

V101 - Mary Colter - AZ HERstory - AL

Arizona's landscapes are unlike any other place in the world. Carved by eons of water, wind, and tectonic forces, our state is breathtaking. The Grand Canyon is the second most visited national park in the country, after the Great Smoky Mountains.

277 miles of the Colorado River, along with the many branched tributary canyons have inspired awe for as long as there have been people.

And it is in *this* setting that we will meet our next incredible Arizona woman. Producer Amanda Luberto has her story....

music

One of the goals of the Arizona HERstory series is to highlight the little-known women that have impacted our state; from revolutionaries to visionaries, rebels to lawmakers

And Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter was described to me as the most known unknown architect in the world. If you're a fan of Southwestern architecture or have visited the Grand Canyon, you've probably seen something she's built or something she has inspired.

Around the turn of the 20th century, the way she integrated nature and Indigenous art was unconventional and inventive.

While she made her mark in the Southwest, she was, like many others, a transplant. Mary Colter was born in Pittsburgh in 1869. Her family moved around a few times when she was a kid. But when Mary was 11, they settled in St. Paul, Minnesota.

This is where she was first introduced to Indigenous art.

music

In the 1880s, members of the Sioux Indian Tribe were prominent in St. Paul. The story goes that a friend of Mary Colter's gave her Sioux art and this started her fascination with Native art and traditions. During a smallpox epidemic, her mother burned all of the Sioux items in their house, believing it could infect them, but Mary hid the art her friend gave her so she could keep it.

And she did for the rest of her life.

When it came time for her to go to college, her interests took her out West.

[00:02:45] **Meredith:** ~~And then~~ after the death of her father in 1886, her sister and mother accompanied her to Oakland, California, so she could go to the California School of Design. There weren't that many educational opportunities for women in architecture in Minnesota at that moment. I mean, all over. But ~~at that moment, and so~~ the California School of Design had recently opened. And so she went out west, attended that school, got her degree, and then she returned with her mother and sister to Saint Paul.

[00:03:29][43.4]

This is Meredith Gaglio. She's an associate professor of architecture at Louisiana State University and in 2018, she wrote about Mary Colter for a series called Pioneering Women of American Architecture.

When Mary moved back home with her mother and sister, she started teaching at the Stout Manual Training School just over the Wisconsin border in Menomonie. (meh-NAH-mo-knee)

During this time, she involved herself in women's cultural groups like the New Century Club and was a speaker at many of their events. This was one of America's first women's clubs and gave ladies of that era a place to discuss professional endeavors and women's rights.

[00:04:16] **Meredith:** it's thought that she may have met a man, named Fred Harvey's daughter, whose name was Minnie Harvey Huckle. And it's we don't quite know how Mary Colter linked up with the Fred Harvey Company, but this is a theory

that she met his daughter in Saint Paul at this sort of New Century Club. [00:04:46][29.5]

Side note here for listeners – some of these stories are what was believed to have happened. The lack of documentation on Mary at this time means historians are relying on hearsay, but there's no way to prove or disprove these tales.

And this is one of the challenges when it comes to covering people who have gone uncredited and unnoticed.

pause

The Fred Harvey Company was focused on bringing the comforts of East Coast travel to Southwestern tourism by building hotels and restaurants along the Santa Fe Railroad.

As a way to enhance tourism, Fred Harvey came up with an idea he called Indian Detours: little roadways from his hotels to Indigenous sites and monuments.

[00:06:02] **Meredith:** And he hires Mary Colter to come over and design the interior of one of his buildings. And so she ends up going out west to do that, and she really takes to the west. And so she continues to work with ~~Fred Harvey~~, the Fred Harvey Company. And by 1910, she was the Fred Harvey Company's main architect. And so she kind of works through that period. So that's kind of where she gets to the West. And since the Fred Harvey Company is focused on Western tourism, that's where she ends up in the long run.
[00:06:51][49.0]

In the early 1900s, The Fred Harvey Company assigned her to design a hotel at the rim of the Grand Canyon. Now, this was before the Grand Canyon was a protected National Park and before Arizona was even a part of the United States.

But travel through the West was becoming popular and people were enamored with the desert landscape so they needed a place to stay.

Terri Cleeland is a retired archaeologist and historical preservationist. Her work was mostly with the Forest Service, but she worked at the Grand Canyon National Park for many years.

