



**NCWHS**  
National Collaborative for Women's History Sites

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**TELLING WOMEN'S  
STORIES**

**A TOOLKIT FOR HISTORIC  
SITES & MUSEUMS**

# PREFACE

## TELLING WOMEN'S STORIES: A TOOLKIT FOR HISTORIC SITES & MUSEUMS

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## PREFACE

Representatives of over 20 historic sites gathered in Washington, D.C. in 2001 with historians, preservationists and interested citizens to create the National Collaborative for Women's History Sites (NCWHS). The organization focuses on "the preservation and interpretation of sites and locales that bear witness to women's participation in American life." With initial funding from the National Park Service, the founders claimed that women's history existed everywhere, if only people looked for it. Founder Heather Huyck suggested that "There is no site that doesn't have women's history. If we are to understand who we are and where we've come from, we need to know the whole story."

A great deal of work has been done in the last twenty years to integrate the history of women into sites, parks and museums. This Toolkit has been created by the NCWHS Research and Interpretation Committee to assist sites as they expand their efforts to tell the whole story. This is particularly important as we become more attuned to the many differences among women and their historic experiences. Those differences shaped their lives, separately and in relation to each other and to men.

Broadening the interpretation at historic sites, museums and parks is a continual work in progress, and we welcome your comments and suggestions. Here, we want to share our insights with others who present history to the public in many different venues. Each of these venues has its own approach and vocabulary which sometimes complement each other and sometimes clash. We appreciate all such venues whether museums, historic sites, house museums or parks, of all sizes and foci, whether publicly or privately owned. The NCWHS exists to support the interpretation of women's history at all kinds of historic places.

Our authors include public and academic historians, site managers and interpreters from different parts of the country. Although the primary contributors are members of the NCWHS Research & Interpretation Committee, we have benefitted from individuals working at a range of historic sites who responded to our widely-circulated 2020 survey. We could not include all of their examples and insights here, but they helped shape the sections that follow.

# CHAPTER 1

## Why a Toolkit? Historic Sites, Women's History and Significance

Welcome! We hope that you find this Toolkit useful and we look forward to your responses. Those of us who work in museums, historic sites, and parks know how experiencing a location deepens our understanding of the women associated with it. Simply asking what half the population did during their lives and how they perceived their experiences changes our perception of the past.

Historic locales provide insights and a deep understanding of the women who once lived or worked there. If we walk into a woman's home, we can discover previously unrecognized aspects of her life. Some houses overwhelm us with ornate decoration, while others sadden us by their lack of comfort. We study physical arrangements of kitchens, public spaces once noisy with passionate women arguing for their rights, and plazas once full of women selling their wares. Rivers, trails and railroads where women travelled all call out for interpretation as we seek to analyze the history of North America and the United States. Seeing antique stoves, washing machines and typewriters up close, and smelling open hearth cooking and hearing barnyard noises of chickens and cows in living history exhibits help us better appreciate how crucial American women and women's labor were to our country's formation, development, and survival.

We rely on expertise from both public and academic historians so that the history presented reflects quality scholarship and inspires exceptional exhibits, tours, events and products. The Collaborative is committed to bringing together diverse insights and skills to enhance our understanding of women's lives, to understand their places in history more broadly, and to clarify the connections between their lives and ours. That understanding has been enriched over the past few decades by extensive research on the diverse groups of women who contributed to our nation's history.

When women's history scholarship blossomed in the 1970s, we struggled to document the presence of women in American life. Since then, thousands of papers, articles, books, and research reports have identified a once unimaginable range of women's histories. Today, we appreciate much more the greater complexities of women's lives, as shaped by race, class, ethnicity, region, religion, and sexuality as well as the specific eras in which they lived. As important, instead of arguing simply that women were half of all Americans, historians now argue for women's centrality in the American narrative. And dozens of specialized organizations have developed to support the work of those studying women in the United States.

These organizations range from those focusing on comparative and international history to the most local and regional perspectives. In addition to the organizations, some with logos displayed below, there have been groups formed to research women in upstate New York, the Midwest, rural America, and others. Many of these groups host conferences and publish newsletters, and can also locate specialists in a variety of areas of interest to historic sites and museums. They can be an excellent resource for exhibit planning.



The Coordinating Council for  
WOMEN IN HISTORY



IFRW



NCWHS



ASSOCIATION of  
BLACK WOMEN  
HISTORIANS  
Thirty Five Years of Truth Telling



S A W H  
SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION  
for  
WOMEN HISTORIANS



berkshire conference  
of WOMEN HISTORIANS



WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN HISTORIANS

*(Logos from top left: The Coordinating Council for Women in History; International Federation for Research in Women's History; National Collaborative for Women's History Sites; Association of Black Women Historians; Southern Association for Women's Historians; Berkshire Conference of Women Historians; Western Association of Women's Historians)*

We now understand that women have been involved in every endeavor imaginable, either directly or indirectly. Women were deeply involved in events major and minor, but their participation was often denied, obscured or forgotten. We have redefined political activity to mean more than voting and election to office. That term now includes protests, petitions, community organizing, institution building, and get-out-the-vote efforts. Similarly, economic activity includes more than formal employment and buying and selling goods. It also entails unpaid and agricultural labor, child and elder care, and food preparation. We better appreciate the sheer time, skills and effort necessary in pre-industrial worlds to achieve basic survival, from gathering fuel and water to myriad steps involved in making each garment from raising flax or sheep. From planting flax to wearing a linen garment required 22 steps. The transition to machine-made goods, electric appliances, and other modern technologies was uneven and had disparate effects on women of different regions, races and social class. For example, the production of factory-made clothing increased work for women in factories and laundries.



*Historians can find women in the most unexpected places. By 1919, for example, women were 20 percent of the workforce at Thomas Edison's laboratories in West Orange, New Jersey, producing batteries, records and film. This photo shows women boarding the train after work. (Thomas Edison National Historical Park)*

Women's history is best understood with insights from diverse fields such as economics, law, landscape architecture and archeology. This Toolkit draws from many different fields, each with its own principles, strengths, and vocabulary; many fields have just enough overlap to be confusing. For academic historians, "interpretation" describes the process of analyzing sources such as documents to construct historic arguments. For public historians, "interpretation" describes the process of sharing history with the people who visit historic places. In this Toolkit, we have chosen to emphasize certain terminology but want to recognize that one field's written documents are another's popular culture. For those people coming from the discipline of American Studies, material culture primarily refers to physical objects, while tangible resources combine both natural and cultural resources to recognize their overlaps and distinctions.

When we use the term “women’s history” we include all ages, races, ethnicities, identities and orientations-- everyone socially defined as a woman/girl and those who identify themselves as such. In addition, we want to increase attention to gender history, the different social and cultural ideas and assumptions attached to women and men, female and male, across time and place. Still, gender is only one of many factors that frame the lives of women and girls and our interpretation of them. Throughout this Toolkit, we pay close attention to the ways that race, ethnicity, and class shape the experiences, opportunities and challenges women and girls face in particular times and places.

As you begin thinking about how to include and expand interpretation of women and girls at your site, we recommend that you use a WHY-WHAT-HOW method to proceed. First, define the significance of the women and their history at your locale. WHY: the importance and purpose in sharing this history. Then, proceed to define WHAT success will be for your site as concretely as possible. Only then decide HOW to accomplish your definition of success. At first, this approach probably will seem unnatural but it will prevent innumerable misunderstandings and arguments. Reviewing your purpose provides your WHY while developing attainable goals develops the WHAT, and finally, the HOW identifies the best way to achieve your goals.

To address the question of significance, think about all the women and girls who are relevant to your site. Assume women were crucial and you’ll find them, even in the most unlikely places. A good first step is to foster discussions with local people and descendant communities and be inclusive.

- What are the physical resources you have-- the objects, buildings, and landscapes?
- Why are women important at your site?
- What are the stories you want to tell?
- What sources can help you tell these stories? Consider traditional libraries and archives as well as curatorial collections and sources yet to be discovered in attics, closets, and basements.
- And as important, who is your audience, both existing and desired? Audiences help shape our questions – what stories will draw them to your site?



*Elementary school students visit the Molly Brown House Museum in Denver (Photos by Scott Dressel-Martin)*



# CHAPTER 2

## Tangible Resources: Landscapes, Architecture and Objects

Fundamental to museums, historic sites and parks are the physical remnants of the past. We use “tangible resources” to recognize that natural resources and cultural resources should not be artificially separated—mountain ranges are simultaneously natural geological features and culturally recognized barriers and viewing places. In recent years the National Park Service has worked to recognize the shared and distinct aspects of physical worlds. Natural resources have cultural meanings; cultural resources -- whether rock walls or wooden tables -- are comprised of natural elements.

Some objects are near-sacred in their connections with famous women or events, while others are discarded bottles, bones or cans, or lost coins and jewelry that archeologists later uncover. These are good examples of various disciplines using different terms for the same physical remnants. American Studies uses “material culture” to refer to physical things (usually objects) and to distinguish from the immaterial. Museum curators use the term “objects” while archeologists use “artifacts.”



*Photo by Heather Huyck*



*(Library of Congress)*

Here we will use the term “tangible resources” to refer to the physical evidence of the past. Tangible resources resonate with us whether they are rolling hills or flat plains, mansions or log cabins, washboards or typewriters. It’s one thing to read about the Battle of Washita but quite different to walk alongside that creek and see the string of cottonwood trees where Indian women were captured or killed in an early morning raid as they slept in their tipis. Experiencing that landscape gives us an understanding that books simply cannot. We feel hot winds or walk rocky rough trails. Demonstrations allow us to lift a heavy bucket of water or a heavy iron. They connect us to the past in visceral ways.

A common vocabulary has developed for preservationists and federal program managers that focuses on categories of landscapes, buildings and structures, and objects/artifacts. Buildings house humans; structures provide infrastructure. A military fort is a building, but the acequia (irrigation ditch) that brings water to the fort is a structure. A mansion is a building but the bridge to it is a structure. Generally, buildings are considered architecture while structures are generally engineering-related. Historically, few women had access to the professions of either architecture or engineering. Yet women used and modified many buildings, raised money to build and preserve them, and depended on structures for water, energy, etc. Many women, from necessity or preference, used buildings and structures intended for one purpose to meet other needs.

For example, Black and white women active on the underground railroad often transformed spaces in their homes and barns or in churches and other public buildings to accommodate fugitives fleeing enslavement. They created spaces for sleeping, eating and sometimes cooking that were hidden from view. Some added secret doorways or movable cupboards to protect fugitives from enslavers or slave hunters. The National Park Service lists numerous sites, including homes, churches and businesses in twenty-two states and the District of Columbia related to the Underground Railroad. Learn more at <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/states.htm>

Public historians have long interpreted the physical remains of the past found in museums, historic sites, and other places. These locations are the tangible resources/material culture that we can see up close, walk into, or walk over. They are simultaneously sources of research and of interpretation. Instead of seeing a photograph of a loom we can stand beside a loom and be impressed by its surprising complexity or touch the woven linsey-woolsey fabric with its heavier and scratchier feel than clothing we wear today. The loom helps us appreciate the labor involved in weaving a single yard of fabric while the linsey woolsey fabric with its distinct patterns provides a sense of connection with those who wore this once-common fabric.

One example of the interpretation of a single artifact is the recent book by Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack* (Random House, 2021). In this book, which won the 2021 National Book Award for nonfiction, Miles tells the story of how in the 1850s in South Carolina, an enslaved woman named Rose packed a cotton sack with a dress, braid of her hair, pecans, and "my love always" for her nine-year-old daughter, Ashley, who was about to be sold. Ashley's granddaughter, over 60 years later, embroidered the bag with this story of generations of African-American women.



*Ashley's sack, bought for \$20 at a Nashville flea market in the early 2000s, is now at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, on loan from the Middleton Place Foundation. (Courtesy The Middleton Place Foundation, Charleston, South Carolina)*

The tangible past provides insights and appreciation for the women who came before us and shaped our lives in ways we seldom appreciate. Museums and historical sites are committed to telling a real story with genuine objects that have survived from the past. Sometimes these came from the women who once lived at that site while other times staff use period pieces or reproductions to replace objects lost long ago. In addition, many older objects have become stained, rusted or have missing pieces -- their current physical state belying their historical usage. Unlike Hollywood versions, accuracy in historical interpretation is important.

Sadly, the many "missing" tangible resources also make it difficult for us to appreciate the essential roles women played in building our country. Missing outbuildings such as slave housing or dairies where women made cheese and butter can no longer bear witness to their

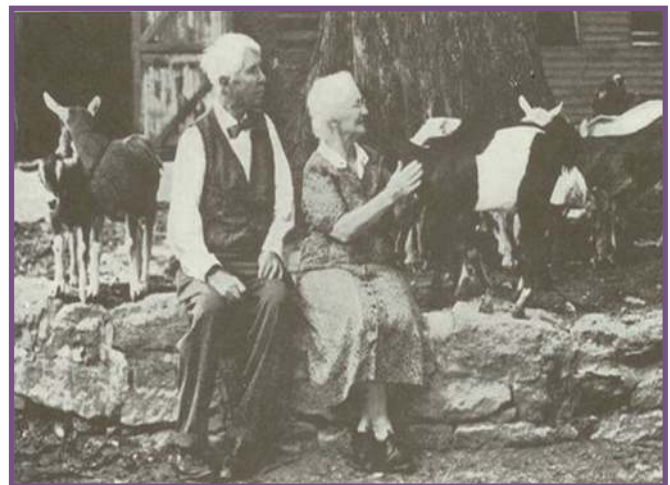


lives. Work clothes became rags recycled into paper or book collections burned in house fires. In these cases, museums can use reproductions of original objects that allow visitors to handle them without risking damage.

Survey your site to identify the tangible resources that remain and those now missing and consider how best they can help tell the stories of women who lived there. Using your knowledge base (Chapter 3), identify as many women as possible who once occupied your site, including different generations of women and girls. Look for evidence from their lives that can be interpreted, either in demonstrations or by allowing the public to look closely. Encourage the public to stop, look, and listen. Our senses help us appreciate their homes, places of work and worship, forts, and other physical sites and their surrounding landscapes and complex ecosystems- rivers, marshes, fields and forests. These tangible resources shaped their lives and provided sustenance, fear and delight.



*The Pauli Murray family NHL in Durham, NC sits partway down a hill, below a cemetery. Originally a field, the city installed a cemetery with effluent draining down to the house -- exemplifying the interaction of landscape, city policy and housing structure. (Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice)*



*The study of Lillian Steichen Sandburg in Flat Rock, NC, reflects her pioneering work in dairy goat genetics, as does the goat farm on the property. (Carl Sandburg Home and National Historic Site)*

Use reproductions or appropriate sacrificial period objects to allow the public to touch the past. Sacrificial objects are those so common and usually so sturdy that visitors handling them will gain a much better understanding of the past without damaging rare or original objects. The challenge is balancing the long-term preservation of historic objects and resources with immediate understanding and access. Simply walking into historic rooms helps us appreciate their different sizes, layouts, amounts of light, and finishes. We can better imagine women straining their eyes in dimly lit rooms as they sewed away or the smell of clothes redolent from wood fires.

Exploring the tangible resources of a historic site illuminates how women, men and children experienced important aspects of their lives as well as how differences of gender, class,

ethnicity, race and location and marital and family status shaped their experiences. Material culture/ tangible resources encompass physical objects– their design, creation, distribution, and changing usages and meanings. While sometimes using different vocabularies, academic and public historians both highlight the various ways that the physical world defines and transforms our lives.

Examples of this physical world include architecture – buildings and structures like houses, hotels, apartment buildings and tenements, factories, forts, hospitals, libraries, restaurants, churches, synagogues, mosques and meeting houses, other religious buildings, school buildings, offices, shops, mines, bridges, railroads, trails, barns and farm buildings. It's important to consider topography, climate, crops and the other kinds of tangible resources because they so influenced women's lives.

Efforts to care for tangible resources range from deer management to routine housekeeping and maintenance to restoration, rehabilitation and occasionally reconstruction where a building is completely rebuilt using historic methods and materials. The 1816 Farmington Hicksite Quaker Meetinghouse (FMHQ) in central New York State, which was used as a hay barn for many years, is now being restored using 19th century materials and techniques to replace sections of the building that had been destroyed. Fortunately, the original pews had been stored in the hayloft and could be reclaimed.

The Meetinghouse between 1816 and 1927 served as the spiritual home to hundreds of women and men active in campaigns for Indigenous rights, abolition and racial equality, and women's rights. The images below show the original meeting house in the 1890s, its use as a barn from 1927 to 2006, and its ongoing restoration as a historic site since 2011. The current 1816 FQMH organization hosts regular events related to the social justice issues historically advocated by its members, including the rights of women from all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Learn more at [www.farmingtonmeetinghouse.org](http://www.farmingtonmeetinghouse.org)



1816 Farmington Quaker Meeting House in 1892 (Photo by Edwin Gardner, Ontario County Historical Society)



Meetinghouse used as a barn, 1927-2008 (Photo by Charles Lenhart)



Meetinghouse restoration since 2011 (Photo by Charles Lenhart)

We can also explore the changing interpretation of cultural landscapes -- parks, monuments, gardens, neighborhoods, cemeteries, battlefields, playgrounds, and roads. These tangible resources also include a wealth of objects. A few examples include religious objects, weapons, art, furniture, toys, beds and kitchenware, the use of which differed if located in a home, hospital or a fort. Nothing is too large or too small to have meaning in understanding the history of a site--rats' nests in walls, for example, have hidden women's shoes and many other items. (See Travis McDonald, "Rat Housing in Middle Virginia" in *Building Environments: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Vol. X. (2005)

When interpreting an object, our questions should include its provenance: where it originated, where it has been, and how it was acquired; how and why it was constructed, and what meaning can be found in the change and/or continuity of usage. In women's history, use is especially crucial. Women rarely built cast iron stoves or sewing machines, but they used them constantly.

Other objects include muffin tins and samovars brought from Europe and used by tenement house residents, as displayed in the seven restored apartments at the Tenement House Museum in New York City; the photographs, maps, furnishings and artifacts at Jane Addams' social settlement, Hull-House, now a museum in Chicago; or the gardens at the Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts.



*1930's recreated kitchen of the Baldizzi Family  
(Courtesy Tenement House Museum)*



*The Hancock Shaker Village garden includes  
plants recorded in a list from 1873  
(Courtesy Hancock Shaker Village)*



*Period bedroom at the  
Morristown National  
Historical Park  
Museum and Library*

Parks whether local, state, or national—and there are many thousands of them—contain many tangible resources relevant to the history of American women, such as Adeline Hornbek's Rocky Mountain homestead at Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument in Colorado. Preservation is crucial to using tangible resources for research and interpretation. Shelves of books have been written on the often highly technical methods necessary to extend the physical existence of landscapes, architecture, and objects, whether by landscape architects, architectural conservators, or curators. Preservation slows the physical degradation that occurs naturally or by human agents.

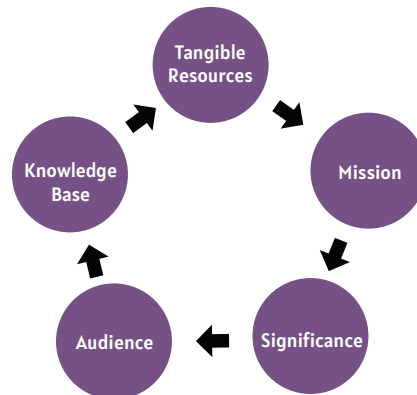
### **Getting Started:**

Different kinds of organizations have different missions, governance, and ways to determine their priorities. A private non-profit house museum may have requirements established in the original donor's will, while National Park Service historic sites usually (but not always) are bound by Congressional legislation establishing procedures and policies required for its maintenance and use. Some organizations have considerable leeway in how they operate while others follow decades of traditions; some have robust and lively boards while others are personal dreams



realized as museums. While all of these locales can provide excellent history, the process of incorporating women's history into each must consider and match its particular circumstance, and balance flexibility with practicality. More formal organizations must respect legal requirements even as they broaden their stories to recognize the centrality of women.

