

Historic House Museums & Women's History

Molly Brown House Museum

Vice President & Museum Director, Andrea Malcomb

Historic Denver's flagship property, the Molly Brown House Museum, was founded in 1970. It remains one of only a few historic sites west of the Mississippi dedicated to telling one woman's story. Historic house museums are perfectly poised to recognize women's history and the achievements of women and girls from all backgrounds.

As the resource, *A Toolkit of Women's History: Strengthening the Interpretation of Women at Historic Sites and Museums* from the National Collaborative of Women's History Sites says, "When we look at women's history sites across the U.S. and the world, we've seen a reckoning, a recentering of historical narratives that include women and girls and a whole spectrum of identities. Assume women were crucial and you'll find them, even in the most unlikely of places."

This historic house is unusual in that it was preserved because of a woman, yet it bears no lasting physical evidence of the presence of Margaret "Molly" Brown, beyond some bits of wallpaper and plaster. The home was built at the zenith of our state's mining boom as wealth poured down the mountains from places such as Leadville where Mr. Brown orchestrated the largest gold strike in North America in the 1890s.

Margaret Brown was not overly sentimental about her possessions or her home, preferring to think of the world and its treasures hers for exploring then leaving behind. A savvy businesswoman among many other attributes, she largely rented out the home after 1910 and dreamed of one day turning it into a Beaux Arts salon and artist's residence.

After her death in 1932 the house went through extensive renovations, becoming boarding rooms, a Jane Addams Hull House for wayward girls, and even a haven for gay men in the 1960s. In these decades any original markers of the life of Margaret Brown were erased as others lived their lives in this home.

Pop culture and mythmaking were not kind to her in death, with newspapers, books, and movies all saying she was uneducated and unaccepted by society. The *Unsinkable Molly Brown* play then movie was seemingly intent on demeaning the accomplishments of a woman once known the world around, and early museum interpretation was overly dependent on the mythic "Molly" of Hollywood fame.

This mythologizing can be tied to an incomplete knowledge base on the full and extraordinary real life of Margaret Tobin Brown. Born only two years after the end of the Civil War and succumbing to a brain tumor in 1932, her life was defined by large-scale change. Margaret's story began in Hannibal, Missouri, moved to Leadville, Colorado during the height of the silver boom, and then to Denver after her husband's fortuitous discovery of gold. With the family's finances secured, Margaret devoted her life to philanthropy, political and civic engagement, performing arts, and world travel.

Margaret Brown was passionate about education and human rights and wanted to make Denver and the world a more just and equitable place. She was Judge Benjamin Barr Lindsey's chief fundraiser as he created his juvenile court system. She gave the Denver Dumb Friends League, now Humane Colorado, their first big check, and she helped build playgrounds, hospitals, day nurseries, and churches so that all Denverites could thrive.

When a certain "unsinkable" ship did the unthinkable and sank on its maiden voyage 113 years ago, Margaret Brown did what she was already good at, comforting those in need and confronting those responsible. After seeing families make the sudden and painful decision to separate or together stay behind, Mrs. Brown took up the mantra, "Women demand equal rights on land – why not on sea?"

This desire for equality propelled her to international notoriety in the aftermath of the Titanic disaster. Heralded as the "Heroine of the Titanic" by the press, Brown's formation of the Survivors' Committee within hours of the disaster solidified her significance in history. The Titanic story has endured for over 114 years, because it is a snapshot of humanity, a morality play that encourages each of us to put ourselves in that moment and contemplate the decisions made. Our guests are prompted think "Would I be a heroine like Margaret Brown? Would I stay behind so that others may live?"

After the Titanic, Margaret found herself speaking internationally about labor and equal rights causes. This included condemning the Rockefellers as the events of Ludlow unfolded then turned deadly in 1914. In a Denver Post interview, Margaret said "The solution is for the people of Colorado to rise in a body and demand that Rockefeller put into practice that which he has been teaching his Sunday school class... "Am I my brother's keeper?" Guests learn not only this story of labor resistance, but that Margaret Brown was just one of several notable women who responded to the labor strike, including Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, declared America's Most Dangerous Woman by the capitalists and press.

Margaret spent the rest of the summer of 1914 campaigning for the US Senate under the Congressional Union's tactic to punish the party in power. She focused her speaking engagement topics on the situation of miners and equal rights for women. She held salons and conducted a whistle-stop tour around the state. "If I go into this fight I am going to win," she said. "There will be no mincing matters- no pink tea policies."

Ultimately, Brown did not appear on the ballot. Colorado's own Susan B Anthony of suffrage, Ellis Meredith, wrote to Doris Stevens, a leader in what would soon become the National Women's Party, about Margaret Brown. Meredith reminded Doris Stevens, Alice Paul, and Lucy Burns that their tactic to "oust the Democrats" wasn't a good idea in Colorado.

With a wealth of new knowledge from such scholars as Elaine Weiss and Susan Ware in the lead up to the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, we now know, just like the rest of history, that the story of suffrage is complex and nuanced. And because institutions like the Schlesinger Library began to value such archives as the Doris Stevens papers, we now know why Margaret Brown didn't appear on the ballot in 1914.

While Brown wouldn't be the first woman to reach the Senate, she did live to see that woman elected when Hattie Caraway of Arkansas took office in 1931. What was game changing about Margaret's campaign was the national conversation that unfolded in newspapers and magazines, in lectures and parlors, about what it means for a woman to hold the office of Senator. Visitors are prompted to connect this story to the challenges women face in politics today and decide for themselves if Margaret helped open a door for others to walk through.

