

MARY PAXTON KEELEY

Mary Paxton Keeley was the first woman graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism.



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A native of Independence, Mo., Mary Gentry Paxton was in her first semester at the University of Chicago when she decided to study journalism. She learned the University of Missouri was going to open a school of journalism, so she left Chicago for Columbia, Mo., where “I was sitting on

the doorstep waiting for [the journalism school] to open,” she said.

Veteran newspaperman and University of Missouri curator Walter Williams had long advocated for the creation of a school of journalism. In 1906 he finally convinced his fellow university curators and when the Missouri School of Journalism opened its doors on Sept. 14, 1908, it was the first journalism school in the world.

Paxton was the first woman admitted to the new program. For one assignment, the professor sent her to interview the mascot of a visiting team. She recalled, “He sent me out to interview the bear! So I had to translate the bear’s conversation.”

After graduation, Paxton joined the Kansas City Post. Her starting pay was \$8 a week. She discovered a woman reporter was rare west of the Mississippi. “I became such a curiosity that people used to come into the office just to stare at me,” she said. Paxton covered a variety of stories and wrote investigative articles. One story was about alleged abuse at the State Training School for Girls in Chillicothe, Mo.

Paxton developed appendicitis, and left the Post after working as a reporter for 15 months. She recovered, but

left journalism and spent the next few years working various jobs. She met Edmund Burke Keeley and they married upon her return from working for the YMCA in France during World War I.

Her husband’s health began to fail, so Paxton Keeley took a job with



Mary Paxton Keeley, front row left, with her former students at her retirement party.

the Atchison County Mail in Holt County, Mo. Soon a widowed mother, Paxton Keeley was determined to provide for her son and returned to the University of Missouri, obtained a master’s degree, and began teaching journalism and creative writing at Christian College (now Columbia College) in Columbia. She became famous in town for riding through the streets on her bike at a time when few women rode bicycles.

After retirement, Paxton Keeley continued to write articles and co-founded the Columbia Art League in 1959. The University of Missouri School of Journalism honored her with an Alumni Citation Award. Her portrait hangs in the School of Journalism’s Graduate Studies Center.

— Biography and photos courtesy of The State Historical Society of Missouri

As graduation approached in 1910, Williams let Paxton select the color of the graduation tassel. The journalism school’s tassel remains red to this day.