One way to envision expanding women's history in a museum, historic house, park or other site is to consider these elements and how to strengthen each one's connection with women's history. Start at one node of the circle below and enhance recognition of women's history in that node, and then do another until all are as powerful as possible.



Begin with Tangible Resources because every historic locale, by definition, has those. List the tangible resources at your locale and then ask what other landscapes, architecture and objects are associated with women and girls. Consider your existing audience, ask what people seek and which audiences you want to attract (especially those not currently involved); with Mission, the existing one and an enriched one; with Knowledge Base, the existing sources and stories and how they are used.

Adding to any node will raise issues and opportunities for the other ones. The stronger the ties between Mission/Significance and the history of women, the more leverage you'll have to persuade board members and staff. Rather than approaching this in a linear fashion, it is often helpful to embrace an iterative process in which you work on one element and then another, but always with the thought of returning to earlier elements as you develop a larger plan.

Ways to approach the WHAT and the HOW for your site involve creating a knowledge base through research in written and quantitative sources, visual and oral sources, material culture/tangible resources. The Knowledge Base helps to define the important issues and questions and how to best impart that information via exhibits, tours and other visitor services. This, too, is an iterative process: insights in one aspect will enhance another, and one revision will lead to another. But it's crucial to be as clear as possible about the significance of what you are planning and then to develop a list of tangibles, archival, quantitative, visual, and oral resources that can help you develop exhibits and other interpretive media.



*Margaret Mitchell's typewriter in the living room of her ground floor apartment, which she called "The Dump." Note the space itself, its windows, decoration, uses, and objects. Atlanta History Center. (Photograph by Heather Huyck)*

# CHAPTER 3

## **Knowledge Base: Archival, Manuscript, Quantitative, Oral/Aural and Visual Sources**

Women's history asks different and often new questions. Our knowledge base has been developed to answer those questions and, in the process, reveals still other "new" questions. Our understanding of history is continually revised through this process.

For example, the book *Indigenous Prosperity* (2020) by Susan Sleeper-Smith, tells the story of successful Native American women farmers in the Ohio River Valley, before their society was disrupted by Revolutionary War veterans claiming those same lands as payment for their military service. By highlighting indigenous women, this book transforms the meaning of the decision by U.S. political leaders to pay veterans with land rather than cash. Similarly, in *They Were Her Property* (2019), Stephanie Jones-Rogers rewrites the history of slavery by showing how white slave-owning women participated directly in the purchase, sale, and living conditions of enslaved African Americans. Rather than being passive bystanders or secret critics, many white southern women actively engaged in the system of enslavement as a result of inheriting, selling or purchasing slaves; providing slave traders with room and board; hiring enslaved women as wet nurses; and administering brutal punishments. These are but two examples of the way women's historians continue to reinterpret historical developments.

A knowledge base is everything we know or can learn about a place and the women (and men) associated with it. During the past few decades, the knowledge base for women's history has grown exponentially in ways we could not have imagined when we first began to delve into our foremothers' lives. Because knowledge is cumulative, we can now ask questions once impossible to research and use sources in ways not previously considered. Work with descendant communities has opened impressive insights, as has using business sources such as trade journals and catalogs once little researched.

Various parts of the knowledge base interact with each other. A woman with her grandmother's trousseau helps us appreciate bridal customs and expectations. Other tangible resources, whether landscapes, architecture or objects, are equally important in revealing the roles of women and girls. Walking the crowded and noisy streets around the Tenement Museum in New York City or struggling in the blasts of heat and humidity on historic cotton plantations helps us understand women's lives in centuries past. Similarly, discovering once-hidden "back stairs" of houses that were staffed with domestic workers or enslaved women provides insights into their lives.

*Clothing tells us a lot about the people who wore it. This eighteenth century cape belonged to Tempe Wick. She was the daughter of Henry Wick on whose land George Washington's army camped. Morristown National Historical Park Museum and Library Collections. (Photograph NPS, Morristown site, New Jersey)*





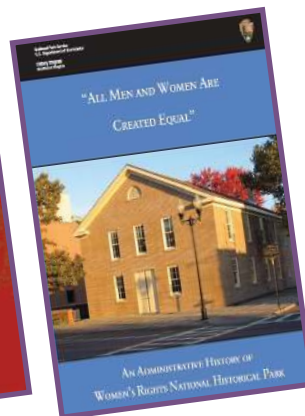
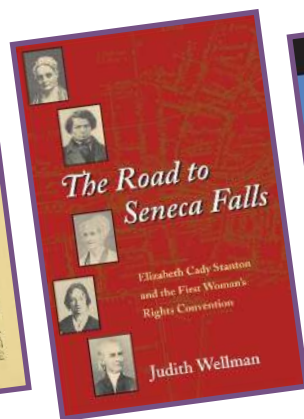
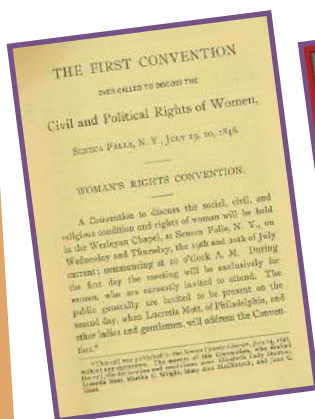
Written sources, such as letters and newspapers, lead us to ask different questions in oral interviews about an event or group of people. In turn, many interviewees have visual or material resources that help us imagine a particular time or place. For example, the book *Shades of LA: A Search for Visual Ethnic History* (1996) grew out of an oral history project developed by Kathy Kobayashi and Carolyn Kozo Cole, sponsored by the Los Angeles Public Library. They invited families to bring photo albums to local libraries, where family members were interviewed about their and their ancestors experiences in Southern California from the 1880s to the 1960s. The book contains excerpts from these interviews and reproductions of more than one hundred family photographs from eight ethnic communities: Native American, African American, Japanese American, Filipino American, Korean American, Samoan American, Chinese American and Mexican American.



Projects like this can provide local historic sites with critical resources for understanding and exhibiting the diverse experiences of local women and families, including objects and artifacts as well as interviews and photographs.

There is a progression in sources, beginning with primary sources, which are those that are original to the period under study. They provide the foundation for scholarly papers, theses and PhD dissertations. That research is incorporated into journal articles, then monographs that focus on particular topics before being synthesized into books with larger scopes. Only then might some of these ideas and discoveries appear in textbooks.

Knowledge bases include primary sources that originated with the women, secondary sources that analyze and synthesize primary sources (articles, and monographs), and tertiary sources which in academic history use are reference works-- electronic databases, bibliographies or encyclopedias, or in public history use, guides for site management decisions-- historic resource studies, furnishing plans, and master plans. While the distinctions among these three kinds are not definitive—an early historical monograph that stereotyped American Indians might now be seen as a primary source for a study of such attitudes or an environmental impact statement (EIS) which combines research with legal management prescriptions—they are all useful for developing your knowledge base. For example, relevant tertiary sources are crucial to managing the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. These include James R. Hinds, "Frederick Douglass Home: Cedar Hill, Historic Structures Report" (1968); Anna Coxe Toogood, "Frederick Douglass Home: Cedar Hill, Historic Grounds Report, Historical Data Section" (1968); and Sally Johnson Ketcham, "Cedar Hill: The Frederick Douglass Home, Furnishing Plan" (1971). Frederick Douglass lived surrounded by women who shaped his life and whose lives are reflected in these tertiary sources which too often are overlooked. They directly link historical actors with tangible resources.



These images show the 1848 report (primary) of the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention (Library of Congress), Judith Wellman's (secondary) interpretive book on that convention, and Rebecca Conard's (tertiary) administrative history of the Women's Rights National Historic Park.

Researchers turn to different types of sources, using secondary and tertiary ones to identify primary ones and primary ones to check the validity of claims made in secondary and tertiary sources. Searching among all kinds of sources is crucial, including the growing body of digital sources, many of which were expanded and strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Below we discuss some of the elements of building your knowledge base, including the use of archival sources like manuscripts, records and letters; quantitative sources like the census or payroll records; and oral and cultural sources.

## Archival Sources

Historians find much of the material they use in archives: repositories for primary sources ranging from family papers and military records to newspapers and photographs. They are housed in libraries and historical societies, colleges and universities, religious institutions, hospitals and asylums, orphanages, voluntary organizations, and businesses as well as in collections organized by state and the federal governments. Many national organizations, from the National Association of Colored Women to the Young Women's Christian Association to labor unions, create and maintain their own archives. Many historic sites also contain archival materials, such as the Molly Brown House Museum in Colorado and the Atlanta History Center in Georgia.

Both the National Archives (NARA) and the Library of Congress (LC) have impressive sets of tools to help researchers—lists, webinars, and finding aids—useful for working anywhere. The LC divides its vast holdings by media—manuscripts, maps, audio, prints, and newspapers. When researching the National Archive records, it's helpful to identify the federal agency involved to find the appropriate "Record Group." Each agency has its own RG identifier. For example, the Women's Bureau is RG 86, Women's Army Corps is RG 336, and the Food and Drug Administration is RG 88. All have expanded their digital holdings.

The kinds of archival sources relevant to each site vary, but some general information about finding material on women can prove helpful. For example, women's names can be a challenge. Until recently most European American women changed their names upon marriage, adopting their husband's surname. Their birth name and all the familial relationships it identifies often get lost just as their legal rights did under the Anglo-American common law of *couverture*.

Another complication arises because many married women, from various ethnic and racial groups, historically used the form "Mrs. John Doe" as their name in business, religious, charitable or other public endeavors, erasing their first names completely from the record. They kept Mrs. John Doe when widowed while divorced women became Mrs. Jane Doe. Even famous women were sometimes lost this way. The artist Frida Kahlo was sometimes referred to as "Mrs. Diego Rivera," or the modernist designer-architect Ray Eames was listed only as "Mrs. Charles Eames." In 1932, Amelia Earhart pleaded with the publisher of the *New York Times* not to be called "Mrs. George Putnam." In 2020, the *New York Times* ran a series of articles with these and other examples; see "The Mrs. Files" *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/arts/mrs-women-identity.html>

Without a woman's full birth name, including her first name, it is often hard to trace an individual in public records and to be sure whether, over time, the "Mrs. John Doe" you see referenced, is the same person or whether there is a second wife or daughter-in-law using the same married name. Between 1822 and 1862, for example, the Rochester (NY) Female Charitable Society listed a "Mrs. Everard Peck" every year as a member and often an officer. Church records and newspaper accounts revealed that this single name referred to three different women. When

the first two Mrs. Pecks died, Everard Peck remarried within the year-- the new "Mrs. Peck" was either already a member of, or immediately joined, the Society. Sometimes middle names identify specific women. Other times, families "recycled" names after an older sibling died.

Not all cultures, however, adopted the custom of a woman taking her husband's surname. Most importantly, perhaps, for North America/United States, Spanish-language communities at least through the nineteenth century followed a different tradition. In this linguistic-cultural group, women did not change their surnames at marriage and both the maternal and paternal family names are recognized in children's names. The child is given a first name, which could include one or two names--Maria or Maria Elena, for example. There were no middle names in this Spanish language tradition. After the first name, a child's name was followed by the father's surname and then the mother's surname. So, if Maria Elena's parents were Luis Rodriguez and Ana Zapata, she would be known as Maria Elena Rodriguez Zapata and listed in some documents as Rodriguez Zapata and in others as Zapata, depending on how knowledgeable the record keeper is with Spanish naming practices.

Church, synagogue, and temple records and family genealogies are among the best sources for tracing a woman's name across her life span. Many churches and synagogues keep records of births, baptisms, confirmations, bar and bat mitzvahs, marriages, divorces (or "gets" in orthodox synagogues), and deaths. A growing online source for burial information can also be useful. Learn more at <https://www.findagrave.com>. Until governments kept vital records, religious records were the sole source for such information. Legal records—deeds, wills, marriage licenses, court and prison documents—can also provide crucial information about women's current and past names as well as other important aspects of her life. After 1850, when the United States Federal Census began listing every member in a household, census records provide evidence of married women's first names as well as those of single daughters and female servants. Newspapers can also provide leads, especially through birth, wedding, and death notices as well as stories about women's organizations, local court trials, and society news highlights. Still, identifying women over time can be daunting, especially in families where the same first names were used across multiple generations.

Various kinds of archival sources can help clarify women's identities over time and the relationships of married women to their birth and marital families. Sources can also provide many other clues to the people and events that shaped a particular historic site. For a historic home, family papers are especially useful. Many sets of family papers contain correspondence as well as legal or financial documents. Family collections can also lead to descendants of a woman or women of interest, and they may be able to offer family lore and perhaps items handed down to younger generations. Some family papers and most county or municipal archives contain the wills of local residents. Wills are especially useful for tracing an individual's relations with family and friends and documenting the wealth of and material goods owned by the deceased.

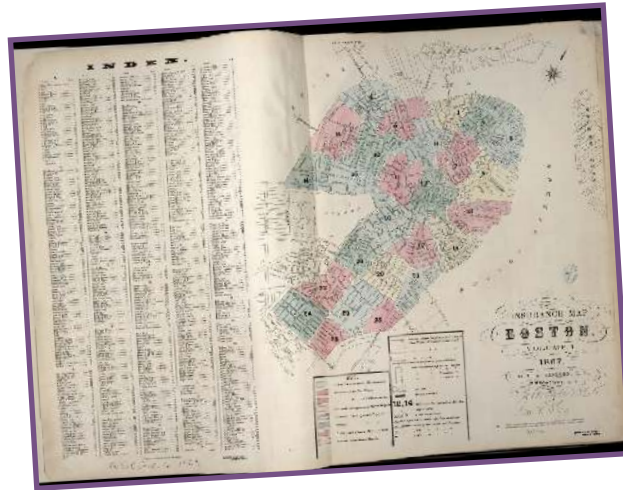
The wills of male and female slave owners (also referred to as enslavers) generally include information on enslaved workers who were to be distributed among family members or sold. They provide a rare glimpse into how owners felt about particular enslaved workers, including those who were their own relatives. Some wills also contain donations to churches, schools, and charitable or reform organizations, which provide a sense of an individual's connections to relatives, friends, neighbors, and social causes. Probate papers can also reveal information about property, economic status, and family ties.

Deeds and other official documents can be found in municipal and county archives as well. They provide information on the built landscape and the people who lived in those buildings at



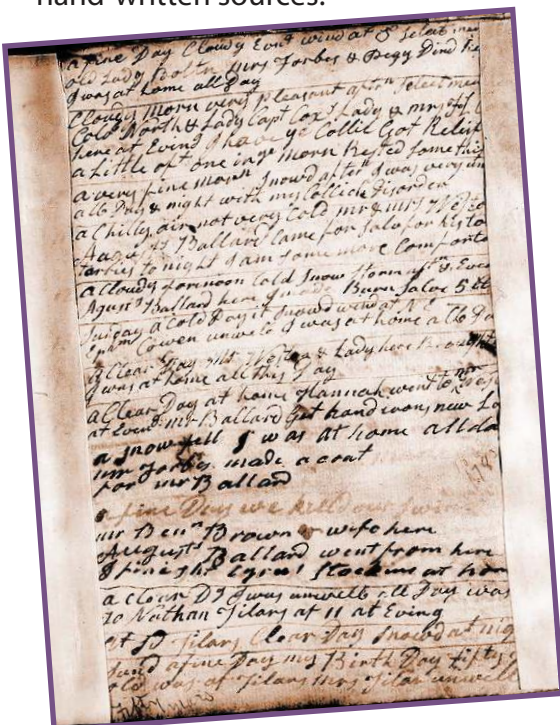
a particular time. Deeds generally list when a property was purchased, a house was built, its original size and later additions. By following deeds for a specific property, one can find the names of various owners and dates when a house was sold or inherited.

Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, created between 1867 and 1977 for towns and cities across the United States, offer an especially rich source. They note the worth of buildings block by block, including individual houses as well as businesses, churches, hospitals, and other institutions. The Library of Congress has been digitizing Sanborn maps, and now has more than 18,000 (of a possible 50,581) available on line at [www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps](http://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps)



Sanborn Insurance map of Boston, 1867 (Library of Congress)

Diaries are also wonderful archival resources. They are sometimes included in family papers or as individual items separate from larger collections. Colonial diaries usually contain fairly brief entries, which may seem indecipherable before reading through many entries and figuring out the writer's shorthand for persons, places, prices, etc. One of the best examples of a diary deciphered by a historian is that of Martha Ballard, a midwife in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Maine. In the Pulitzer Prize winning *A Midwife's Tale* (1990), historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich combines this diary with other local sources to recreate women's economic, reproductive and familial roles on the Maine frontier. As you can see in the photo below, it can be a challenge to read and interpret hand-written sources!



From the nineteenth century on, diarists became more expansive, offering rich sources for family history, women's history and the history of major historical events. They have been used effectively in analyzing the westward journey of pioneer families; the experiences of Civil War soldiers, nurses and prisoners of war; and life on the Homefront during the Great Depression and World War II. While most diaries found in archives were written by Anglo-Americans of the middle or upper-class, a growing number have been found that document the lives of African American, American Indian, working-class, and immigrant women. The largest online collection of North American Women's diaries and letters can be found at: <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/north-american-women-letters-and-diaries> While this this is a commercial site with much of its information behind a paywall, it can be accessed through many university libraries.

A page from Martha Ballard's diary, from two hand-sewn volumes, 1785-1812. (Courtesy Maine State Library)

Organizational papers—for local, state and national charitable and missionary societies, temperance, suffrage and other reform organizations, labor unions, religious societies, patriotic organizations, and so forth, provide valuable information on members and their activities. Many women's organizations formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had male boards of trustees, but others managed their own financial affairs. And in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many organizations kept detailed records of their activities, expenses, policies, and outreach to wider communities. The records of the YWCA, for instance, are held at the Sophia Smith Library at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. They contain national, regional and some local records and are currently in the process of being digitized to provide greater access to researchers. The American Red Cross records are at the Library of Congress along with the jewels gifted to founder Clara Barton. Also at the Library of Congress are the papers of the National Council of Negro Women – founded in 1896 as the National Association of Colored Women.

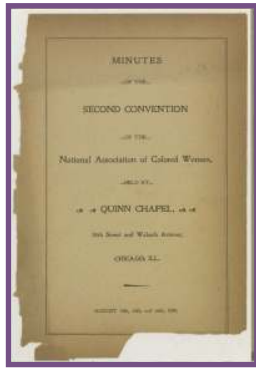
The Library of Congress also holds a wealth of materials on the history of the lesbian community, including the personal papers of individuals, organizational records, photographs and news items. In addition, there are numerous specialized archives, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY, the Dr. John P. De Cecco Archives and Special Collections at the GLBT Historical Library in San Francisco, CA, and the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives in Chicago IL.

The records of institutions run by women's organizations, including orphan asylums, homes for indigent women, juvenile detention centers, asylums, and hospitals for women and children— provide critical information about both the women who founded and managed these institutions as well as those who sought their aid or were placed there by family members or local authorities. Local historical societies or universities are most likely to hold the records of local organizations, while many national organizations have their own repositories, some of which contain local or regional as well as national records. Historian Anne Firor Scott published an accessible history of women's organizations in 1991, entitled *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*. The footnotes for this book offer a treasure trove of citations to primary sources in cities and towns across the country and across time.