[00:08:11] **Terri:** they asked if she could come out to the Grand Canyon and help design the interior of El Tovar, which was the last of these European designs. It was kind of a chalet design at the south rim of the Grand Canyon, built in 1905. [00:08:29][18.7]

The El Tovar Hotel was constructed by Charlie Whittlesey, but Mary Colter designed the interior. It's considered one of the most elegant buildings in the West and in 1987 became a National Historic Landmark.

Next she designed the interior of the famous Hopi House at the South Rim. For this design, she is more openly credited. It's even called Mary Colter's Hopi House on the Grand Canyon's website.

[00:08:44] **Terri:** If you've ever been there, there's quite a contrast between the El Tovar, which, as I said, is like a Swiss chalet design. And right across the way, the Hopi House, which is literally a take on a modern Hopi Pueblo. And Mary Jane Colter did something that nobody else did. And she actually took the indigenous peoples materials. There are like doors in that building that are from the Hopi Pueblos that are hundreds of years old. She put a recreated a Hopi altar in one of those rooms that's now closed off because of the sensitivity of it. [00:09:24][39.8]

From 1905 to 1932, Mary Colter designed and built numerous buildings for the Grand Canyon National Park including the tourist lookout points Hermit's Rest, The Lookout Studio, and Desert View Watchtower, the cabins at Phantom Ranch and Bright Angel Lodge, and two dormitories for Fred Harvey employees.

[00:11:38] **Terri:** Grand Canyon National Park has the greatest collection of existing Mary Jane Colter designed buildings. There are nine of them that are still there today that she had some kind of a hand in. [00:11:53][14.2]

Some of these buildings she was the lead architect on, some she decorated, and some she designed. It's hard to tell the difference on some of the buildings because of how little was documented.

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In addition to being an archeologist who had worked at the Grand Canyon National Park, Terri Cleland also believes that Mary is a design genius. Her buildings have also played a crucial role in Terri's personal life.

[00:04:32] **Terri:** ~~So when you know, my~~ I have a couple of personal stories with Mary Jane Colter. That first hike was with my husband to be he was my boyfriend at the time. And we both went together down to Phantom Ranch 40 years ago, the first time I went there. But he worked on the North Rim in the summers and I worked on the south rim in the summers and we would hike to Phantom Ranch to meet for weekends for romantic getaways. So I got to know Phantom Ranch really well, [00:05:06][33.3]

Terri describes Colter's 1932 Desert View Watchtower as a masterpiece.

[00:21:35] **Terri:** First of all, one of the things about Mary Jane Colter is she would always invent a backstory to her buildings. She was asked by Fred Harvey to design a lookout tower. So they wanted a tower, a tall tower. And she had to design something that she wanted to fit into the native surroundings. Desert View is the highest point along the South rim. ~~And there were~~ during that time there were a lot of towers that were built around the country. And her thoughts were to make it ~~like an~~ as if the Native Americans had built it. And she did her homework. She spent months traveling throughout the Southwest, visiting Puebloan sites that were 800 to 1000 years old. [00:22:40][64.9]

Mary Colter had a life-long relationship with Native American art. From her childhood days with the Sioux Tribe to visiting Indigenous communities for design inspiration. She would often hire Native designers and builders to assist her in constructing the structures.

But there is a fine line between inspiration and appropriation.

In 1923, she designed the El Navajo Hotel in Gallup, New Mexico. She is quoted saying that she always wanted to carry out a fully Native design in a hotel with none of the modern motifs.

She wanted to avoid the sort of kitchiness that could be seen at that time and create something more authentic.

The hotel is built in a very classic Colter way: integrating nature and Native culture into the look and design of the building, inside and out. It's very inspired by Pueblo architecture with Navajo designs inside.

But this is when she finds herself using sacred traditions for American commercialization.