Because the home's spaces have been reproduced and only a fraction of the collection is original, there was a disconnect between what visitors were hearing from guides and what they were seeing in the rooms. For decades, the tour was a regurgitation of myths and a pointing out of what was, and largely wasn't, original, with no substantial and authentic retelling of the Brown family story. Without the onus of an intact house or collection, in the last fifteen years we've liberated ourselves from being a "mothballed shrine" historic house to instead becoming a museum of exploration and conversation centered on a woman.

Now, as visitors explore the home, either on a guided tour, or self-guided exploration, they find touch baskets, copies of source materials, sensory-friendly touchables, and thanks to Bloomberg Connects, guests can learn this story in over 25 languages. Guests are provided with places to sit, to read, and to contemplate a whole host of thought-provoking questions

based on the idea that if Margaret, as one woman constricted by her gender, accomplished such acts, what can they do today to help others in their community? Into the historic spaces we've integrated video, audio, thematic text panels, and object labels that connect the domestic spaces to the inward activities of the family and the outward actions of a reformer.

Staff underpin programs and interpretation with Margaret Brown's own quest for equality and social justice. When visitors learn about Mrs. Brown participation in the suffrage movement, they also learn about other important women like Elizabeth Piper Ensley, a notable Black suffragist in Denver who was instrumental in securing the Black male vote in 1893 creating full voting rights for women in Colorado. Or they meet Clara Brown, a freed slave who became a notable and wealthy entrepreneur in early Colorado.

The issues and ideals of the Progressive Era that Brown aligned herself with can be directly connected to and inform today's issues of systemic racism, gendered wage gaps, voter suppression legislation, and more. Our visitors explore the ways in which Margaret Brown's story demonstrates how women in the Progressive Era shaped larger national events and policies and set the social norms and laws that we benefit from today.

Museum programs feature local speakers and non-profit groups who help facilitate constructive conversations about topics relevant to social activism, justice, and community involvement – tied to the actions of Mrs. Brown and pulling a thread from then to now. Topics have included women as political representatives and how women are treated through law; women in the workforce including work/life balance and equal pay; and the history and current state of bodily autonomy and reproductive justice in the United States.

Beyond telling the story of Margaret Brown, her biography becomes an entry point to lesser-known or untold stories. We started by recentering the story of Mr. Brown as a mining industrialist at the end of the 19th century and the financier of the families travels and Margaret's philanthropy. His story is placed within a natural resource extraction context in our permanent exhibit on mining in Colorado called the *People's Quest for Gold*, which starts with the Indigenous trading at the confluence of the Platte River and Cherry Creek and takes us to today and the environmental reclamation efforts happening across the state.

To honor Margaret's desire for a Salon, we often work with local artists to bring in their work in conversation with our art collection. For example, photographer Dustin Kearns hung his

contemporary images of historic mining activity within beautiful settings, set against our collection of historic mining photographs. This photography exhibit was in Mr. Brown's study, providing a visual spark for his historic achievements.

Two of the home's five bedrooms on the second floor are no longer set up as bedrooms. Who needs to see (or jump on) another Victorian bed?! Instead, one bedroom serves as an exhibit space for our newest exhibit that centers a Venetian Blackamoor statue purchased by Mrs. Brown. Based on a quote of Margaret's on "acquiring culture," as her identity changed from working class child of immigrants to wealthy world traveler, we look at this "souvenir" through the lens of cultural appropriation and within the context of the "exotic" on display at World's Fairs and larger shifting notions of what it meant and means to "be" American. Guests are prompted to watch videos from area students who discuss cultural appropriation and identity with a local member of the Moorish community, then they can participate in an identity chart activity and think about what influences and shapes their own identity.

Another bedroom is now a permanent Titanic exhibition space with rotating loans and panels that highlight different facets of the Titanic story. Current panels share the stories of the immigrant passengers on the Titanic whose journey to a new life was cut off by the disaster. Visitors learn about the Swedish, Irish, and Syrians passengers and the economic and political conditions that forced such migration. They learn about the Goodwin family, all seven of whom perished that night, and meet the Tu'mahs, Arab Christians who were fleeing persecution under the collapsing Ottoman Empire and were who thankfully reunited with family, right here in Michigan.

And in a third bedroom, half the room remains a bedroom where we discuss the children who have lived in the house, including an original bed, but the other half of the room features a pack-n-play family activity that uses three sets of siblings to explore why children might have to pack and travel. Developed as part of a *Fostering Historical Curiosity Through Play* museum cohort, families decide what to pack if they are Helen and Larry Brown going on a trip, or if they're Tulio and Lena Verna whose family had to relocate to a tent colony during a labor dispute, or Ilyas and Jamilah Yarid, Lebanese children who travelled alone on the Titanic and eventually reunited with family. This play activity supports a family guide, both in print and digital, that shepherds curious exploration of the house for visitors with younger children, as well as a scavenger hunt and Jr. Historians badge program.

At the Molly Brown House Museum, I believe we have answered the challenge to use the building itself as a primary document and connect our historic house museum to a rich and amazing body of women's history scholarship that's created a more sensorial, lively, and engaging house museum.

Mary van Balgooy, in her chapter of *Reimagining the Historic House Museum* titled *Interpreting Women's Lives at Historic House Museums Successfully* tells us that "by using a different set of tools to interpret women, a new narrative arises where women are just as active as men, participating in all facets of society and redefining history as we know it."

By telling not just one woman's story at the Molly Brown House, but using Margaret Brown's life as an entry point to all women's stories, our interpretation can go far beyond the four walls of our domestic spaces to tell the diverse stories of not just women, but all those who called Denver, Colorado and the West, and America home, all through the Brown family.

To a reporter Margaret Brown once said, "I believe that to be happy one must serve humanity." It's our hope that Margaret would be happy with the legacy her service has left behind - one that gives voice to the voiceless and aid to the friendless, and always champions the cause of equality, regardless of gender, origin, or economic background.