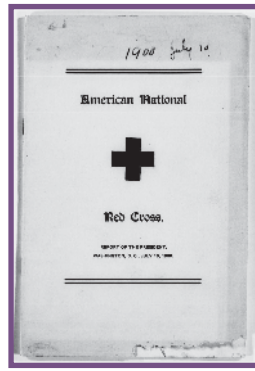
A vast array of primary sources documenting women's activist endeavors throughout the span of American history can be found at the website mentioned above for Women and Social Movements, 1600-2000 (WASM): See <https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/womhist>.

WASM includes petitions written and signed by women, many of which can also be found at the LC and NARA or in state archives. Diverse groups of women petitioned local, state and national leaders, especially from the 1820s to the 1910s. Identifying petitioners and the causes for which they pled provides critical insight into the ways women influenced policies and politics before most gained the right to vote. In 1817, Cherokee women, who had earlier shared political authority with men, petitioned the male Cherokee Council not to transfer more tribal lands to white ownership. Other women's petitions to Congress before 1920 advocated for or against women's right to vote, the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of liquor, making lynching a crime, ending child labor, and more. Women denied the vote as well as female voters active in campaigns for temperance, civil rights, women's rights, peace and other issues have continued to use petitions as a critical weapon in their campaigns.





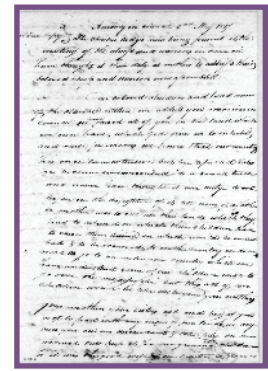
*National Association of Colored Women conference minutes 1899 (Library of Congress)*



*American Red Cross report 1900 (Library of Congress)*



*Men and women in D.C. petitioned Congress for women's suffrage in 1878 (NARA)*



*In 1817, Cherokee women petitioned the Cherokee National Council to oppose transferring tribal land to white owners. (Andrew Jackson Papers, Series 1, Library of Congress)*

The movement for women's suffrage was celebrated in 2020, the centenary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. It declared that women could no longer be denied the right to vote on the basis of sex. The suffrage movement was both distinct from and deeply enmeshed with a wide range of movements from the 1840s to the 1960s, when the 1965 Voting Rights Act significantly expanded suffrage for Black Americans. Its renewal in 1975 provided for the first bilingual voting materials for Spanish-speaking citizens.

Most white suffragists joined organizations specifically dedicated to gaining the right to vote. Some interracial suffrage organizations were founded in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but mainly on a local or state level. While some Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian American, and American Indian activists created suffrage-specific organizations, most worked through associations with broader goals, such as the National Association for Colored Women or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It is thus important to look at a range of archives for sources on particular groups of suffragists active in a specific area. Several U.S. archives specialize in important materials related to the U.S. suffrage movement and major suffrage leaders, as part of larger women's history collections. These archives include the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; the Sophia Smith Archives at Smith College, Northampton, MA; the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA; and the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History & Culture at Duke University, Durham, NC.

Online primary sources have expanded exponentially in recent years, making them more accessible to people across the country. Online suffrage exhibits are available on the websites of the Smithsonian Institution, Library of Congress and National Portrait Gallery. Over the past decade, the Women and Social Movements (WASM) website (see above) has developed a host of materials related specifically to women's suffrage. This includes articles on U.S. women's suffrage and Black women's suffrage as well as primary sources and short biographies of hundreds of suffragists from diverse backgrounds and regions who were active from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

In 2016, NCWHS launched a major project, the National Votes for Women Trail (NVWT). A coordinator in each state researched and collected information on the women and sites that were important to the suffrage movement there. A committee of scholars then vetted these sites to ensure historical accuracy. The result is an extraordinary list of information and primary sources on individual suffragists from all races, regions, and classes. The history of the battle for

women's political equality includes powerful stories of individual commitment, collective celebration, profound disappointment, and racial acrimony. These are all critical to our understanding of women's activism in this cause as in others. The Pomeroy Foundation provided funds to place NVWT plaques at critical suffrage sites in each state. In addition, the Collaborative posts information on all of the individuals included in the NVWT project at <https://ncwhs.org>



There are now over 2,000 suffrage sites in the National Votes for Women's Trail data base, with some 250 historic roadside markers funded by the Pomeroy Foundation.

The WASM Suffrage Project and the National Collaborative's NVWT ensured that the diversity and scope of women's suffrage activism was commemorated in 2020. They also ensure that future generations will have access to this history in all its messy complexity. While the WASM is creating digital archives, the NVWT is creating a public record through historical markers at key sites, and an on-line digital map. Together, they enhance research and reflection on this pivotal movement and its relationship to other movements for equal rights.

Their work complements the dozens of books and articles published on the U.S. women's suffrage movement between 2009 and 2020. Focusing on individual suffragists, specific states or the nation as a whole, they offer vibrant new stories and revisions of older interpretations. Among the most accessible and significant are Cathleen Cahill, *Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement* (1920), Ellen Carol DuBois, *Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote* (2020), Susan Goodier, *No Votes for Women: the New York State Anti-Suffrage Movement* (2013) and *Women Will Vote: Winning Suffrage in New York State* (2017); Brooke Kroeger, *Suffragists: How Women Used Men to Get the Vote* (2017), Lisa Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932* (2009); Rebecca Boggs Roberts, *Suffragists in Washington, D.C.: The 1913 Parade* (2017) and Susan Ware, *Why They Marched: Untold Stories* (2019). A seminal work on Black women and suffrage appeared in 1998: Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*.

Another important source for U.S. suffragists and other women well-known in their own time, but not always remembered today, is the biographical dictionary. Biographical dictionaries became popular in the late nineteenth century. While most focused on men, there were several highlighting women. An early example is *Great American Women of the 19th Century*, edited by Francis E. Willard and Mary Livermore and published in 1897. The largest biographical dictionary on American women is the multi-volume *Notable American Women*. The first 3 volumes, published in 1971, covered women from 1670-1950. Two additional volumes, which updated the original through the end of the twentieth century, appeared in 1980 and 2005. In 1994, Elsa Barkley Brown, Darlene Clark Hine, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn edited *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, published in 1994 and revised in 2005. There are also regional and local encyclopedias, such as *Women Building Chicago 1790-1900: A Biographical Dictionary*, published in 2001 and edited by Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast.

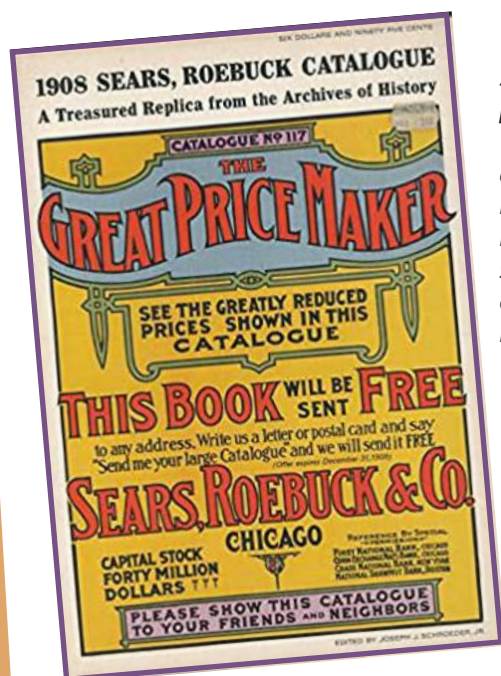
Newspapers are another crucial source of information from their beginnings in the colonial era

through the present. Many archives house collections of newspapers from a local area or region as well as newspapers produced by organizations or on behalf of reform movements or political parties. They document a wide range of issues from local and national political developments to the price of goods, from important social events to the births, marriages and deaths of local individuals.

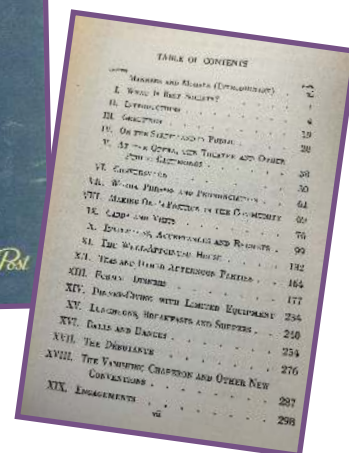
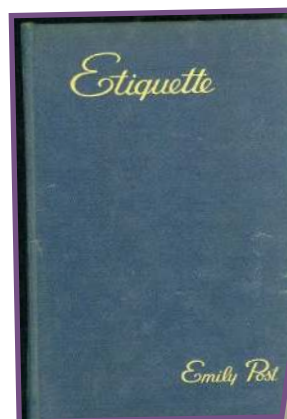
Significant numbers of major urban newspapers have been microfilmed and/or digitized as have many reform and union newspapers, African American newspapers, and even local papers in certain regions of the country. Searching the names of local newspapers on the internet will turn up a surprising number that are accessible online. It's important to look not just at the major city newspapers but also those that serve distinctive groups, such as *The Jewish Daily Forward* and *L'Italo-Americano*. You can also search by organization or movement. Women's suffrage organizations, for instance, published a variety of newspapers. These included *Woman's Journal and Suffrage News*, *Woman's Era*, and *Women's Tribune*. Information on African American activists, including suffragists, was as likely to be found in *National Notes*, published by the National Association of Colored Women, or other African American newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*.

Temperance advocates offered a wide variety of publications to various age groups. These included the *Union Signal* for all members, *The Oak and Ivy* for younger women, and *The Young Crusader* for girls. The WCTU eventually established their own Temperance Publication Association, which produced pamphlets and children's books as well as newspapers. For access to a wide range of newspapers, the website [www.Newspapers.com](http://www.Newspapers.com) offers a treasure trove of material from the 1700s-2000s. Materials on this site are also linked to the commercial site [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) making it possible to find even short newspaper articles--such as an obituary--related to a particular person or family.

Other printed primary sources also offer insights into the lives of American women and girls. Sear's Catalogs or "wish books" were popular among many Americans in the late 19th and 20th centuries, promoting the sale of domestic goods of all kinds - including mail-order residential houses. Over the years many of the Wish Book editions have been reprinted, and can be found on Amazon and other sites.



Sears Catalogs were published from 1888 to 1993, offering access to a huge variety of household goods to many who could not shop in stores because of rural locations or racial prejudice.



Etiquette books have for about three centuries helped adult readers navigate changing social expectations, reinforced gender roles, and taught children the manners of their time. Emily Post's best-selling book *Etiquette* was first published in 1922, with a 19th edition released in 2017.



Etiquette books and cookbooks provide a window into domestic life and gender expectations, including aspects of cooking technology, diets, gardens and ways of socializing. The Schlesinger Library has a large collection ([www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/SchlesingerLibrary](http://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/SchlesingerLibrary)) and HEARTH at Cornell University Library has digitized many books and journals in Home Economics and related disciplines (<https://digital.library.cornell.edu/collections/hearth>).

Another perspective can be gained by looking at baby books. Those common memory booklets were provided by infant formula producers to new mothers, while from the later 19th century on, expensive illustrated books were purchased by wealthier families. By looking at old photographs in these books, awards won at beautiful baby contests at state fairs, lists of gifts and visits, and comments on infant deportment, one is drawn into domestic life from decades, even a century, past. Baby books are not only available on eBay but there is a collection of over 1,600 from communities around the country at the UCLA Biomedical Library: Learn more at [ucla.edu/special-collections/medicine-sciences-biomedical-library/baby-books-collection](http://ucla.edu/special-collections/medicine-sciences-biomedical-library/baby-books-collection)

For historic sites that are not located near major archival collections, the growing number of digitized sources can prove invaluable. Many collections of family papers and organizational records are now available online, as are many cemetery records. In addition, local and state histories and organizational histories written in the nineteenth century and other books long out of print are available online through the Southern Historical Society at The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Google Books; and other sites. These can be especially useful because in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, local authors compiled primary (that is, original) sources about a town, city or state into (often weighty) printed volumes. The sources in these volumes provide a treasure trove of information.

Of course, some of the original sources contain cursive handwriting, which can be a challenge for those reading these documents. There were vast differences in handwriting across time and place, and elementary school students today are less likely to be taught cursive handwriting as they learn printing and typing. Add to that idiosyncratic spelling standards and handwriting conventions that change over time. For example, when paper was scarce sometimes writers used a form of cross-writing, when upon reaching the bottom of a page they would turn the paper sideways and continue to write. Finally, some records of court reporters and journalists may be written in shorthand – an abbreviated writing system common after the Civil War and until keyboards came into use.



*Letter (1860) from Harriet Jacobs (taught to write while enslaved) to Amy Post. (Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester)*



*Cross-written letter by Lucretia Mott (Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College)*

ADRESSE TELEGRAPHIQUE  
 CONTINENTAL-PARIS  
 HOTEL CONTINENTAL  
 3, RUE CASTIGLIONE  
 PARIS

Dear friend Kelley  
 How we are trying to  
 have our resolutions and  
 decisions of our society  
 the very top. We have a  
 number of poor friends here  
 who are struggling and do  
 not have the means of pulling  
 them out and that is very  
 sad. Please send me some  
 of your money if you can  
 help. I will be very  
 grateful. I am  
 Jane Addams  
 May 20 1919

Letter from Jane Addams to Florence Kelley, 20 May 1919 (Jane Addams Digital edition)

OCTOBER 27

19 In office

19 In office - paid \$500.00  
 on note (rent) & bus. made me  
 note of \$3000.00. Came my note  
 + money to the office

OCTOBER 28

19 In office

19 In Convention  
 Emma Church, Ro. Mar. Dec. 1918  
 part

19 In office - many political  
 notes, sent to check on making  
 ballot

19 Learn in Washington, D.C.  
 about the world's economy - part meeting

Diary of Maggie Walker 1918-1922 (NPS, Maggie L. Walker Historic Site)

NATIONAL-AMERICAN  
 WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION  
 Temporary President:  
 LUMBERTO C. STANTON, 16 SUN ST. NEW YORK, N. Y.

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
 Rochester N.Y. Nov. 4, 1895

Mr. O. S. Mahon  
 My Dear Sir

I shall be most  
 happy to give you my pen-track  
 for the Masonic Fraternity Album; and  
 along with them, allow me to send  
 a hope that your Fraternity will be  
 very ultimate in the inclusion of women  
 on equal terms with men, within its  
 circle; and also that your Fraternity's  
 love of moral government may result in  
 its earnest demand for the enfranchisement  
 of the women of our Republic.

A new balance of power  
 must be thrown into the body politics  
 before it will be possible to purify the  
 moral atmosphere of government, city, state  
 or national. And since all men are

11  
 2

already enfranchised there can be no other  
 way of getting this new power save that of  
 enfranchising the other half - and as men love  
 to call it - the better half of the people.  
 Precisely as in our civil war, "military  
 necessity" compelled the abolition of slavery before  
 the government could suppress the rebellion;  
 precisely as at its close "political necessity"  
 compelled the enfranchisement of black men before the  
 Union could be reconstructed; so to day  
 "moral necessity" demands the enfranchisement  
 of women, before it will be possible to have  
 good moral government. Men capable  
 of inflicting the injustice of disfranchisement  
 upon women - are incapable of being honest  
 among each other.  
 With the hope that your  
 Masonic Fraternity may make of itself  
 a balance of power on the side of  
 equal right to all human beings - I am  
 very sincerely  
 Dear Sir,  
 Susan B. Anthony

A hand-written letter from Susan B. Anthony to Mr. O. Mahon to encourage his Masonic organization to actively work towards women's suffrage. Written in Rochester, New York, on November 4, 1895. Morristown National Historical Park Museum and Library. (NPS, Morristown site)



Military records, which at first glance may not seem relevant to women's history, are another useful archival source. European and American women lived in forts from at least the founding of Jamestown in the early seventeenth century. In early American history, officers were more likely to have women in their households—family members and/or servants—than were ordinary soldiers. Enslaved and free Black women as well as indigenous women also lived and worked in forts, sometimes alongside husbands, sons or brothers. Army officials often recorded the names of these women and the kinds of labor they performed, including as servants, nurses, cooks, and laundresses. By the nineteenth century, as the United States expanded westward, more female relatives followed their husbands and fathers to distant postings. The National Archives holds an especially rich collection of military records.

Military pension records are useful for tracing families, especially widows or children, of deceased veterans. They have proven especially useful in tracing enslaved and free Black women in the nineteenth century, as African Americans sought back pay, reimbursement for medical expenses, and pensions following that century's many wars. The wives and children of Black Civil War soldiers were still petitioning for their husband's, father's or their own pensions at the turn of the twentieth century. To make their cases, all these women had to provide detailed information about their marriages and families as well as their husband's service across different locations. Noralee Frankel's fascinating study, *Freedom's Women: Black Women in Civil War Era Mississippi* (1999) demonstrates the significance of military pension records for women. In a more recent study, *Embattled Freedom* (2018), Amy Murrell Taylor uses pension records along with a range of other military records, correspondence among military and political officials, the papers of missionary societies active in Civil War-era refugee camps, and later interviews with some of these refugees to trace the extraordinarily difficult experiences of war on enslaved and newly-free Black Southerners of all ages and both sexes. Taylor explores waged and unwaged laborers, housing, food, death, and other topics in refugee camps scattered across the South with an emphasis on those along the Mississippi River and in Kentucky. The sources she uses can be found for nearly all southern states and many address issues relevant to Union as well as Confederate families. Thavolia Glymph's *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (2020) explores the roles of Black and white women North and South and provides a superb overview of the many horrific experiences women had and the challenges they met.

One valuable published source for those working in the Civil War era is Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1862-1867* (1983). There are separate volumes in this larger series as well as an individual volume incorporating important documents on *Families and Freedom: African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (1997). These volumes contain critical information about planters and their families as well as enslaved and free Black people in the Civil War South. Some of the documents are available online and can be found by searching <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu> for the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. Civil War and Reconstruction era documents are also available at <http://memory.loc.gov> and <http://www.archives.gov> which provide access to sources at the U.S. Library of Congress and National Archives

Most archives now provide some public access to their materials--family papers, organizational records, etc. For instance, the University of Rochester has an online list of collections that describes the contents of various sets of papers. Some, such as the Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, have been digitized. Nearly all the letters in this collection, including an underground railroad pass written by Frederick Douglass to Amy Post and letters from Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and other activists can be read and downloaded. For this and other collections at the University of Rochester, go to: <https://rbscpl.lib.rochester.edu/>

The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women at Harvard University, the Sophia Smith Collection on the History of Women at Smith College, the Bentley Library at the University of Michigan, and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley all provide online access to many collection descriptions and to items within those collections. So, too, do federal records repositories, including mammoth collections at the Library of Congress and the National Archives, noted above. The Smithsonian, the National Park Service and many other historic sites include archival collections as well as collections of material objects used in exhibits and tours. State and city historical societies and specialized archives hold pertinent materials. It's also useful to monitor eBay for pertinent materials held by families and private parties.

A final caution when using archives. Because policies vary, check the specific policies of any repositories relevant to your site. If you are visiting archives, some have limited hours and staff, require proof of your relation to a historic site or academic institution, allow notes only to be taken in pencil, and/or charge for copying documents. Others are open to the public, allow researchers to take photographs of key documents, and have sufficient staff to assist visitors. Even if you are viewing documents online, you will need permission and may have to pay to display documents at your site or use them in your programs and publications. Some published records have been heavily edited making access to the originals crucial. Still, it is worth the effort to visit those archives that are within reach and access others online because the materials they hold can unlock new aspects of women's lives and enrich the stories you tell.

