

Margaret Tobin Brown: A Short Biography Molly Brown House Museum



The life of Margaret Brown spanned one of the greatest periods of change in American history. From her birth in a Mississippi river town to elegant Newport, Rhode Island, from the Colorado mines to the stages of New York and Paris, she had a starring role as a progressive reformer, and a strong voice for human rights. Her actual significance was obscured by Hollywood and its manufactured moniker, Molly — but the true Margaret Brown story eclipses the movie mythology, revealing the rhythms of life in a rapidly changing nation.

Born only two years after the end of the Civil War and succumbing to a brain tumor in 1932, Margaret “Molly” Brown witnessed the profound changes caused by industrialization, technological innovations, social reform movements and the shifting role of women. However, Margaret was not a mere witness, she was an active agent. Carrying with her a passion for action and strong convictions, Margaret helped progress countless social causes.

Margaret, who was never known as “Molly” during her lifetime, first achieved fame after her husband J.J. Brown, a self-taught mining engineer, struck gold in Colorado’s mines in the 1890s. After the family moved to Denver in 1894, Margaret’s egalitarian spirit led her to the most pressing issues of her day. She worked to create Colorado’s first juvenile court system, promoted cultural diversity, helped found the Denver Dumb Friends League and became a patron of the arts. She also became Denver’s first historic preservationist when she saved poet Eugene Field’s home from demolition.

As her skills as a leader, organizer and fundraiser grew, so did her scope. The national fame she gained after surviving the *Titanic* disaster in 1912 led her into society’s most powerful circles. She negotiated with J.D. Rockefeller over the rights of coal miners in the aftermath of the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, joined forces with suffrage leaders Alva Vanderbilt Belmont and Alice Paul and ran for the U.S. Senate in 1914, six years before women could vote at the federal level. Although she ultimately withdrew her name before the election due to the onset of World War I, Margaret certainly helped pave the way for other female candidates.

During the war Margaret volunteered in the first motorized ambulance corps. She also worked on relief efforts in devastated areas of France, a country she loved. She later earned the French Legion of Honor award for her war-time activities. In the 1920s, she focused her energy on personal passions, especially the theater. She rented an apartment at the Barbizon Hotel in New York City and brought her experiences back to Denver in the form of performances and collections.



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Margaret Brown’s theatrical style and everyday heroics helped create the mythology that now defines her life. Today, her name is known around the world, a woman of “titanic” fame, memorialized on stage and screen. While the Molly Brown myth exposes the stereotype of the western women, the true story of how she navigated a changing nation reveals an American story of great depth.

For more information visit www.mollybrown.org