[00:22:28] **Meredith:** what happens that's kind of the moment is that she decides that on the interior of the building, she's going to have 12 ~~sand paintings~~, Navajo sand paintings reproduced, and they're painted by an artist hired by the Harvey Company. It's guided by a Navajo medicine man named Miguelito. But ~~what ends up happening is~~ sand paintings are ritualistic paintings. They are meant to be kind of ephemeral channels for spirits. These are important paintings. They're not empty decorative elements. Right? And so the Navajo leaders nearby were outraged by this. And they bring her to trial for doing this, for ~~like~~ offending them in this way. Everything is amicably, ~~amicably~~ resolved. Actually, the Harvey Company immediately apologizes. They are responsive to the demands. There's a major cleansing of the hotel and blessing, and it's attended by 2000 Navajo and 15 medicine men and the media. It's really a big kind of display. But at the same time, we don't quite know what she was thinking when she did this right? Like, ~~do we?~~ What's her perception of indigenous culture in this way? What's her perception of Navajo culture? Does she comprehend their ritualistic meaning? Is she just earnestly recreating something that she finds beautiful? We don't necessarily know. [00:24:25][116.6]

music

Being a woman in architecture at this time led her to not being properly credited throughout history. But even at the time she faced some backlash.

[00:11:26] **Meredith:** There's an American writer named Frank Waters who wrote a book called *Masks Gods, Navajo and Pueblo Ceremonials* in 1950, and he said that he called her an incomprehensible woman in pants. And it's because she did a number of things that maybe weren't specifically feminine. So she rode horseback. She sketched ruins. She, ~~you know,~~ ~~kind of~~ is working in this predominantly male environment. She's not wearing feminine clothes. She's. Yelling at the builders on the site. She's talking to the railroad engineers as equals. And so I think this kind of underscores her position as a woman in this environment and also the sort of the sort of identity that she had in that environment, whether or not this was her natural identity or whether this was something that was cultivated in order to be a stronger presence, it seems like it was not cultivated to prove herself, but she was a really ruggedly independent person, which sets her apart from a lot of people at that moment. [00:13:02][95.6]

This is part of the reason why she is one of less than 200 women inducted into the Arizona Women's Hall of Fame.

Established in 1981, the Arizona Women's hall of fame aims to memorialize women who have made a lasting legacy here in the state.

Each year about 3 to 4 women receive the honor. Board Chair President Dana Campbell Saylor believes that Colter is a perfect example of someone the Hall of Fame is looking to commemorate.

[00:17:34] **DANA:** I think she is probably the best known unknown architect in the world. And I think that she was extraordinary among women architects, and especially in a man's profession during the late 19th century. And ~~I think~~ ~~that~~ what was exceptional with her work was that she started out as an interior designer. And I think that gave her an element of that was different from men going into

architecture, that she really brought in the elements, the landscape elements inside as well. And I think that she designed the buildings. Not to just entertain them, but she sought to occupy the eye and the mind together. There was a psychological impact of her work, and I think that she was remarkable, that she brought in the remnants of the history of the Native American culture. [00:18:50][76.2]

For Colter, there was a political element, a gender element, and an appreciation element that all went into her work.

[00:19:46] **DANA:** She was a perfectionist and that she spent a lifetime advocating and defending her aesthetic vision. And ~~I think.~~ I think her reputation grew. Significantly when they realized the broadness of her architecture, [00:20:06] [20.1]

music

Mary Colter may not be as household of a name as someone like Frank Lloyd Wright, but her work goes back to the origins of Arizona and can still be seen today.

In addition to the buildings at the Grand Canyon and the other hotels mentioned, she is also connected to the La Posada Hotel in Winslow. Her work is all around us, and yet, she has a silent legacy as Meredith Gaglio said.

[00:35:51] **Meredith:** as far as a kind of visual or physical architectural legacy, I think she really did. She did inspire the national park style that we're still seeing is part of the system today. And her buildings still exist and are and still create the feelings that I think they were meant to. In 1914 and 1920s. And so I think that's still something that we see from her legacy. Yeah. But yeah the big problem really is that she was largely forgotten from that larger history of architecture. And so her legacy is difficult to recover in some ways just ~~because we didn't.~~ Because a lot of people didn't know about her. You know, her contributions to architecture at the time. So I also think in a way, every woman, every female architect who's working

during this time, their legacy in some ways is are all of the female architects today who are marching forward.

[00:37:26][95.5]

theme

Thanks so much for listening to this week's episode of Valley 101.

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If you'd like to follow me, I'm at Amanda luberto. That's l-u-b-e-r-t-o.

The Arizona HERstory series concludes next week with the story of another inductee of the Arizona Women's Hall of Fame from Kaely Monahan.

music beat

This has been Valley 101. I'm producer Amanda Luberto, we'll see you next week.