### **Quantitative Sources**

To interpret the lives of women at a historic site, it is important to find out which women lived at or were significant to that site over time. One can start by counting the women, that is, by discovering how many women lived at, worked in, or had some other connection to the home, fort, park, plantation, shop, or landscape that is central to a site. While this may sound difficult, especially for sites that have been considered primarily male sites, such as forts and mining towns, there are sources that can help identify women and girls in a particular place and provide information on their relative numbers, ages, and occupations. Many of these sources, like a ship's manifest or the United States Federal Census, capture people in a specific place at a specific moment. Others, such as factory or plantation records, allow us to trace changes over time in the activities of girls and women (as well as boys and men). For one excellent example of how census records were used to discover women's role in a Midwestern mining town, see the section on the Keweenaw Heritage Site in Michigan, by Jean Ellis, in the Case Studies section below.

The kinds of sources available vary enormously by time period, region, race/ethnicity, and gender, but there are some useful starting points. For the colonial era of North American history, church or synagogue, poorhouse, and court records can prove especially rich sources for finding women and tracing their experiences. Some of these remain in church basements, courthouses, public libraries, local historical societies, and local college or university archives. Others are collected at state or national historical societies, such as the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Church records, for example, generally list members' names and include information on baptisms, marriages, and deaths. This allows one to follow the history of a family or group of families over time. Since women were also often active in church-based missionary and benevolent societies, these sources also provide information about local female networks. One excellent source for tracing Mexican and Spanish families in what became the Southwest of the United States in 1848 is the mission records project at Tumacácori National Historical Park in Arizona.



*Tumacácori Chapel, one of the missions founded by Spanish Jesuit missionaries and built by O'odham, Yoeme peoples with Apache peoples coming later. Church records of baptisms, marriages and deaths include histories of women there. (Tumacácori National Historical Park)*

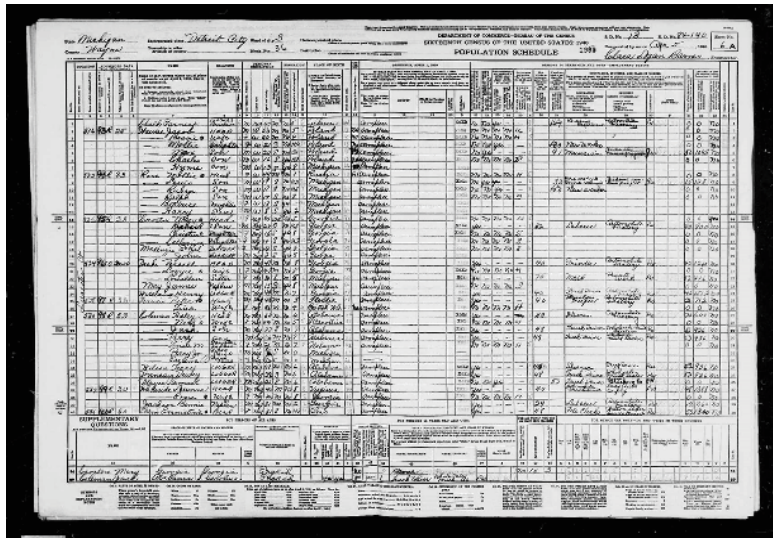
For later periods, territorial, state and federal censuses provide information on individual households while town and city directories list the names of adult male residents and many women who were employed or owned businesses. Directories often include home and work addresses. In most towns and cities, white and free Black domestic servants and seamstresses (but not enslaved) were included in directories along with women who ran boarding houses or owned dress shops or taverns. Directories generally list churches, charitable and reform associations (with rosters of officers) along with male civic leaders and brief histories of a locale. Hundreds of city directories are now available online, often for free from public libraries, or, for a fee, from ancestry.com.

The U.S. Federal Census was first taken in 1790 and then every ten years thereafter. All the federal censuses to 1950 are "open" except for 1890 which was lost in a fire. The federal censuses, available at the National Archives, varied over time in the kinds of information collected. They often contain different information than state or territorial censuses, which were taken at different times. For instance, many state censuses were taken every decade on the "5s" --1835, 1845, 1855, etc.

In 1850, the federal census began listing the names not only of heads of households but also of all residents in the home with age, occupation, race or ethnicity, the value of the home, and literacy for each. Every person in the United States was to be counted so the census included information from asylums, forts and other outposts as well as rural areas, towns, villages, and cities. However, the census did not list enslaved people individually before or after 1850 nor did it count Indians living on tribal lands, such as reservations, until 1900. There were some efforts by territorial governments to count Indians in their region, including an 1857 enumeration of Pueblo peoples in New Mexico Territory and an 1857 census of Shawnees in Kansas Territory. The federal government also attempted an 1880 enumeration of Indians on reservations.

With all of these sources, it is important to remember that some census takers and directory editors were more careful than others. Many misspelled names, especially foreign names, and ages did not always match birth dates found on other documents. Still, combined with other sources, like church records and state and territorial censuses, the federal census provides an important snapshot of the people, including women and children, inhabiting a place at a particular time.





Census page, 1940 (Lynn Weiner family history collection)

Nancy Hewitt’s study, *Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (1984), combines information from federal and state censuses, city directories, and family and organizational papers to distinguish three networks of white female activists by religious affiliation, economic status, and household type. Similarly, Jean Ellis found that the significant time spent collecting data on hundreds of individual women for the Keweenaw Heritage Site (See Case Studies below) allowed her to see patterns that would have otherwise been invisible.

Source material from *Women’s Activism and Social Change* and Hewitt’s *Radical Friend: Amy Kirby Post and Her Activist Worlds* (2018) are used here to show how federal census data can be combined with city directory information to create a portrait of the 1850 household of abolitionist and women’s rights advocates Amy and Isaac Post. This snapshot of the Post household in August 1850 provides essential information about individual members as well as a sense of the household’s economic situation. In an era when segregation existed throughout the country, this information also offers a hint about their political commitments. Having an African American girl listed as a Boarder rather than a Servant suggests that the Posts were more liberal than most local white families. At the same time, in engaging an Irish servant, the Posts proved typical for the period.

This table also provides information about Amy Post’s reproductive history. Having sons aged 20, 16, and 3 raises questions about whether there were other children who were stillborn or died young. We know from letters in the Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers that Amy bore a son Henry in 1834, who died at age three, and a daughter Mathilda in 1840 who died of scarlet fever at age four. Finally, at age 42, she gave birth to Willet, who appears in the 1850 census. While we do not always have the sources to explain widely spaced births, age differences like that between Joseph and Willet Post suggest the possibility, indeed, the likelihood of miscarriages, still births, or infant deaths. The Post Family Papers have been digitized and are available at <https://rbsc.library.rochester.edu/3252>

### Isaac and Amy Post Household, c. 1850

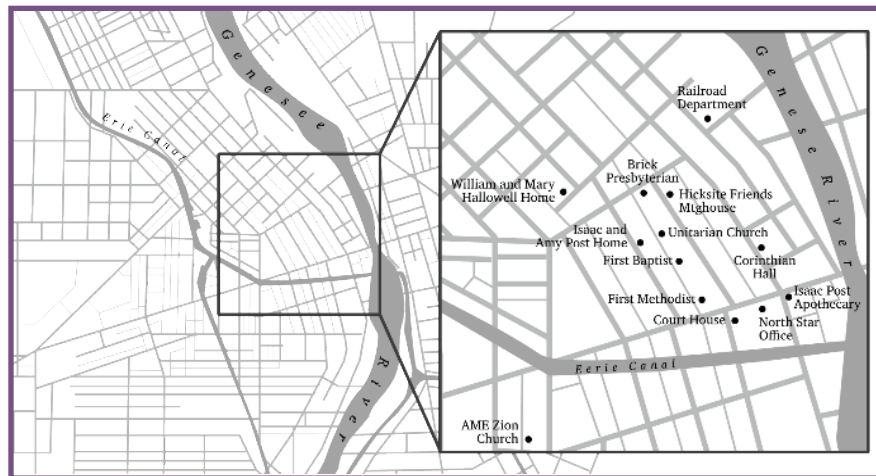
First Name	Last Name	Relationship	Age	Sex	Color	Occupation	Birth City
Isaac	Post	Head	50	M	White	Druggist	New York
Amy	Post	Wife	45	F	White		New York
Jacob K.	Post	Son	20	M	White	Clerk	New York
Joseph	Post	Son	16	M	White	Clerk	New York
Willet	Post	Son	3	M	White		New York
Sarah	Hallowell	Sister-in-law	30	F	White		New York
Ansel	Bowen	Boarder	28	M	White	Teacher	New York
Elizabeth	Bowen	Boarder	28	F	White		New York
Bridget	Head	Servant	23	F	White		Ireland
Mary Ann	Pitkin	Boarder	10	F	Mulatto		New York

Based primarily on the 7th U.S. Federal Census, Ward 1, Rochester (NY), 1850 with additional information from the 8th (1860) U.S. Federal Census, Ward 1, Rochester, NY; and Rochester, NY, City Directories, 1853

Snapshots of individual households can provide important information about women, girls, and families. They can also be expanded to include a neighborhood, a small town, or a city. To create a snapshot of a neighborhood, you can gather census information on neighboring households that appear on the same or surrounding pages. While today census data is collected mostly online, from 1790 until recently, census takers walked from house to house to collect the necessary information. If you wanted to collect information on an entire city the size of Rochester, Chicago, or Sacramento, you can take a sample from the census— charting every 100 or every 1000 households and using that sample to gain a sense of the city as a whole. If you want to get both a snapshot of a city and a closer view of a particular neighborhood, you can combine the 100/1000 sample with information on a single street or neighborhood.

The census also notes the occupants of public institutions, including churches, hospitals, asylums, and prisons. Finding the location of public institutions and businesses can illuminate the stories you tell in a variety of ways. For example, Isaac and Amy Post's home on Sophia Street sat less than a block from the Friends Meetinghouse, where they worshiped after moving to Rochester in 1836. Isaac could easily walk the few blocks to the pharmacy he opened in 1839 on Exchange Street, one of the main commercial blocks in the young city. By the 1840s, the Posts would have walked by the reform-minded Unitarian and Brick Presbyterian churches as they headed to the Hicksite Quaker Meetinghouse. Indeed, when Amy Post helped organize the second woman's rights convention in the nation in Rochester on August 1st, 1848, it was held at the Unitarian Church.

A few blocks south of the Post home, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a school, and a variety of businesses from barbershops to groceries served the city's African American community. When Frederick Douglass moved to Rochester in 1847, he opened his newspaper office across the street from Post's pharmacy. Since the Posts were ardent abolitionists who worked with the Underground Railroad, the location of their home and Isaac's business clearly served their political as well as their spiritual and economic needs. Mapping these sites helps visitors imagine the kinds of daily interactions that took place in this neighborhood.



*Rochester Map courtesy Nancy Hewitt*

As this short example suggests, the federal census is a valuable tool for studying an historic location and analyzing the significance of women and their households, neighborhoods and communities. Still, it is important to verify and extend federal census information through the use of state or territorial censuses. State censuses allow us to track changes between federal censuses and to compare ages, occupations and other information provided on each. Most state and territorial censuses are now available online through historical societies or state and city libraries. Town and city directories can add details about occupations, especially for women.



Women's occupations often went unrecorded in the federal census, especially during the nineteenth century, unless they were professional women, owned substantial businesses, or worked as live-in domestic servants. City directories also miss many women, especially those employed part time or seasonally. Still, they generally capture a wider range of women's occupations and provide addresses of employers, whether self-employed professional women or those working in businesses or private households. By combining quantitative information from multiple sources, you can create a fuller portrait of the individuals and communities central to your site or to a specific exhibit or tour.

Using city directories and censuses for later periods reveals how families, households and individuals changed over time. In 1853, for example, the city directory lists sons Jacob and Joseph Post as clerks at their father's drugstore. In the 1860s, Jacob takes over his father's pharmacy while Joseph opens his own drugstore in a neighboring town. By then, both were married, and their wives managed the households and provided Amy and Isaac with numerous grandchildren.

This one example shows how federal and state censuses and city directories can provide snapshots of individuals, families, neighborhoods and communities at one moment in time and also allow us to trace changes across time. It certainly helps if you have newspapers, family papers, church records, educational records, and other sources to fill out the stories of both individuals and communities.

For instance, the Tampa, Florida City Directory for 1903 lists dozens of Black laundresses. Many lived on four streets that formed a square block, allowing them to string clothes lines across buildings and keep a watchful eye on each other's labor. In southern cities especially, asterisks or other marks were used by compilers of city directories to identify African American residents. Although a product of racism, the practice allows us to track the occupational and residential lives of Black Americans in greater detail.



Tampa, Florida City Directory 1903. Note the asterisks next to the names of Black laundresses, such as Sarah Ashley and Rachel Atkins.

Factory and plantation records provide important information as well. Factories and other businesses generally kept records of all employees and often included other information such as age, job, and special skills. Through them we can trace how a labor force changed over time as a result of costs, technology, and modes of production, and the available labor force. Nineteenth-century New England textile mills offer a good example. Early on factories recruited whole families, but as they expanded farmers' daughters formed the largest share of the labor force. Then in the 1840s and 1850s, as factories sought to cut costs and speed up production, those native-born women and girls were increasingly replaced by Irish immigrants. In that same period, as public schools expanded in New England and across the North and Midwest, male

teachers were slowly replaced by female teachers. This cost-cutting measure was soon justified by noting women's "natural" bond with children.



*President Herbert Hoover as a child attended the West Branch School House in Iowa, built in 1853. One room country school houses proliferated in the nineteenth century; there were 190,000 nationally by 1918, and 400 in 2020. By the mid nineteenth century women began to replace men in the teaching profession, representing two-thirds of all teachers by the turn of the century. (Photos Herbert Hoover Historic Site)*

In the South, plantation records offer equally important information about enslaved and free laborers. Such records vary greatly depending on the size of the plantation and the interests of owners and overseers. Still most owners list enslaved workers by name (though often only a first name), age, and skill or position, such as domestic, field hand, midwife, or blacksmith. Many also include the owner's assessment of the value of an enslaved worker, which allows us to compare the ways that owners thought about women of different ages and skills as well as differences between women and men. Plantation records might also include information on free women—Black or white—who were hired as seamstresses, midwives, or extra hands at harvest time.

Public online genealogical sites, such as the National Archives Resources for genealogists and family historians, <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy>, provide a wide variety of information on how to do genealogy for specific individuals including the use of immigration records, census records, military service records, land records, naturalization records and a variety of other sources. The Immigration Records site <https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration>, contains information from ship manifests (including date of entry to the US), nationality and place of birth, profession, place of last residence before entering the US, name and address of relatives they are joining in the US and other useful details. It also includes links to other databases that were created using National Archives passenger arrival records such as Castle Garden, Ellis Island and Ancestry.com. Immigration records also include the Angel Island Immigration Center in San Francisco Bay – the entry port for many Asian and Mexican immigrants and later, a detention site for Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Naturalization records at: <https://www.archives.gov/research/naturalization/naturalization.html>, include court records, generally Federal court records. Many State and local court records are not held by the National Archives unless they were donated. For military service records and census data go to <https://www.archives.gov/research/military> and <https://www.archives.gov/research/census>. Finally many families have preserved items from ancestors including passports and naturalization papers which include information on age, family members and place of residence.

To find archival materials relevant to a specific site can be difficult and finding those that offer quantitative information even more so. Begin by checking local libraries and historical societies or visiting archives at area colleges and universities. Footnotes and bibliographies in scholarly books about your site or the surrounding area offer valuable clues for locating critical primary sources. For example, *The Dawn of Detroit* (2017), by historian Tiya Miles, offers a fascinating exploration of the early French, British, Native, African American, and Anglo-American history of that fort-village-city using a variety of archival materials. Some of the important collections she

researched are held at the Detroit Public Library, the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library, and three fat volumes of primary sources published between 1876 and 1929 under the titles Pioneer Collections, Historical Collections and Michigan Historical Collections. Miles also uses a variety of family papers, court and military records, and government documents to show how the size of different national and racial groups changed over time. These changes shaped the relations among diverse settlers and those forced to labor on their behalf. By exploring her footnotes, we can trace the primary sources she used and then check them to see what other issues, events, or people they illuminate. We can also discover the original languages of the documents -- English, French or one of the many Native languages such as Ojibwe.

Issues of race, ethnicity and language are especially crucial for sites in the South, Midwest and West, where powerful American Indian nations vied for control with Spanish, French and/or English invaders and settlers through the nineteenth century. Africans brought to North America--whether free or enslaved-- by various colonizers also played critical roles in many areas of North America, especially in the US South, in Mexico and (after the American Revolution) in Nova Scotia. The histories of both Canada and Mexico intersected with early American and US history from the sixteenth century on, which ensured that women were affected by events occurring in distant parts of North America as well as by developments in Africa and Europe, and, by the mid-19th century, China and Japan.

The study of many locales along the Mississippi River illustrates the challenges for historians and site staff in recreating life at a particular time and place. Because this region was home to diverse native communities and then settled by different groups of Europeans at different times, documents may be written in French, Spanish, English and various native languages. In many locations along the Mississippi River, official control shifted over time even though much of the population remained the same. For example, in the late 18th century St. Louis was governed by the Spanish but was home to mainly French inhabitants. Similar challenges occur for those studying regions along the Gulf of Mexico and in the Far West. After 1848, when the northern half of Mexico came under U.S. control the territories of New Mexico and California were then home to many more Mexicans, Spaniards and American Indians than U.S. Americans. In St. Louis, documents were written in Spanish but dealt with French residents. In New Mexico and California, similar documents were written in English even when the subjects are Spanish or native peoples.

Most documents exist only in their original language and have not been translated. In areas home to diverse Native American inhabitants and settlers, or in those with significant populations of different groups of immigrants, translating key documents is crucial. (Google now enables quick translations from many languages, but mainly from immigrant rather than indigenous peoples.) In translating sources, it is critical to consider the ways that people of one language/ethnic/racial group understood the terms and concepts used by another language/ethnic/racial group.

How, for instance, did St. Louis's American Indian and French populations interpret the policies implemented by Spanish officials? How did California's many Native American communities understand Spanish and then U.S. American laws and regulations? And how did (New) Mexican families understand the Anglo-American legal system which differed markedly from the Mexican and Spanish system on such key issues as women's property rights? In addition, following individuals through documents in different languages can be a challenge. A Spanish settler named Maria in one document may appear as Mary or Marie in another.

Further, handwritten letters and diaries in any language require close attention to ensure that you have correctly transcribed words, some of which were spelled differently at the time or



were idiomatically spelled by the writer. When a researcher has to translate from a foreign language, attention to word usage, spelling, and meaning can be even more challenging. This is especially true for sources in indigenous languages, some of which are no longer in general use or are spoken or written by only a small number of native speakers. If diaries and letters include drawings or sketches, these too need to be considered in their historical context.

## Oral and Aural Sources

Although interviews or oral histories are the best-known form of oral sources, this category includes a diverse array of materials. In addition, aural sources are heard rather than spoken by humans. Women often noted sounds they heard in nature, some beloved such as a sparrow singing, and others feared, such as coyotes howling. Including such aural sources in site interpretation enhances the historic realism and visitor connections. Women heard the noise of train whistles, street peddler cries, and creaking rope beds. These sounds can provide rich soundscapes for sites and museums.

