all career stages.
- **Collaborative Learning:** Providing specialized education, such as the "WIN'ing Conversations" webinar series, which covers topics like leadership, effective meetings, and AI integration.
- **Networking & Mentorship:** Creating platforms for women to share experiences, develop leadership skills, and connect with peers during annual conferences and via [IAAO Connect](#).
- **Advocacy:** Promoting the interests and visibility of women within the assessment field.

Join the WIN Mailing List

You can sign up for the WIN mailing list to receive updates on future presentations and events.

WIN hosts a quarterly webinar series called "**WIN'ing Conversations**" focused on professional development.

- **General Registration Info:** Many WIN webinars are **free** for both members and non-members, though registration is still required to receive the access link.
- **Registration:** You can generally register for these events through the [IAAO Events Page](#).

Other Ways to Get Involved

- **IAAO Connect:** Members can participate in ongoing discussions and community networking on the IAAO Connect platform.
- **Annual Conference:** WIN hosts dedicated events, such as a luncheon and specialized sessions, during the IAAO Annual Conference.

In honor of the November 2025, WIN'ing Webinar "AI as Your Communication Partner", I used Google Gemini to summarize this information on WIN!



VALUING COMMUNITY QUICK TAKE

A gentle reminder that the Maine Association of Assessing Officers (MAAO) transitioned to CommUnity as their new communication platform at the end of last year. CommUnity provides assessors an opportunity to reach out to other assessors for help and guidance in solving our everyday challenges! For more information on the MAAO CommUnity Group, please visit the MAAO website at maineassessors.org.



A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON MY WAY TO FINISH THIS NEWSLETTER...

As chance would have it, the Standish Clerk's Office has been hard at work organizing the vault that contains the Commitment Books and other Town records that are kept in perpetuity. I poked my head into the vault to see how neatly all the archived records had been stacked and labeled and my eyes fell on the 1896 Town of Standish Annual Report. After researching some of the historical items for this newsletter, I got curious about what was going on with the assessments at that time, so I flipped through to the assessor's report. It was there I found this paragraph, and I couldn't help but smile.

TAXES.

Your Assessors were obliged to assess the tax upon the rate of two dollars per hundred, and we fail to remember the name of the person who has extended thanks to us for the small amount assessed against them, but we do distinctly recollect the faces of many who have called and condemned us before they fully understood the circumstances under which we are placed. There is a serious mistake made by a very large majority of the voters of Standish, thinking that their duty ends by casting their votes for town officers for the present year. That is but a small and unimportant part of our duty as citizens of this town. It makes very little difference to the tax payer, whether *Mr. Black* or *Mr. White* assess the tax, *but* it does make a difference whether you vote to raise *eight or ten thousand dollars*. Your Assessors are but as clerks. **You** are the ones who make the taxes. You made your tax for 1895 by your votes March 5th of that year. You will make your tax for 1896 on March 2nd, next. Don't blame your Assessors of next year. Don't grumble to them. Don't grumble about them. *You, yourselves*, are wholly responsible for your tax.

I suppose we will continue to bang this same drum for the next 130 years (perhaps we could start a band?)

2026 MAINE CHAPTER BOARD MEMBERS

Executive Board

Joseph St. Peter, President
 Lauren Asselin, Vice-President
 Clinton Swett, Treasurer
 Donald Ferrara, Secretary
 Darryl McKenney, Past President

Directors

Natalie Andrews
 Barbara Brewer
 Theresa Duff
 Brent Martin
 Amber Poulin

Kerry Leichtman, **IAAO Representative**

DID YOU KNOW?

The Maine Chapter of the IAAO was founded in 1978, and in that same year the very first Women's History Week was celebrated! In 1987, Women's History week was extended to the entire month of March!

2026 MAINE CHAPTER COMMITTEES

The Maine Chapter of the IAAO strives to support other assessors through connection, networking, and education events. If you would like to serve on a committee, let us know! Every year we gauge the interest of our members in serving on a committee. If you have volunteered and have not been contacted, or you did not volunteer and wish you had, please reach out to the Committee Chair and let them know you are willing to help! This year our Committee Chairs are as follows:

Audit-Theresa (Terri) Duff, tax.assessor@houlton-maine.com

Communications- Joseph (Joe) St. Peter, jstpeter@auburnmaine.gov

Education-Amber Poulin, assessment@stocktonsprings.org

History-Darryl McKenney, assessor@waldoboromaine.org

IAAO-Kerry Leichtman, kleichtman@camdenmaine.gov

Legislative-Darryl McKenney, assessor@waldoboromaine.org

Membership-Donald (Don) Ferrara, dferrara@eliotme.org

Nominating-Lauren Asselin, lasselin@graymaine.org

Do you have an idea for a future newsletter or would like to submit an article, puzzle, or funny story? Please contact our regular **Newsletter Editor Joe St. Peter** at the email above. He is always looking for a fresh take or a new perspective!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



I would like to thank PJ (Pepper Jack), Remy (Remington Steele), Cyrus (Prince Cyrus the Younger- we tend to go overboard on names) and Piper (because she "sings" at the birds outside the window and is a little kitty cat) for their loving support and inspiration. You four get me out of bed every morning to face another day! (And I mean that quite literally).



Thank You!

I would also like to thank the staff in the City of Augusta, Kelly, Kristy, Roxy, Loretta, Sarah, Nancy, and Lisa (though retired). I am so impressed that you all took the time to pursue an answer to my question about Ellen Fitzgerald and her service to Augusta! I never would have solved it without your help and persistence! Thank you!