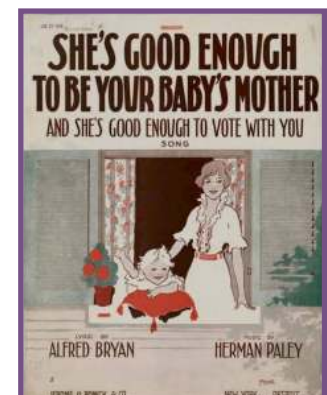
Music is a critical resource in reimagining and recapturing the past. It can be interpreted through scores and notations, instruments, and in more recent times recordings of and reporting on performances. Before recorded music was common, instruments were important in many American homes and schools. In 1909 one of every 99 U.S. households had a piano, compared to 1 in 3,788 today. Music was part of religion, social and family life, education, culture and politics. Upper- and middle-class young women often learned piano as a way to demonstrate refinement. Suffragists wrote and sang new lyrics to popular melodies such as “Yankee Doodle.” Hymns written by women provide insights into their lives and beliefs such as “Come Labor On” which encouraged missionaries’ work. Popular songs in the more recent past such as Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” or Tammy Wynette’s “Stand By Your Man”, also convey cultural values. Many American plays, and later, film, radio, and television provide rich resources for the understanding of popular gender assumptions, ideals, and practices. In the 1940s, for instance, families gathered to listen to such popular radio soap operas as “Portia Faces Life,” featuring a widowed attorney, Portia Blake. Later television shows reflected changing gender roles, including the “Mary Tyler Moore Show” and “All in the Family”.



Popular soap opera 1940-1953



Pianos in the 19th century often signaled gentility



Library of Congress, (Music Division)

Another important source is oral history. Oral history interviews provide an important means to preserve women’s history. Nothing brings women’s history more to life than listening to interviews or reading transcripts. Existing collections allow us to hear women who were friends of a president, Japanese American internees, a World War II “Rosie” who worked in shipyards, a civil rights or feminist activist, or the former director of the American Red Cross. When building your knowledge base, consider how such interviews can strengthen your ability to interpret women’s lives. While many oral history collections now exist, you should consider developing



an oral history program specific to your site. Many former plantations are gaining invaluable insights from descendant communities of enslaved people. To do this, you need to identify the most crucial people to interview, develop a core set of questions as well as individually-specific ones, and research the people to be interviewed before launching the interviews themselves. These steps will greatly enhance the quality of the sources you create.

See below a short list of federal websites where oral histories have been created and preserved. Many universities and colleges also house oral history interviews, including significant collections at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Columbia University, New York City; University of California, Berkeley; Roosevelt University, Chicago; Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Oral history interviews can:

- document people and events
- capture multiple perspectives on past events
- enhance museum exhibits
- make interpretive and educational programs more relevant to visitors
- connect with new audiences through the Web

A number of federal agencies maintain large oral history collections that tell the history of the U.S. through many perspectives. Many interviews are in the public domain.

Oral history plays a valuable role at many National Park Service sites. Ellis Island/Statue of Liberty NHP, for instance, has an especially large and important collection of interviews with immigrants who arrived in the U.S. via Ellis Island. Some people use interviews to enrich museum exhibits and others to enhance interpretive and educational programs and to bring digital place-based stories to audiences through their websites. [www.nps.gov/parkhistory/oralhistory/practice.htm](http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/oralhistory/practice.htm)

The Library of Congress (LC) has Audio Recordings, the American Folklife Center, and the Recorded Sound Research Center which includes international subjects and groups as well as those from the U.S. [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov). The National Archives (NARA) holds oral/aural sources at its main archive in Washington, D.C. as well as Presidential Libraries, Center for Legislative Archives, Women in Space History, and Civil Rights History. [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov).

An excellent source for private and university oral history collections is the Oral History Association (OHA) <https://www.oralhistory.org>, an international membership organization that includes many private and state oral history projects and collections and widely used resources. Its website includes information on locating oral history collections and for planning and conducting oral history projects.

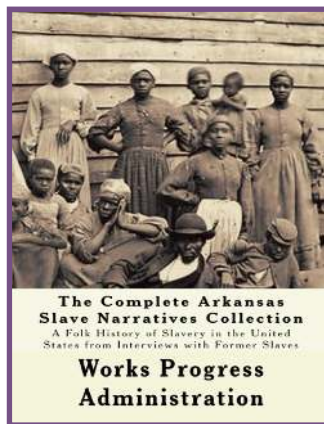
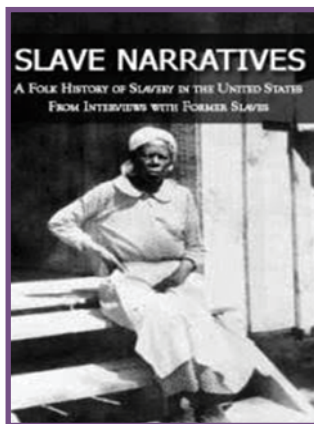
A careful approach to oral testimony and interpretation is necessary in the use of oral history. Anyone who uses oral history interviews should avoid stereotypes, misrepresentations, and manipulations of the narrator's words. This includes retaining the integrity of the narrator's perspective, recognizing the subjectivity of the interview, and interpreting and contextualizing the narrative according to appropriate professional standards. If a project deals with community history, the interviewer should be sensitive to the community, taking care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes or to ask questions that could be misinterpreted as too intrusive, particularly before establishing a close rapport with the narrator. Interviewers should strive to

make the interviews accessible to the community, although some narrators may want parts of the interview sealed for a certain number of years.

A number of published how-to guides are useful to oral history practitioners. One of the best is "Introduction to Oral History" from the Baylor University Institute for Oral History. This on-line manual describes how to plan and design an oral history project, choose recording equipment, plan and conduct interviews, process and archive recordings, and use oral histories for interpretive programming. Another source, "Oral History in the Digital Age" (Institute of Museum and Library Services, Michigan State University) offers up-to-date information about getting started, project planning, choosing digital audio and video equipment, and many other aspects of oral history practice. These guides can also help with needed permission documents which are required if you cite the quotations you gather.

Many histories of enslaved people were recorded by folklorists and anthropologists in the early 1900s, and during the 1930s Works Project Administration (WPA) program. Given the timing of this oral history project, most people who were interviewed experienced enslavement as children. Another factor that shaped these accounts was that most of the interviewers were white. As with all sources, consider biases, misinformation, and mythmaking.

In *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class and Black Community Development* (2008), Leslie Brown uses both WPA resources from the 1930's and oral histories recorded under the auspices of Duke University's Documentary Studies Center. The latter recorded the living memory of African-American life from the 1890s through the 1950s – the era of Jim Crow legal segregation, with over 1,200 interviews, many available at <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil>.



*During the late 1930s the WPA Federal Writer's Project collected some 2,300 oral interviews with formerly enslaved people*

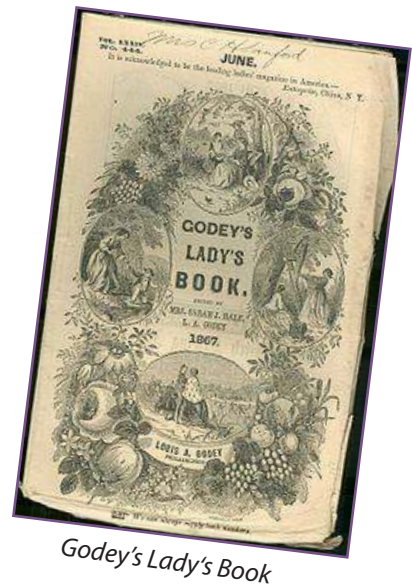
*Photograph of Kara Turner interviewing Margaret Rogers for the book **Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South**. (David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University)*

Some women narrators don't recognize the historic value of their lives. In such instances, women who participated in labor strikes alongside men may assume that the story of male leaders is more significant. Convincing women of the value in their experiences on the picket line or their efforts to feed and clothe their families when wages were not being paid requires patience, empathy and skill. Other women are reluctant to share their history because they find it too personal or even shameful. Thinking of oral history as a process that requires developing a relationship with the narrator--rather than a singular event during which you ask questions and your narrator responds--can help create the kind of atmosphere that enriches the stories we collect.

## Visual Sources and Popular Media



Portraits convey a person's likeness. They are wonderful resources from which to recreate fashion, jewelry, hairstyles, and more. This is an engraving of John Wollaston's portrait of Martha Washington. Morristown National Historical Park Museum and Library. (Photograph NPS, Morristown site)



Historic sites and museums use popular media and visual sources to find important information on women and girls. These sources encompass a wide swath of American life and illuminate their daily experiences. Print media (religious tracts, broadsides, government documents, political pamphlets, magazines, obituaries, books and newspapers) exposed the general public to new ideas about politics and culture. For example, the widely read 19th century *Godey's Lady's Book* featured the latest fashion, sewing patterns, short stories, and sheet music.

Analysis of visual sources (paintings, prints, signage, sculpture, jewelry, photographs, gravestones, statues, monuments, household décor, film and television, and even architecture) yields rich insights. Iconic representations of political and cultural heroines such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Betsy Ross, Amelia Earhart, and the symbolic Rosie the Riveter reflect changing interpretations of female achievement. Future historians will surely remark on the ubiquitous representation of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as a subject of tee shirts, bobblehead dolls, totes and purses, keyrings, postcards, calendars, and greeting cards. In the early to mid-twentieth century, small businesses offered customers annual calendars with their name, a picture, and sometimes a thermometer. The images on these calendars included babies, landscapes, and historic homes with little connection to the particular business or industry.

Political kitsch, or iconography, is rife in popular culture. Examples from women's history include Rosie the Riveter (pandemic face mask), Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (keychain and figurine), Hillary Clinton (button), Michelle Obama (magnet), and Eleanor Roosevelt (Barbie doll). (From the collection of Lynn Weiner)





Photography documents women's lives in newspapers and magazines, government collections, family albums, and collections of photographic equipment, studios, and film, such as those housed at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York. Different kinds of sources provide dramatically different portrayals of women's lives. Photographic technology has changed significantly from early tintypes and daguerreotypes which allowed a single image, to heavy wet plates treated with silver compounds which allowed multiple copies.

Daguerreotype cameras were first used in 1839. Early photographs were often portraits which left our foremothers looking stiff and stern-- because the long exposure times required them to sit still. Later cameras became much more powerful, able to capture images much faster in lower light levels.

Photographs can capture fleeting facial expressions, and unintentional information such as the arrangement of furniture or the existence or lack thereof of curtains and other decorative items in family portraits. They also document spatial relations. Comparing photos of a tenement house and a banker's home in an eastern city or a workers' village and a mine owner's family in the West offer stark images of the ways space shapes people's lives. Dividing up images into quarters and examining each part carefully often results in additional insights—you can see the child on the edge of the image. Digitized images allow us to play with them and find details otherwise impossible to see. They also guide us for preservation-- having looked at many photographs of Victorian parlors we learn their customary appearance and can easily see anything unusual in them. Because their images are available without charge, many Library of Congress and National Archives photographs grace exhibits and publications.



*Occupational portrait of a seamstress, 1853  
(Library of Congress)*



*Harriet Tubman, Carte de Visite, 1868,  
Auburn, New York (Library of Congress)*



*Unidentified woman and girl 1855.  
(Library of Congress)*

Familiarity with period photographs helps a great deal in learning how landscapes functioned and appeared, how technology reached different regions such as when treadle-powered sewing machines were replaced by electrified ones. Photographs are so useful in research and interpretation one can almost divide history in pre and post photographic eras. Certainly, sketches and paintings provide important information, but they tend to focus on idyllic landscapes and wealthy families.

Postcards, which first became wildly popular in the U.S. during the 1893 Columbian Exposition, also illuminate a variety of themes. For example, in the 1910s, the National American Women's Suffrage Association used postcards to promote the suffrage movement, as did various other suffrage organizations throughout the decade. There were also placards, advertisements, and other images. The anti-suffragists also produced a wealth of postcards presenting the right to vote for women as an attack on men and traditional family values.





Women's suffrage postcard, 1913 (Library of Congress)



(National Endowment for the Arts)



(National Park Service)

Films also powerfully display popular conceptions of historical events. Activist and philanthropist Margaret Brown's experience on the *Titanic*, for example, has been portrayed in 12 films, television shows and plays produced from 1953 through 2020, cementing her identity in popular culture as "the unsinkable Molly Brown." It's important to compare the often-fictionalized versions of people and events with primary sources and historical studies. (See the case study of the Molly Brown House Museum, below). The many sources for historical visual culture include the photography collection at the George Eastman Museum and photographs from the Works Project Administration and Historic American Building Survey. Local and regional history is emphasized in historical compilations of photographs, artifacts, illustrations and postcards, available through publishers like Arcadia. Their books cover an enormous range of local American history; titles include *Wild Women of Boston*, *Latino History in Rhode Island*, and *Texas Ranch Women*, to name a few.

The Neon Museum in Las Vegas offers a great example of how women's history can be uncovered in visual culture. Once ubiquitous because they were so much more visually engaging than earlier painted signs, neon signs brightened much of the mid-twentieth century U.S. A tour of some 200 discarded and salvaged neon signs reveals the story of influential graphic designer Betty Willis, who designed the iconic Welcome to Las Vegas sign in 1959. Her vivid art is considered a major influencer of the visual look of the city. The museum also has featured programs on female city founders, business owners and politicians.



Visual artist Betty Willis was one of the few women in the early neon sign industry, and designed a multitude of hotel and other signage defining the iconic look of Las Vegas. She is best known for the Welcome to Las Vegas sign, which she created in 1959. The sign was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2009. (Neon Museum, Las Vegas)

For more information on visual sources in the history of American women, see Heather Huyck's discussion of pictures, maps and photos in *Doing Women's History in Public* (2020), chapter five.

# CHAPTER 4

## Challenges and Practicalities

### Interpretation

Interpretation links a museum, historic site or park's significance, knowledge base and tangible resources with its audiences, using a variety of tools and techniques. Similar to but distinct from formal classroom instruction, interpretation seeks to help visitors of all kinds make emotional as well as intellectual connections with our heritage. It uses the physicality of the location to help visitors connect with history. We've all encountered interpretations of all kinds, whether on tours, signs, movies or exhibits. Anyone who has toured a historic house museum, attended a program, walked on a trail through native plants marked with explanatory signs, watched a movie in a visitor center, or heard historic individuals or events carefully explained has experienced interpretation. Professional interpretation is backed by considerable research, planning, training, and practice. Every year historic site interpretation conveys history to millions of visitors. When places ignore or denigrate the women who once lived there, the public loses access to decades of hard work and powerful opportunities to appreciate how fundamentally the history of women - all women - is woven into our history.

Recent interpretive efforts have focused on being more inclusive and increasing the connections between visitors and resources. Having visitors sit in historic parlors (but not on original furniture!) is an example of our being more intentional. We want visitors to engage with the past to gain perspective and insights on the present. Such increased connections between visitors/guests and historic sites enhance their experience but caution must be exercised to avoid damage to irreplaceable resources.

Curators grow especially concerned when original objects are at risk of damage. Interpretation often includes sharing intangible resources - languages, dance, performances - that reflect and strengthen cultural traditions and carriers. For example, seeing performances of indigenous dances is memorable and provides insights into various cultures. Hearing drums or other musical instruments or the haunting melodies of women singing at Ephrata Cloister envelop us and bring life to historic communities.

### Audience

Audience is one of the most significant concerns and an essential component for historic sites and museums, as vital as funding and leadership. People's presence, whether imagined or actual, exist at the forefront of institutions and within their mission statements. Audiences, whether current, desired, sought or virtual greatly influence programming and outreach in addition to providing revenue. Knowing your audience and expanding it is important to the life of your institution.

Tour guides/interpreters should assess their audience visually and orally. Who are the visitors on the tour? It can be useful to begin by asking what visitors know or heard about the site or person

including the positive, negative, true, and false. When sites are connected to popular culture, that helps the audience see its relevance. While tour guides are the experts, they should engage with the audience and encourage them to speak and contribute to the experience.



*Visitors to the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site in Richmond, VA (NPS, Maggie L. Walker NHS). Maggie Walker (1864-1934) was a pioneering civil rights activist and entrepreneur.*

When thinking about the audience at sites or museums, uncontrollable variables of weather, tight scheduling and even cranky children can affect participation. Not every visitor will enjoy the site, tour or museum program. Some visitors will critique everything, including the information, language, themes or perspective presented. There may be individuals or groups that simply come to challenge the institution. When encountering hostile audiences, inquire why they are challenging the current narrative. Entering into a conversation about their concerns provides a different type of audience engagement. Despite these challenges, such highly critical visitors can offer ideas that lead sites to reconsider their interpretation and current narrative.

Just because you are addressing their antipathy does not mean that you are not defending the institution. You are just providing a different type of audience engagement. As uncomfortable as it may be, follow up with them. Provide a general email address, and ask them to provide more about their claims and critiques. Collecting such documentation helps to validate/quantify concerns that may need to be addressed by other departments of your institution. Documentation also assists with short term and long-range planning.

Once again: your audience profoundly affects the longevity and legacy of your institution. Immediate audience assessment can be done during tours. This provides the institution a real-time snapshot of each group of visitors. Pay attention to variables such as time of day, type and size of group. Does the audience change around major periods of significance affiliated with your site such as birthdays, anniversaries and holidays. The National Park Service now does annual visitor surveys that ask about visitors' satisfaction and their comprehension of a site's core story.

### **Some Crucial Considerations for Managing Change**

There are many different management and ownership structures at historic sites, house museums and parks. Many have Boards of Directors while others have a "chain of command." In all cases, match your approach to your specific situation.

We will now discuss procedures for adding or updating the interpretation of women and girls at historic sites. You need to be committed yourself and learn the basics of American women's history before you dive in. It's also important to draft a preliminary plan and timeline. Articulate why you are doing this before you focus on how to do it. Imagine what your success will look like. Only then begin the process. This approach can save untold amounts of angst for everyone!

Prudence dictates that the executive director/management take some steps to smooth the process of integrating “new” stories into the site’s strategic interpretive plan and ensure that they meet with the least resistance once developed. These steps include keeping members of the Board of Directors or other persons charged with oversight of your site informed and enthusiastic about the changes, finding funding for the research and transition process, utilizing social and other media to communicate how new discoveries highlight the need for change, and test-marketing how you will tell these “new” stories within the framework of the site.

In addition, it’s important to identify potential objections early in the process so that they can be appreciated, understood and answered, with respect, before making final decisions about shifting the site’s interpretation. Including all stakeholders in the process from the beginning facilitates change. For example, building relationships with descendant communities associated with antebellum plantations will provide insights and support for major changes in interpretations.

### **Why are these considerations important?**

Many of the more than 16,000 smaller, privately owned and operated U.S. historic house museums, along with many historic sites are governed by Boards of Directors. These Boards are composed of individuals who are passionate about the site, often involved with it for decades, and may also be major funders. These individuals believe strongly in the educational value of their museum and often view it as a shrine for a historic, often male, figure who was either their ancestor, or considered a patriot, or honored as a local heroic-founder. Some museums have a social or political agenda wrapped into its founding motivations which long-time board members may still believe and proudly support. Such directors may consider any attempt to change site interpretation a threat from liberal academics practicing revisionist history. These board members don’t always recognize that professional history continues to respond to new research sources and findings.

Such revisions can actually improve, rather than threaten, the integrity of the site and its stories. Other more progressive boards may still need to be convinced that changes in the site’s interpretation should be a priority since it may involve budgetary changes to implement this reinterpretation. State and federal sites can have Friends Groups, legislators passionate about them and/or bureaucratic “chains of command” that can both protect and hamper change. They also have to address legislative mandates, and managers can be either supportive or hostile to the full inclusion of women at their site.

### **In the Boardroom**

Before bringing the project of full inclusion of women to the boardroom, it may help to share a compelling story about a woman’s historic contribution with individual board members. Such stories can help board members and other staff see how such changes can enhance rather than threaten a site. Sell your proposed changes. Explain how other historic sites have benefitted from changes in interpretation - such as by increased visitation - after expanding their interpretation to include a more explicit emphasis on women’s history. Sketch out how much time and funding you envision needing for the research process and how you expect to roll out any new exhibit, program or activity. Ask for feedback. Take notes. Respectfully probe any hesitancy or objections. Listen carefully for those aspects of your conversation received with enthusiasm. Use meetings with individual board members to inform how you plan to approach the full board, especially if you must have board approval to proceed. Beginning with small changes can increase their comfort level with proposed reinterpretation. Engage the Board’s enthusiasm for new research discoveries in archives or archeology.



## Funding and Benchmarking Research and Interpretation

Small sites that lack dedicated staff to handle the necessary research required to develop a more inclusive interpretive strategy have to face this challenge as an opportunity. Larger sites also have to make decisions about how much paid staff time should be allocated to creating more inclusive interpretation. Even when volunteers do the research, staff must coordinate the project, provide guidance and logistical support, supervise everyone, adjust the research questions and priorities along the way, and then determine which findings to implement and how best to do so.

Before committing to the integration of the history of American women at your site or presenting it to the board, count the cost. Create a budget. Figure out the cost of staff time, consultants' time, outsourced labor, and the contributed value of any volunteer time. Is this project something that could be handled by a college or graduate internship? Will it be feasible for you to create activities by which visitors, school groups, homeschoolers or scouts pay to learn to do the research as volunteers, especially once you have identified some of the women you want to feature? How much time are you willing to allocate yourself to the research stage of this project? How well do you know the scholarship for the proposed changes? What outside experts do you want to consult?

What incremental benchmarks or goals will you set up for the site reinterpretation? Will you begin by identifying and developing interpretation around a specific woman or will you attempt to profile the experiences and contributions of women more broadly? Will you create one character using museum theater or Living History to provide the interpretation or will you begin by creating text panels that enhance artifacts already owned by the site? How much space will you devote to interpretive panels and displays about women? What objects and stories will need to be removed from the current visitor experience to make room and time for the new interpretation? How much money will need to be spent for the design and production of the new exhibits? Finally, how will you celebrate the implementation of your project?

Think about how the new interpretation can be extended into the museum's gift shop by developing a list of branded promotional items, such as tee-shirts or other related products. Make realistic predictions about the initial investment in the new inventory as well as in the additional sales these items may generate. Search other museum shops for products you might carry. Locate prospective funders, grants and budget line item shifts to off-set the cost of the research, design and production of integrating or adding women to the interpretation of your site before you present the project to the full board.



*Gift shops offering books, postcards, reproduction artifacts, tee shirts, special exhibit souvenirs and other items help brand a museum, raise operating funds, and allow visitors to remain engaged with the site long after returning home.*

Of course, if there are board members who are especially interested in this project, you may be able to get a commitment of initial funding that can help persuade the rest of the board that the

site is making a fiscally sound decision. Also helpful is data from comparably-sized sites in similar locations about how the addition of the history of women and girls has impacted their revenues through increased admissions, sales, and new donations. Consider the measurable increases in the comparable site's social media statistics and increased mailing list participants.

### **Using Social and Other Media**

Once you have decided to work towards enhancing your site's interpretation through the addition of information about women, begin mentioning it on your Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages, as well as other social media sites. Use photographs of artifacts in your collection or historic photographs you have discovered during your research. Superimpose simple one-line statements or interesting questions on the images to create memorable, sharable memes to stir up curiosity among your "friends" and "fans." Add news, a new meme or a teaser at least every two or three days. Include a column in the site newsletter so that each issue presents a new discovery related to the larger project. As the project moves from research to exhibit development, continue creating a buzz especially on social media. Your first audiences are likely to be drawn from the people who will become involved online with the project as it has been developing

### **Test-marketing New Interpretations**

Before spending thousands of dollars to create new interpretive exhibits and text panels for the site, you may decide to test-market stories about the women you have discovered. A very cost-effective way to do this is to create a small traveling exhibit on some retractable banners that you can take to classrooms and organizations that invite you to speak. Not only will the honoraria you receive help to defray the cost of the exhibit, but the feedback from the audiences will help you to sharpen the message. It will also help develop the training for your museum staff when the new exhibits become part of the visitor experience. In addition, these audiences are the most likely to be enthusiastic about attending the opening events for new exhibits at the museum.

For example, the Alice Paul Institute's traveling exhibit, "Marketing the Movement," interprets the unique strategies of the New Jersey suffrage campaign, and has been displayed in public spaces in every county in New Jersey since 2020.



*(Photos courtesy of the Alice Paul Institute)*

## Consider Collaborative Projects

Sites, museums, foundations and state and local governments can work together on such projects as women's heritage trails. Trails focusing on suffrage, as mentioned earlier, have been created not only by the NCWHS but in various states and localities. Broader projects on women who shaped the history of cities and states have existed for decades, including heritage walking trails in Boston and Chicago. In New Jersey, the New Jersey Women's Heritage Trail combined efforts by the New Jersey Historical Preservation Office, Department of Environmental Protection, and 94 historic sites throughout the state to present stories of influential women. This trail includes the homes of suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Alice Paul, pioneering aviator and writer Anne Morrow Lindberg, and Mary Teresa Norton, the first Democratic woman elected to the U.S. Congress without being preceded by her husband.

Note: Publicly owned properties are often shaped by local and national policies and politics which can be in conflict. The National Park Service has struggled to be more inclusive for decades, gradually including more parks that reflect our diverse history. Still, a local congressperson or group or park manager can exert considerable weight for better or worse, some supportive of full women's history and others resisting it. Finding common ground is challenging but necessary.

# CHAPTER 5

## Learning From Each Other: Case Studies

To illustrate the benefits of incorporating women and girls into interpretations, we asked a range of historic sites and museums to share their stories. We also surveyed dozens of sites nationwide and received short commentaries from some of them. These case studies are written in different styles, with different methods, emphases and approaches, reflecting the wonderful array of historic sites and their interpretation of women. Here you can read about history museums and centers, house museums, National Historic Landmarks, parks and outdoor heritage sites and more - and how they engage communities, provide in-person and virtual tours, confront historical racism, develop exhibits, and in so many ways deepen our understanding of the diverse and complex history of women in the United States.

### **The Black American West Museum & Heritage Center**

**Denver, Colorado**

**[www.bawmhc.org](http://www.bawmhc.org)**

**720-242-7428**

**Daphne Rice-Allen, Chair, BAWM & HC**

The Black American West Museum & Heritage Center (BAWM & HC) began with Paul W. Stewart. As a child playing "Cowboys and Indians", he always had to play the Indian because he was told, "There is no such thing as a Black Cowboy." He learned as an adult that one in three cowboys were African American, and Stewart began his quest collecting materials, memorabilia, and stories on Black cowboys as well as Black Coloradans in a wide range of areas. This quest culminated in the creation of the Black American West Museum & Heritage Center.

The Museum was incorporated in 1971 and in 1988 his collection was relocated to the former home of Dr. Justina Ford. Dr. Ford, affectionately called "The Lady Doctor," was the first licensed African American female physician in the state of Colorado. Establishing the museum in her house gave her and the collection the recognition they deserve.

The mission of the Black American West Museum & Heritage Center is to promote an understanding of the roles that African Americans played in the settlement, growth and development of the western United States through its collections, exhibits, programs and presentations. While initially known for presenting the stories of Black cowboys, the museum now tells the stories of early African Americans who settled the West and became miners, soldiers, homesteaders, ranchers, blacksmiths, schoolteachers, lawmen, and every other occupation which helped to build and develop the region. For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, many African Americans joined the "back to the land" movement encouraged by Booker T. Washington.





A young man by the name of O.T. (Oliver Toussaint) Jackson invested in land for an African American colony located in Weld County, about seventy-six miles north of Denver. He established the town of Dearfield as a self-sufficient all-Black agricultural colony. This historical site is now used by UNC, CSU and the University of Colorado undergraduate and graduate students for ongoing educational archeological studies. The museum is the owner of several lots in the Dearfield Historical site and documents the history of this important part of the back to the land movement.



The BAWM & HC along with Historic Denver Inc's, Molly Brown House Museum, and a handful of other historical and cultural arts agencies agreed to focus on women in western history by honoring unrecognized women who contributed to western expansion and growth of Colorado. For the 2020 Centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment, volunteer board member Linda Burks-Brown headed up an effort to add materials on the contributions of African American suffragists to this project.

*Reenactors at the Black American West Museum (Photo by Scott Dressel-Martin)*

Taking a holistic approach, the project focuses on what these women accomplished after Reconstruction, when many southern African American women moved west; how the movement affected their lives; and how they contributed to the larger movement for women's rights and civil rights. Board member Linda Burks-Brown writes that her advice to those beginning to include the interpretation of women is "never give up!" And she adds "It is very rewarding when you can put all the pieces together."

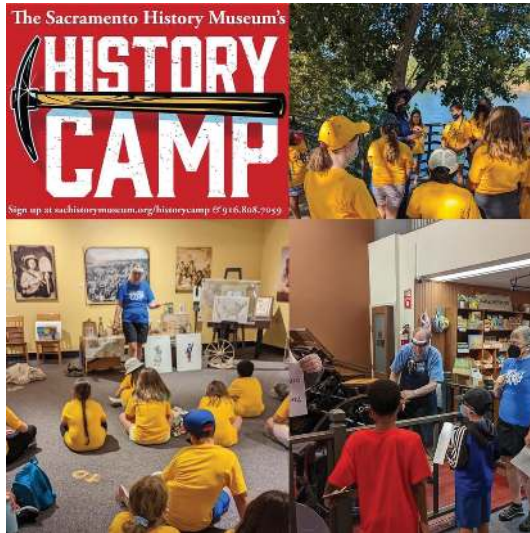
**Center for Sacramento History**  
Sacramento, California  
[centerforsacramentohistory.org](http://centerforsacramentohistory.org)

**Sacramento History Museum**  
Sacramento, California  
[sachistorymuseum.org](http://sachistorymuseum.org)

**From an interview with Marcia Eymann, Sacramento City Historian, by Lesley Barker, historical consultant.**

Both the Center for Sacramento History (CSH) and the Sacramento History Museum (SHM) incorporate women's history in underground tours, taking visitors beneath the city streets, which were raised in the 1860s and 1870s, to see antebellum brothels and shops. The Gold Rush, traditionally described as a male experience, has also been reinterpreted to include women who owned

property, ran businesses (including brothels) and worked in many fields, including as cooks. The CSH supports a research and archives collection and exhibits which are sometimes staged in public buildings in Sacramento and the SHM. The SHM offers walking tours, speaker series, school visits, web exhibits and a history camp. Forthcoming is an “adopt an artifact” program inviting donors to support the repair and care of historical artifacts.



Marcia Eymann is the city historian of Sacramento, current director of the Center for Sacramento History and former director of the Sacramento History Museum. She has spent 25 years working on the history of women in California. J.S. Holiday, the author of *The World Rushed In*, catapulted her into this field, which has been her passion and priority. In a lecture on the Gold Rush, Holiday stated that prostitutes had been the only women in California. Eymann got so offended that she walked out of the lecture. Later they spoke in her office. “You’re upset,” he said, “and I want to know why.”

Eymann told him he was wrong because he had left out native women and Spanish and Mexican women, known as Californios, and was only focusing on white women. She pointed out the statistics in his own book that documented women arriving in San Francisco and crossing the plains. In 2018, she was asked to curate an exhibit for the Society of California Pioneers in San Francisco. Her research at the Society highlighted a recently discovered collection of archival material related to an organization called the Pioneer Women of California, founded in 1893. The society was created in response to an 1893 newspaper article about California’s founding fathers. Soon after a woman wrote a letter to the editor asking, “What about the women? They were here too.” Many letters to the editor came from women who had arrived during the Gold Rush. Wanting to tell their stories, these women organized the Pioneer Women of California. They recorded and preserved their experiences of traveling overland and by sea to join their men in the Gold Rush.

Sadly, the Pioneer Women dissolved in the early 1960s, right before the women’s movement inspired a new wave of women’s histories. Still, their work helped preserve critical stories of western women. For example, John C. Frémont’s wife, Jesse Benton Frémont, traveled to California across the jungles of the Isthmus of Panama with her six-year-old daughter Lily. She recalled handing Lily to a total stranger in order to board a boat. Other women wrote of riding mules across the isthmus. One woman was so ill that she was totally bound up and tied, like a sack, to a donkey. When they got to their destination, her arms and legs had become so numb that Panamanian natives had to massage them in order for them to function. This exhibit and the research on which it is based continue to inform Marcia Eymann’s goal of publishing the accounts of these women to explore what choices women faced and made and how those choices impacted the formation of the community as a whole.

Eymann described how the Center for Sacramento History and the Sacramento History Museum incorporates women’s history in their underground tours. The tours take visitors to the city’s original grade, now beneath the streets and buildings which were raised during the 1860’s and 1870’s. Two of the buildings were houses of prostitution run by African American women.

Another was a tin shop that had been run by a woman who had been abandoned by her husband. There are also evening tours for adults that specifically focus on prostitution and how the women in that industry were key to the development of the city. The *Sacramento Bee* newspaper, for example, began operating in rental property owned by a woman who was one of the brothel owners.



*Sacramento History Museum Underground Tour*

Since 1982, the Center has held the Eleanor McClatchy collection of maps, rare books and California letter sheets. Eleanor McClatchy owned and edited the *Bee* from 1936 to 1982. She was a friend of Robert and John F. Kennedy and a powerful voice in liberal politics in California as well as an amazing collector of the state's history.

Marcia Eymann has some advice for sites that are just beginning to incorporate women's history. She recommends reading Paul Cohen's book, *History In Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*. It describes how we learn about history from three sources: formal written narratives describing events, first-hand accounts, and the myths that develop around past events. Eymann reminds us that historical narratives have typically been written by men. Hence, men set the tone and point to a certain kind of passion. The Gold Rush, for example, has been related as having been a great male experience, which is perpetuated today in local history and by many historians. So, when we set out to do women's history, we have to be aware that, in some ways, we are destroying people's views.

Questioning men about whether they have taken in the women's stories can make them very uncomfortable. She quoted a woman who went to California during the Gold Rush, Jenny McGuire who said, "The air is even freer here." For women, Eymann asserts, "California was freer than the East Coast for standards and expectations. But, unless we find these accounts, we can't tell the stories."

**Dallas Heritage Village/ Old City Park**  
**Dallas, Texas**  
**[Info@OldCityParkDallas.org](mailto:Info@OldCityParkDallas.org)**

The Dallas Heritage Village is an historical park featuring 20 relocated pioneer and Victorian homes and buildings from the period of 1840-1910. The park sponsors research, exhibits and educational outreach. Village director Melissa Prycer describes how in 2010 she worked with junior historians, mostly girls between the ages of 12 and 16, to interpret one of these buildings – a hotel owned and operated by two sisters in the early twentieth century. The students used census records, Ancestry.com and other sources to discover more about the owners and their family as well as life in the hotel. Their work led directly to new interpretation and more inclusivity in telling stories of the site.

When planning a second project, on the centennial of the suffrage movement in Dallas, the site faced a serious problem: a lack of artifacts from that era. The DHV staff decided to create an exhibit of suffrage as told through art. Melissa Prycer offers two tips for those beginning to incorporate women's history into their interpretation: involve diverse people, such as teens, in research and telling the stories, and use art to fill the gap when original artifacts are lacking.



## Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration

Staten Island, New York

<https://www.statueofliberty.org/ellis-island>

Diana Pardue, Chief, Museum Services Division, Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island

The Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration is managed by the National Park Service and provides an example of the challenges and opportunities for integrating women's history into a story that long ignored their roles. The island served as an immigration station in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty from 1892-1954, processing 12 million immigrants - an average of 5000 people daily - including millions of women who arrived with families or as single women, in many cases joining their already Americanized husbands.

This National Park Service historic site plays a major role in conveying immigration history to its 2.3 million visitors annually. As a major public "classroom" Ellis Island shares stories of the women who arrived and the women who guided them through the immigration process to show how two marginalized groups encountered and supported each other. Many of these personal stories are preserved through oral histories and case histories, newspaper reports, and annual reports in the Ellis Island museum collection and archives.

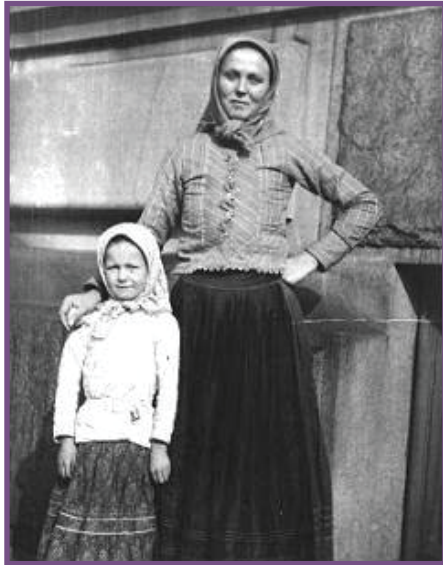


*Entrance Ellis  
Island Museum*

Numerous organizations offered aid to immigrants at Ellis Island as many of the same organizations do today. They employed women working as missionaries, chaplains, agents, matrons, and social workers. These dedicated women provided counseling, guidance, information, translation, money, food, clothing, reading material, and gifts. Two of these social workers, Cecilia Greenstone and Ludmila Foxlee, arrived as immigrants and were later hired to work at Ellis Island. Their stories are among many that help park docents relate the intertwined stories of women as immigrants and as workers at Ellis Island.

Cecilia Greenstone immigrated to the U.S. from Russia in 1906 and months later was hired as the Ellis Island Agent for the New York Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, a position she held from 1907 to 1919. She said that "to rescue human dignity from this nightmare -- that was the single thought my co-workers and I had." Ludmila Foxlee, an immigrant from Bohemia in 1892, was employed at Ellis Island from 1920 to 1937. Both women guided thousands of immigrants through the challenges of the immigration process, bringing them hope and helping them avoid deportation. For Greenstone and Foxlee, this was not just a job, it was a mission. As former immigrants, they understood and appreciated the cultural values, customs and traditions of these newcomers.





*Ludmila Foxlee (NPS, Statue of Liberty National Monument)*



*Cecilia Greenstone (Photo courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, Cecilia Greenstone photographs collection – P-683)*

**Frances Willard House Museum and Archives Evanston, Illinois**  
**[franceswillardhouse.org](http://franceswillardhouse.org)**  
**[info@franceswillardhouse.org](mailto:info@franceswillardhouse.org)**  
**Lori Osborne, Director, Frances Willard House Museum**

This house museum, opened in 1900, is one of the earliest to interpret the story of a woman's life and work. It focuses on nineteenth century reformer and women's rights advocate Frances Willard, who was also the long-time leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) which was headquartered in her home after her death in 1898. The interpretation of Willard's life and work has changed many times over the years. Most recently, the museum has focused less on Willard and more on the many women who lived and worked with her, and on women's leadership more broadly.

The Willard House museum recently featured an award-winning community project - "Truth Telling" - which focuses on the conflict between Willard and anti-lynching advocate Ida B. Wells. Wells criticized Willard for her racist statements and lack of support for the anti-lynching movement. The WCTU eventually passed anti-lynching resolutions. As director Lori Osborne notes, "we want to talk about a real failure in Willard's leadership on a critical issue, as well as all the ways her leadership on so many issues was exceptional."



*Frances Willard House in Evanston, Illinois (Library of Congress)*

*Frances Willard on her bike, "Gladys" (WCTU Archives Photographic Collection)*

**Keweenaw Heritage Center**  
**Calumet, Michigan**  
**KeweenawHeritageCenter.org**  
**Jean Ellis, Vice President**

The Keweenaw Heritage Center is located in the city of Calumet, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The Center partners with the Keweenaw National Historical Park and other historical sites to preserve the history of copper mining. In 2009, the Center held an exhibit on women's lives there that resulted in a book by Jean Ellis, *Beyond Brothels and Bars: Discovering Women's Roles in One Mining Community* (2020).

Plans to celebrate the 100th anniversary of a labor strike in a Michigan copper mining community may seem an odd inspiration to "Discover A Woman's Place." But that celebration inspired the investigation of contributions that women made to the community of Calumet Township from 1910 to 1914. Being a bit wearied by the focus on men and mining, a few of us wanted to offer a broader picture of life in the community. That folklore and stereotypes needed to be re-examined was obvious from one of the first reactions to our plan to look at women's roles—"Oh, you mean all the whores."

Two women formed a committee with two goals: to learn about the community as a whole and to focus on all women in the community rather than to single out individuals. Each of the initiators brought a varied academic background to the process. One had been a librarian who eventually coordinated media programs in a region that encompassed twenty-three rural school districts. She also drew on graduate degrees in English, history, and reading along with ten years of high school teaching. The other had a background in classical and modern languages with experience working on educational levels from pre-school to first-year college students. Each woman had extensive experience providing professional development for educators. Both had made numerous presentations at regional and state conferences and had served on state-level educational commissions. They shared a love of research, a passion for accuracy, and a variety of contacts developed from involvement in community organizations.

Initial steps included:

- Determining possible sources of information: Our brainstormed list included: minutes/ records/ bulletins of organizations or congregations; oral histories; newspaper accounts and historical pictures; insurance maps (Sanborn); census records; school records; heritage clothing; account books (store); hospital records; and many more.
- Seeking to balance information about the many ethnic groups in Calumet; the economics of the community, including mining personnel, business operators, domestic workers, teachers, clergy, medical workers, etc.
- Investigating life events like births, weddings, and deaths by utilizing information about courting patterns, leisure activities, sports, music, and other activities to describe how people lived.
- Developing a theme that could lead to a meaningful exhibit that presents the heritage of the Keweenaw so that people see the whole picture of a multi-ethnic, multi-generational, economically diverse population of men and women.
- Identifying the costs of research and of implementation.

In an early meeting, we explored what sources were available and created an inventory. For physical objects, we looked at artifacts, equipment, pictures, visuals, and audio. From there, we tried to determine what would be essential to procure and what would just be good to have. To assess the information, we had or that could be obtained, we looked at resources at the national, state and local levels to find out about women's occupations, wages, rights, attitudes, and languages. The questions we had -- and those that we wanted the exhibit visitor to have -- guided us through the process. We considered what we wanted to highlight and how we could address the different learning styles of our visitors.

Luck was on our side when we tried to learn the first names of the women in the Woman's Club. Phone calls in which we inquired, "What was your grandma's name?" attracted a third person to the effort. As a local member of the clergy, she could provide connections to church records. Equally important, she had worked as a staff member at a local hospital and still had connections with her former employers. That proved to be especially valuable when the hospital was ready to simply dispose of some historical papers. She rescued them and turned them over to the Keweenaw National Historical Park Archives.

That luck continued when a summer resident learned what we were doing and said, "I love to sew. Could I make the costumes you need for the exhibit?" She delved more deeply into issues of clothing when she returned to her winter home in Massachusetts where she accessed a local historic textiles museum. We also benefited from research provided by a graduate student and a local retired history teacher. His interest was primarily connected to the 100th anniversary of the area-wide strike. The phone calls inquiring about grandma's first name produced another treasure—a 1976 interview of a woman who had begun her teaching career in 1914.

We drew from many sources of information. We learned that we could access primary sources from home. Google Books proved absolutely priceless in allowing us to draw information from books, directories, state reports, and newspapers. Entering all the 14,109 females in Calumet Township in the 1910 census onto a spreadsheet led to sorting and filtering data that could reveal how many spoke English; how many kept boarders; and that women had 58 different occupations in the township! The spreadsheet also shattered the commonly held misconception that people from different ethnic groups could not communicate because of language barriers, as 85% reported that they spoke English. A "Report from the State of Michigan" allowed us to see that statewide, more women died from complications from childbirth than men from mining or quarry accidents.

While it would have been wonderful to have had the talents of an exhibit designer, our limited budget made that impossible. Instead, we provided census information in an accessible way (see below) and we integrated posters with artifacts such as laundry washboards, sewing machines, an old tin bathtub, baby cribs, and school desks. One woman copied old photographs and sewed fantastic period clothing. Placing four dolls into a regular-sized crib showed that four out of five children survived to adulthood. One doll in a toy crib dramatized the death of the fifth child.



*Exhibit on infant mortality from **Discover A Woman's Place: In the Community, in the Home, in the Workforce, in Calumet, in 1910-1914** at the Keweenaw Heritage Center. (Photo courtesy Jean Ellis)*



## WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE IN 1910 IN CALUMET TOWNSHIP

In the 1910 census, 1 in every 4 women was generating income.

Women's Occupations Found in the 1910 Census for Calumet Township

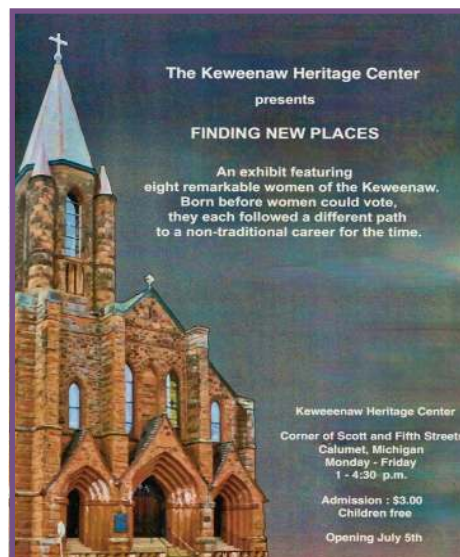
Category	Number	Category	Number	Category	Number
Keeps Boarders, lodgers or roomers	454	Artist	3	Carpenter	1
Servant	412	Baker	3	Checker	1
Teacher	263	Cashier	3	Commercial traveler	1
Dressmaker	166	Cigar maker	3	Demonstrator	1
Saleslady	146	Hair dresser	3	Dishwasher	1
Laundress	66	Hired girl	3	Doctress	1
Nurse	62	Housework	3	Florist	1
Housekeeper	60	Maid	3	Governess	1
Clerk	43	Musician	3	Grocery store	1
Stenographer	43	Typesetter	3	Hat dresser	1
Bookkeeper	39	Actress	2	Ironer	1
Own income	31	Assistant bookkeeper	2	Landlady (hotel)	1
Milliner	27	Assistant librarian	2	Linotype operator	1
Farmer (farm worker)	24	Canvasser	2	Manicurist	1
Exchange operator (telephone)	17	Confectionery store	2	Masseuse	1
Janitor	16	Dairy woman	2	Matron-hospital	1
Proprietor	16	Laborer	2	Notions	1
Seamstress	16	Office girl for dentist	2	Officer (Salvation Army)	1
Waitress	15	Postmistress	2	Organist	1
Cook	14	Principal (public school)	2	Peddler	1
Domestic	11	Scrubwoman	2	Photographer	1
Music teacher	9	Superintendent	2	Printer	1
Carpet weaver	8	Accountant	1	P.O. Register clerk	1
Odd jobs	8	Agent	1	Social worker*	1
Tailor/tailoress	7	Assistant clerk	1	Traveling sales	1
Chambermaid	6	Assistant hairdresser	1	Undertaker	1
Librarian	5	Assistant postmistress	1	Ward girl	1
Helper	4	Barber	1		
Storekeeper	4	Building operator	1		

In the list of occupations, do you see

- A biochemist?**
- A brain researcher?**
- A hospital administrator?**
- A journalist?**
- A military officer?**
- An optometrist?**
- A pharmacist?**
- A sheriff?**

The many positive comments about the exhibit made our 3,000 hours of preparation worth the effort. We were pleased that many visitors spent far beyond the reported usual time of 20+ minutes per visit. We were also pleased that visitors said the admission price of \$3 was more than worth it and that Keweenaw Heritage Center benefited from the efforts of some very dedicated volunteers.

More recently the Heritage Center developed a new exhibit focusing on the lives of eight women:



Keweenaw exhibit poster by Greta Erm



**Molly Brown House Museum**  
**Denver, Colorado**  
<https://mollybrown.org/>  
**Andrea Malcomb, Museum Director**

*"I am not taking sides and am here to help all who need aid. I am interested in humanity and will do my duty impartially and conscientiously." – Margaret Tobin Brown*

Historic Denver's Molly Brown House Museum presents tours, exhibits, and programs about the family of Margaret "Molly" Tobin (1867-1932) and her husband J.J. Brown (1855-1922) as well as the history and cultural traditions of the Denver, Colorado region. Most memorable for having survived the *Titanic* disaster, Margaret Brown exemplifies the cadre of women engaged in Progressive Era reform. Her civic engagement included: feeding mining families impacted by homelessness in Leadville, Colorado, where her husband made his wealth; actively championing livable wages for all members of the working class; working tirelessly for the juvenile reform movement; and passionately engaging in the women's suffrage movement.

Born in 1866 and succumbing to a brain tumor in 1932, Margaret Brown's life was defined by large-scale change, locally and nationally. Born Margaret Tobin in Hannibal, Missouri, she moved to Leadville, Colorado during the height of the 1880s silver boom, and then to Denver after her husband's fortuitous 1893 discovery of gold at the Little Johnny Mine. With their family's finances secured, Margaret Brown devoted her life to philanthropy, civic engagement, progressive politics, performing arts, and world travel.



*Margaret "Molly" Brown*  
*(Library of Congress)*



*Molly Brown House Museum*  
*(Photo by David Keith)*

### **Themes of Site / Women's History Themes**

The Molly Brown House Museum fosters engaged citizens by immersing visitors in the life of Margaret Brown, mining in Colorado, and the history of Denver as a western boom town. The stories embedded within the life of Margaret "Molly" Brown extoll civic virtue and demonstrate the power of being an active participant in our communities today.

The museum has undergone a tremendous interpretive and programmatic shift in the past decade as a result of ongoing scholarship, participation in the American Alliance of Museum's Assessment program (MAP), and an openness on the part of staff and volunteers to experiment. Foremost, docents have been trained to avoid perpetuating the myth of the "Unsinkable Molly Brown," as a brash and uneducated woman who stripped down to her bloomers and fired a gun in a lifeboat. This myth is now seen as just one of several entry points into the life and times of Margaret Tobin Brown.

Using biography as an interpretive lens, museum tours illustrate the profound changes caused by industrialization, technological innovations, social reform movements, and the shifting roles of women during the late Victorian and Progressive Eras. By viewing collections, exhibits, and programs, visitors discover her as a woman both ahead of her time and also representative of many of her female peers who became community leaders, passionate social reformers, and advocates for women's equality.

### **Tangible Resources**

The Molly Brown House is an 1889 Richardsonian Romanesque Queen Anne Revival-style house individually designated as a landmark in the City & County of Denver. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and sits in the Pennsylvania Street Historic District. The historic envelope and decorative elements that make up the Molly Brown House greatly contribute to the stories we tell as do the objects that fill the 1889 home.

The collections gathered at the house are significant for their connection to Colorado's mining elite and to the humanities themes reflected in the Browns' story. Brown decorated the home to reflect her husband's gold strike with gold-painted embossed anaglypta wallpaper in the entryway and copper and gold plaster medallions in the dining room. These elements reinforce themes such as local geology and mineralogy, economic drivers including mining, the evolution of household design and technologies, and the history of Denver's built environment.

The museum holds in its collection approximately 10,000 artifacts used to interpret the life and historical context of Margaret Brown. The museum's collection includes the house itself, original Brown artifacts, and period pieces that reflect the life of an upper-middle-class family in early 20th century Denver. Located in Denver's Capitol Hill neighborhood, once home to the city's elite, and today an eclectic urban community, the fashionable house contained all of the newest technologies of its day. Electricity, indoor plumbing, and telephone lines represent the advantages found in domestic life for a family of the Brown's newly acquired social status.

The museum collection includes more than 2,800 individual clothing and accessory objects. The staff use this collection to tell the story of Margaret Brown and of women of her class and time more generally. Margaret Brown's own fashionable life is emblematic of how women used clothing to highlight and transcend gendered and social constructs and to, literally and figuratively, free themselves from the corset.

While the extravagance of Gilded Age fashion evokes images of beauty and glamour, fashion was shaped by political and social upheavals, health issues, technology, environment, and economic status. The most notable garment, the corset, was meant to create a disciplined mind and regulate emotions by being physically, socially, and morally restrictive to women. By the late-Victorian era, many women protested this style of clothing, demanding dress and health reform, and many then became associated with the women's suffrage movement. As women of Margaret Brown's class were fighting for dress reform, working women from the lower classes working in urban factories joined unions and demanded the implementation of a minimum wage, maximum hours, sanitary working conditions, and safety regulations.

## Interpretive Resources

The primary resource for visitors is the guided tours of the museum which (pre-pandemic) run 6-7 days per week and 8-14 times per day. These tours, led by Docent volunteers, activate the domestic spaces and Margaret Brown's biography in order to highlight her desire for social justice and equality. Docents thoughtfully provoke dialogue from the history of the Brown family as well as those found in the rotating exhibits presented within the domestic spaces. Past exhibits include Brown's involvement in World War I, the juvenile court system she funded, dispelling the myth of "Molly"; and how she became the heroine of the *Titanic*.

On tours, visitors walk through both public-facing and private spaces, connecting stories to the objects found in each. For instance, while learning about the Browns' trip to Japan in 1903 in the formal parlor, they see the ebony and pearl tray brought home as a souvenir. On the second floor, visitors learn about the daily clothing changes required by women of Mrs. Brown's standing and see her gowns, daybeds, and corsets within her bedroom. These are exhibited alongside her writing desk, on which sit suffrage magazines and her own letters to show the multiple facets of her life as an educated and fashionable woman.

In the museum's new Education Center, additional stories are told in a permanent exhibit on gold-mining in Colorado. Natural resource extraction was the driving force behind Denver's rise to prominence, not only as the Queen City of the Plains, but also as the nexus of industry and transportation for the entire Rocky Mountain region.

*Suffragist and student Alice Rich visits the Molly Brown House Museum (Photo by Andrea Malcomb)*



*Permanent and loaned material culture illustrates such stories as the sinking of the Titanic and Margaret Brown's role in the aftermath of the disaster. Shown are objects from the Stanley and Laurel Lehrer Collection. (Photo by Andrea Malcomb)*

Throughout the exhibit, visitors learn the story of her husband J.J. Brown, an accomplished mining engineer who orchestrated the largest gold-strike in North America and whose story had long been marginalized by the focus on Mrs. Brown's accomplishments. Here, the other spouse's story needed more attention!

Again, using biography, this quest for gold narrative also includes the diverse stories of the American Indian women - Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne - who first lived on this land as well as formerly enslaved women, and later the players in Denver's early Chicano movement. This new interpretation was added in 2018 as part of a 4-year, \$1 million capital investment in the museum that included physical restoration work, opening new spaces to the public including servant's quarters, and the addition of the Education Center with exhibit space recaptured from basement areas previously used for collections storage.

Also, in the Natural Resource Education Center, a documentary created by museum staff and scholars is available to visitors. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2007, "Molly Brown: Biography of a Changing Nation" provides relevant and fresh insights on how the real story of Margaret Brown connects to the events important in western American history. By using her biography as a focusing lens, this film enlightens visitors about the pitfalls of myth-making alongside such themes as westward expansion and industrialization, social reform, evolving gender roles, immigration, and race.

### **Interpretive Programs**

Margaret Brown has long captured the nation's imagination and many are drawn to her larger-than-life persona. Her knack for being in the right place at the right time, her independent mindset, and her extraordinary experiences make her life a powerful teaching tool. At the Molly Brown House Museum, her historic home and its collections are essential to override the public's mythology with past realities. Museum programs include over 15 education outreach trunks designed to meet state curriculum standards; an annual slate of special events including those on literature, Victorian etiquette, and the *Titanic*; as well as insider tours and programs designed to meet community accessibility needs.

Educators travel to hundreds of classrooms, libraries, community centers, and care facilities across the region with interactive, and content-rich programs. Three programs - "Denver Grows", "Mining Lab", and "Lego City" - work in tandem promoting historic preservation, Colorado history, and community building to create a well-rounded approach to place-making. This model is also used with three *Titanic* based programs, and a trio based on mining, the industrial revolution, and the built environment.

Insider tours use the house and grounds to supplement the regular tours and dive deeper into themes present in the Browns' story. They include: "Was There an Upstairs/Downstairs" to look at the servant's lives, "LGBTQ: 1900 to Now" to explore Capitol Hill's evolving queer culture, and "Tales from the *Titanic*" to examine the different passenger classes on board the ship. Special events include teas that allow guests to meet a costumed first-person interpreter "Mrs. Brown" and share their philanthropic concerns while learning about how she impacted Denver. Hat making workshops use newspaper accounts of Mrs. Brown's millinery as inspiration for guests to make their own hats. Victorian Horrors allows guests to immerse themselves in Gothic literature as they explore the candlelit home on a dark October night. And the annual *Titanic* Shindig captures that moment onboard the ship when the promise of reaching America was still possible.

To make all people feel welcome, the recent rehabilitation of the home includes a lift to make the Education Center and first floor of the home accessible to people with mobility challenges. The museum also offers SPARK! programs in partnership with the Alzheimer's Association of Colorado, a free program with multi-sensory components for people experiencing early-stage Alzheimer's or a related dementia. Other community access programs include Low Sensory for those on the Autism spectrum, SCFD (Scientific and Cultural Facilities District) sponsored free admission days, and other ways to reduce barriers to participation.

### **Challenges & Reactions to Women's History**

Most popular media representations of Margaret Brown, including "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" play and movie offer inaccurate depictions of J.J. and Margaret Tobin Brown's story, western history, or the *Titanic* disaster. Examining how Margaret "Molly" Brown was represented both within her lifetime and afterwards provides an opportunity to use her life story as a case study to understand the sources and pitfalls of biography as well as demonstrate how women's narratives can be used as primary source teaching tools.



The Molly Brown House Museum strives to enlighten audiences about the facts of the Browns' story and the events of their lives to replace inaccurate, romantic, and nostalgic views of the past. Ongoing interpretation is responsive to new research, evidence, and critical analysis. As audience members think about Margaret Brown's life today, they can each appreciate something new because so much more is known about Brown than when "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" was conceived and when the museum first opened in 1970.

In foregrounding the singular story of Margaret Brown as a vocal and extraordinary woman, secondary narratives in the home's history were marginalized. Margaret's own story as wife, mother, employer, and friend was de-emphasized. Even the story of Margaret as author largely went unspoken, even though we know she wrote prolifically about her travels and the social conditions she experienced. Those writings included her experience on the *Titanic* as well as John D. Rockefeller's treatment of miners in Ludlow, Colorado. Now these stories are interwoven to complicate a once simple if exciting tale.

The story of her husband, James Joseph Brown, had long been relegated to that of breadwinner with no further mention of his role in the house or family. To insert his role as father, husband, mining engineer, and philanthropist back into the narrative, we created the permanent exhibit on Colorado's gold rush. A room on the first floor of the house was also reinterpreted as his study, based on their daughter Helen's recollections. The objects and space create a physical and masculine presence and provide an opportunity to incorporate him into the tour of the museum so that visitors are presented a complete picture of the house's inhabitants. Other "hidden" stories at 1340 Pennsylvania Street are re-interpreted in the third-floor garret space originally used by female servants. Research has revealed that Brown house servants were treated more as friends than domestic workers, making Margaret Brown a frequent target of social derision for her elevated treatment of Irish, German, Swedish, and African American domestic workers. Through tours and exhibits, visitors learn that from 1932-1970, the "House of Lions" was a boarding house, dormitory, and apartment building, undergoing significant interior changes. After serving as a boarding house for years, including as a settlement house for young girls, the home was restored to reflect the Brown family's daily life.

### **Why Women's Stories Matter Now**

Women's stories like that of Margaret Tobin Brown's or the others "hidden" in plain view at the museum provide opportunities to understand the history behind many issues we see in the headlines today. We know that looking back through history allows us to examine and better understand the complicated intertwining of women's lives and the history of the country that can manifest in current social justice and equality issues.

Molly Brown House Museum programs, most notably a Salons Series, promote a safe space using the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience guidelines to build a "learning community." Programs feature local speakers and non-profit groups who help facilitate constructive conversations about topics relevant to social activism, justice, and community involvement both then and now.

By telling stories of the women who came before us, we can give voice to our own experiences and together lay a foundation to know what it means to be a member of a more just and equitable civic community. Margaret Brown's story can be used to discuss such complicated issues as immigration, reproductive autonomy, equal pay, sexual identity, and voting rights. Women's biographies provide the crucial knowledge museum goers and program participants need in order to make sense of these issues and, in the spirit of Margaret Brown, become agents for change.

## National Historic Landmarks and Parks of Washington, D.C.

With special thanks to Kathryn Smith, Coordinator, National Historic Landmarks and National Register, National Park Service, National Capital Region

National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) recognize exemplary locales with national significance, complementing the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) and the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) and Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS). Congress when considering authorizing national park system units often looks to NHLs that have already been significantly vetted for their significance and the quality of their tangible resources - that a building is substantially original and not a reconstruction. A special committee advises the Secretary of the Interior on which locales to recommend as NHLs. If the Secretary of the Interior agrees, they are then designated as NHLs, become eligible for funding, and are regularly evaluated for their preservation condition. Most NHLs are privately owned but states and the federal government own others. There are 2600 NHLs nationwide.

The NCWHS proposed, researched, and achieved landmark designation for the homes of four remarkable women. These include the Durham, North Carolina home of the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, an African American activist, author, lawyer, and the first African American Episcopal priest. NCWHS also successfully promoted the NHL status of the Klagetoh Council House in Arizona, associated with Annie Wauneka, the Navajo activist who bridged traditional and western medicine to improve the health of the Navaho nation; the Lynn, Massachusetts home of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science Church; and the Miami, Florida home of Everglades defender Marjory Stoneman Douglas.



*Marjorie Stoneman Douglas*

*Mary Baker Eddy*

*Annie Dodge Wauneka*

*Pauli Murray*

*Women associated with National Historic Landmark Buildings as a result of the work of NCWHS.  
See <https://ncwhs.org/projects-and-partners/national-historic-landmarks/>*

There are many NHLs in the Washington, DC area. The US Capitol, the Supreme Court and the White House, for example, all represent significant women's history. Below are three other nationally significant sites: The Mary Church Terrell House, Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park, and the Clara Barton National Historic Site.

### **Mary Church Terrell House 326 T Street NW, Washington, DC**

This brick townhouse, located in Washington's LeDroit Park neighborhood, was the residence of Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) educator, suffragist and civil rights leader. She was one of the first Black woman to earn a college degree, serve on an American school board (1895) and the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (1896). Her fame achieved international proportions at the turn of the century when, in 1903, she spoke in German, French

and English on “The Progress and Problems of Colored Women” at the International Congress of Women in Berlin. The acclaim she received from that speech started her on a lecture circuit in the United States, in which she tirelessly continued her fight against discrimination toward her race and gender. The house is now owned by Howard University.



*Terrell House (Library of Congress)*



*Mary Church Terrell (Library of Congress)*

**Meridian Hill/ Malcolm X Park**  
**16th Street & Euclid Street NW, Washington D.C.**  
**202-895-6070**



This early 20th century urban park is among the country’s most ambitious and successful examples of neoclassical landscape design. It is named after the estate of Commodore David Porter, who fought in the War of 1812 and whose property was used as a military encampment during the Civil War. Built on a hillside in 1915-1920, the park was conceived as a Renaissance landscape with water features, including a cascade, terraces, and walls. Horace W. Peaslee, architect, and Ferruccio Vitale, landscape architect, contributed their talents to produce this enduring urban amenity. Construction began in 1915, but the park did not officially open until 1936.

Mary Foote Henderson (1842-1931), who lived in a mansion just across Sixteenth Street, fought to establish this park. Born in Missouri, she moved to Washington D.C. in 1887 with her husband John, a former Missouri senator. She was a real estate developer, author, suffragist, and President of the Missouri State Suffrage Association.

After years of persistent lobbying, Mary Foote Henderson convinced Congress in 1910 to authorize the purchase of land to construct Meridian Hill Park across 16th Street from her residence Boundary Castle. She argued that the stunning views from this site as well as the



opportunity for elegant terracing and cascades made the spot ideal for a formal park. The land was at that time occupied by African Americans who had built their homes just outside the city boundaries; many were evicted after the Henderson's purchased the land on which they lived. Meridian Hill Park officially opened in 1936, five years after Mary Henderson's death.

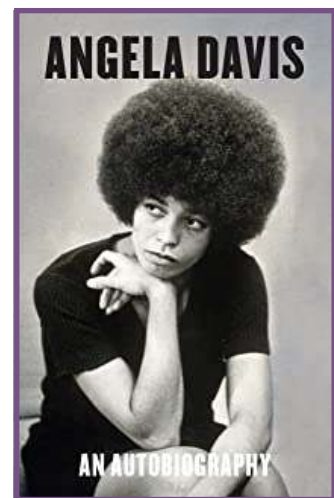
By the 1960s, the neighborhood once again became home to a racially diverse population. It became a gathering place for Black musicians and activists. These included members of the D.C. chapter of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. SNCC leader and antiwar activist Jen Bailey suggested that the park be renamed in honor of Malcolm X. In 1969, Angela Davis spoke at a rally at Meridian Hill Park and publicly called for renaming the park. Although the federal government did not agree with this proposal, many local residents adopted the name Malcolm X Park, and today some street signs include both names. The park was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.



*Park sign*



*Mary Foote Henderson (Library of Congress)*



*Angela Davis*

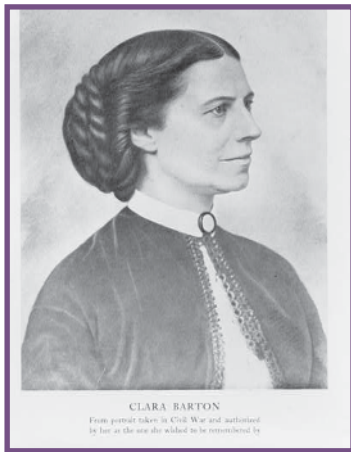
*Two activist women with visions for a park.*

**Clara Barton Historic Site**  
**Glen Echo Park, Maryland**  
<https://www.nps.gov/clba/index.htm>  
**301-320-1410**

The Clara Barton National Historic Site combines her home, American Red Cross headquarters, and disaster relief supply storage in a 14,000 square foot building. As of 2022 it is closed while undergoing historic preservation treatments on its exterior, HVAC and electrical systems. Clara Barton was a heroine of the Civil War as a battlefield nurse and organizer of supplies. After the war she led the way to more civil treatment of the missing and dead on the battlefield with her Missing Soldiers Office, before founding the American Red Cross in 1881. She successfully lobbied the U.S. government to ratify the Geneva Convention in 1882, and in 1903 she pioneered in the development of first aid kits. She also worked throughout her fifty years of public life to bring greater rights to women and African Americans.

Park interpreters explain, "We focus on her work: she travels the world; speaks to large audiences, and works on battlefields. We want to have visitors appreciate how unusual she was, and talk about that."





*Clara Barton, from a portrait taken during the Civil War (Library of Congress) and the Clara Barton House. (NPS)*

As a woman in a man's world, Clara Barton repeatedly had to win acceptance and prove herself. During the American Civil War, she gained support from the Union Army Quartermaster David Rucker who gave her wagons, teamsters and passes to reach the battlefields to nurse wounded soldiers there.

The objects usually found in her home are currently in museum storage. The collection consists of her personal possessions and the furnishings of the Red Cross Headquarters, a combination office/ Barton home/boarding house for Red Cross workers and warehouse storage for disaster response supplies. Today, large photographs illustrate how the building once looked. When last visited, the park interpreter demonstrated his passion and expertise in re-furnishing the building not only with the missing furniture but presenting Clara Barton and the people who also lived in Glen Echo, Maryland to visitors. As he explained, "most people want to be here, all sorts of people but nobody knows her in advance, making that an advantage. We have a good story but people don't know it; I give them everything I've got which leads to a good discussion; it's an audience-centered experience, getting the group to talk." Given that the house is not furnished, a guided interpretive tour with a very knowledgeable person is crucial. The National Park Service is planning for its future interpretation and extensive repair work to rebuild this multi-purpose building.

#### **New Echota State Historic Site**

**Calhoun, Georgia**

**[www.Gastateparks.org/NewEchota](http://www.Gastateparks.org/NewEchota)**

**706-624-1321**

**Janice Sumler-Edmonds, Professor of History Emerita, Huston-Tillotson University**

New Echota, the scenic Cherokee ancestral capitol in northwest Georgia, displays tribal history and culture from the late 18th century to their forced removal during the "Trail of Tears" in the late 1830s. The site includes 12 original or reconstructed buildings, outbuildings including barns and corn cribs, a visitor center, and walking trails.

Historians have recently suggested replacing the term "removal" with "deportation" and "expulsion" to reflect the military force used to push the Cherokee and other native peoples off their ancestral lands. Guided and self-guided tours of cabins, public buildings and landscapes interpret the lives and activities of the Cherokee people, including women and girls. Visitors learn that the Cherokee matriarchal tradition, including ownership of land, diminished with assimilation as women lost their historic rights to serve in tribal government. As they conduct preservation activities for New Echota, site personnel speak of their dedication to an honest

portrayal of the Cherokee, and the importance of gender inclusion in ongoing and future narrations and exhibit interpretations.



*New Echota Sign*



*New Echota Council House*

**Sea Mar Museum of Chicana/o Latina/o Culture  
Seattle, Washington**

[seamarmuseum.squarespace.com](http://seamarmuseum.squarespace.com)  
[museum@seamarchc.org](mailto:museum@seamarchc.org)

**By L Heidenreich, Associate Professor of History, Washington State University**



*Farmworker's cabin (Sea Mar Museum of Chicana/o Latina/o Culture)*



*Traditional clothing exhibit (Sea Mar Museum of Chicana/o Latina/o Culture)*

The Sea Mar Museum depicts the post-World War II history and culture of Latino/a and Chicano/a people in the state of Washington. Women are featured in every section of the museum, from civil rights marches to farmworker labor and activism. This museum has a strong program of community involvement. Prior to opening, the museum held “town hall” meetings throughout the state to explain their mission and requested donations of stories, photographs, diaries and artifacts, an invitation now posted on their website. Oral histories are also an important resource. Since most of the material presented portrays the lives of adult women, they are now interested in deepening the understanding of girls in the community. The museum provides two galleries and a space for community gatherings and events.

**Women's Rights National Historic Park**  
**Seneca Falls, New York**  
[nps.gov/wori/index.htm](https://nps.gov/wori/index.htm)  
315-568-0024

**Nancy Hewitt, Professor Emerita of History, Rutgers University, interview with Andrea DeKoter, Acting Superintendent and Chief of Interpretation and Education, National Park Service. Ahna Wilson was named Superintendent of WORI and the Harriet Tubman NHL in November 2020.**

The Women's Rights Historic National Park (WORI) commemorates the women's rights movement of the 1840s, particularly the first women's right convention held at Seneca Falls in 1848. The park has four properties, including a Visitors Center, the reconstructed Wesleyan Methodist Church (site of the convention), the original Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, and the Elizabeth and Thomas M'Clintock house in Waterloo. Standon and the M'Clintocks helped organize and lead the convention.

Since 1980, Park interpretation has developed in new directions, including inspiring conversations that address issues of race and class in the women's rights movement, and working with new NPS initiatives. These acknowledge racist arguments made by Stanton and Susan B. Anthony during debates over granting voting rights to Black men following the Civil War while also discussing how they rebuilt relationships with Frederick Douglas and other black activists.



*Seneca Falls laundromat in 1980 on the Wesleyan Chapel site with a marker commemorating the 1848 meeting (NPS)  
Renovated interior of the Wesleyan Chapel, site of the first Women's Rights convention in 1848 (WORI/NPS)*

New exhibits reflect this approach. An exhibit about the 19th Amendment, for example, is commemorative rather than celebratory, noting that the Amendment failed to provide political rights for many women of color. Andrea DeKoter, NPS Chief of Interpretation and Education, notes that the exhibit tries to "present this history as it was: messy and complicated, not neat and linear."

**Harriet Tubman National Historical Park**  
**180 South Street, Auburn, New York**  
[harriettubmanhome.com](http://harriettubmanhome.com)  
315-882-8060

The Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn, New York is central to one of two National Park Service sites commemorating and interpreting the life of Tubman. She fled slavery on the eastern shore of Maryland and resettled in Auburn, New York, where she assisted other fugitives on the underground railroad. She was active in movements for abolition, racial equality, women's suffrage, and human rights. The Harriet Tubman NHP in Auburn and Fleming, New York was established in 2017. The site is comprised of three properties, including the Tubman residence, the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged, and the Thompson A.M.E. Zion Church. The Harriet Tubman Visitors Center is operated by the National Park Service.





*Harriet Tubman, 1895. (Library of Congress) and Harriet Tubman House (Harriet Tubman National Park)*

Site staff work closely with the AME Zion Church to interpret Tubman's life, building ties with the Black community in Auburn and also illuminating spirituality as a crucial force in Tubman's life, as it was for so many 19th century activists. Harriet Tubman is buried at the Fort Hill Cemetery, also in Auburn, which operates independently of the park.

The cooperative work of these two sites engages visitors with difficult topics, facilitating dialogue with rather than lecturing at visitors. DeKoter advises sites not to shy away from hard discussions, and instead find ways to make history presentations inclusive. "For far too long," she says, "too many people have been ignored in the telling of our nation's stories. It's our job to uncover and share those stories."

**Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park**  
**4068 Golden Hill Road, Church Creek MD**  
**410-221-2292**  
**[www.HarrietTubmanByway.org](http://www.HarrietTubmanByway.org)**

The Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park was established in 2017. It includes a Visitors Center with self-guided exhibits and serves as the gateway to the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Scenic Byway. The entrance to the Byway is located at 2 Rose Hill Place in Cambridge, Maryland. A self-guiding tour stretches for 125 miles through Maryland's Eastern Shore and extends another 98 miles through Delaware. It includes 45 historic sites related to Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. The website for the Byway, noted above, lists the various sites along the route and provides information on tours.



**Alice Paul Institute**  
**Mt. Laurel, New Jersey**  
**www.alicepaul.org**  
**856-231-1885**  
**Rachael Glashen Rupisan, Executive Director**

In 1984, Equal Rights Amendment advocates founded the Alice Paul Institute (API) to commemorate the 100th birthday of Alice Paul, suffragist and author of the Equal Rights Amendment. The non-profit saved Alice Paul's papers and donated them to the National Archives and soon thereafter acquired Paulsdale, Paul's family home in Mount Laurel, New Jersey. In 1992 they successfully nominated the property for National Historic Landmark status, one of the few (less than 5% of the total) NHLs that honor a woman. Their purpose in saving the house was two-fold. First, to create a place where the public could learn about Paul's life and work to win Constitutional equality for all. Equally important, the house would host workshops and programs in which girls and young women learn leadership skills from historical and contemporary role models.

Through public programs and on-site exhibits, visitors learn the story of Alice Paul's life, her Quaker roots and her seven decades of activism for American women's suffrage and then the Equal Rights Amendment. The centennial celebration of the 19th amendment brought into stark relief the omissions of the history as it has traditionally been told. BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) women and queer women were almost completely absent from the story of the struggle towards women's suffrage in popular narratives.

Recognizing this omission, the Institute began work on telling a more representative story, one that might question some of Paul's beliefs and actions. The first step was adding a pop-up banner as part of the permanent exhibit that highlights the most famous instance of exclusionary tactics by suffragists in the early 20th century - the 1913 Suffrage Parade in Washington DC that Alice Paul organized. The exhibit notes that Paul failed to welcome and include Black women who wanted to participate in the parade and the suffrage effort. API has adopted a policy of including this incident in all programs and house tours.



*Paulsdale, Alice Paul's birthplace and home to the Alice Paul Institute in Mt. Laurel, NJ (Photo courtesy of Alice Paul Institute)*



*Paulsdale staffers with new exhibit panel, June 2022 (Photo courtesy of Alice Paul Institute)*



*Alice Paul (Library of Congress)*

Looking to the future, API is planning a new permanent exhibit at Paulsdale, one that will tell a broader and more inclusive history of the struggle towards gender justice. The new exhibit will look at the whole spectrum of women and gender nonconforming people and will ask what the laws around franchise and access have meant for them. At the heart of the work is the goal of having every person who walks through the doors see themselves mirrored in the stories told on the walls and in public programs. API Executive Director Rachael Glashan Rupisan sums it up well: "We use history to inspire people to get civically engaged, to take action now. It's critical that the information we share to our visitors is as full and accurate a story as possible."

***And some last words from a pioneer of women's history -- Gerda Lerner:***

***Women have always made history as much as men have, not 'contributed' to it, only they did not know what they had made and had no tools to interpret their own experience. What's new at this time is that women are fully claiming their past and shaping the tools by means of which they can interpret it.***

# RESOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## RESOURCES: Want to learn more?

National Collaborative for Women's History Sites	<a href="http://www.ncwhs.org">www.ncwhs.org</a>
American Association for State and Local History	<a href="http://www.aaslh.org">www.aaslh.org</a>
American Alliance of Museums	<a href="http://www.aam-us.org">www.aam-us.org</a>
American Historical Association	<a href="http://www.historians.org">www.historians.org</a>
Monumental Women	<a href="http://www.monumentalwomen.org">www.monumentalwomen.org</a>
National Council on Public History	<a href="http://www.ncph.org">www.ncph.org</a>
National Trust for Historic Preservation	<a href="http://www.savingplaces.org">www.savingplaces.org</a>
National Park Service	<a href="http://www.nps.gov">www.nps.gov</a>
Organization of American Historians	<a href="http://www.oah.org">www.oah.org</a>

## Select Bibliography

In addition to the books cited in the text of the Toolkit, the following offer information that may be useful:

Cherstin, Lyon et al. *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017)

Hartigan-O'Connor, Ellen and Lisa Materson. *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

Hewitt, Nancy and Anne Valk, eds. *A Companion to American Women's History* (Wiley Blackwell, 2021)

Huyck, Heather. *Doing Women's History in Public: A Handbook for Interpretation at Museums and Historic Sites* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020)

Merigolo Denise, ed. *Radical Works: Civic Engagement, Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2021)

Ware, Susan. *Women's History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015)



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THE STORIES OF WOMEN AT HISTORIC SITES AND MUSEUMS**