



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

Mary Jane Colter...
"An incomprehensible woman in pants."

Frank Waters, historian



1893 portrait by Arthur Mathews

Mary Jane Colter: Architect & Designer

In an era when there were very few female architects, [Mary Jane Colter](#) (1869-1958), broke with traditional European design to create groundbreaking commercial buildings with a distinctly Southwest American flare. Utilizing natural materials from surrounding landscapes and artifacts inspired by indigenous cultures, Colter's unique style paid tribute to Native American, Spanish Colonial, and Arts and Crafts elements.

[Born](#) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1869, Colter's family moved to Colorado and Texas, before settling in St. Paul, Minnesota, when she was 11 years old. At the time, St. Paul was home to a large minority population of Sioux. Colter became captivated by the geometry, design, and symbolism of Native American art.

From an early age, Colter was determined to be an artist. In 1886, she left Minnesota to [attend](#) the California School of Design, now, the San Francisco Art Institute. To help finance her studies, Colter apprenticed at a local architectural firm. Graduating in 1891, Colter returned to St. Paul to teach art and drafting at a local high school. But in 1901, she landed a summer job that would change her life—as interior designer for the Fred Harvey Alvarado Hotel in Albuquerque, New Mexico. With the boom in travel and tourism resulting from new railroad lines across the West, came an increased demand for restaurants, hotels, and other hospitality buildings.

By 1910, Colter left teaching to work as the Fred Harvey Company's chief architect and interior designer. When she retired 38 years later, Colter had completed 21 landmark hotels, commercial lodges, and public spaces across the Southwest.



Often working long hours in rugged conditions, Colter was [described](#) by historian Frank Waters as “an incomprehensible woman in pants,” [riding](#) horseback, sketching ruins, and meticulously studying construction details. It was also [said](#) that “she could teach masons how to lay adobe bricks, plasterers how to mix washes, and carpenters how to fix viga joints.”

Colter also had a reputation for being a stubborn perfectionist. [According](#) to Virginia Grattan, author of *Mary Colter: Builder upon the Red Earth*, “Colter was so particular about the colors she used...that she sometimes mixed her own. For the interior of Bright Angel Lodge, she made a special shade of blue...” insisting “...that the painters mix the shade exactly. They dubbed it “Mary Jane Blue.”

Colter was equally passionate about designing spaces that fulfilled their commercial function and created a unique and satisfying experience for the user. For the [La Fonda hotel](#) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, she hired local artists from nearby pueblos to make the furniture. Native American designs were utilized in hand-crafted ornamental details including chandeliers and lighting fixtures, and in tiles and textiles.



Fred Harvey Restaurant, Union Station, Los Angeles, Courtesy Annie Moore



Lookout Studio

To evoke a more vivid sense of place, Colter insisted on naming her rustic lodge at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, “[Phantom Ranch](#),” instead of the proposed, “Roosevelt Ranch.” She designed [Hermit's Rest](#) to look as if it had been haphazardly pieced together by a mountain man, and [Hopi House](#) to resemble a 1,000 year-old pueblo. These buildings, and a series of others in the Canyon, secured her legacy. From 1905

to 1935, she built Hopi House, Hermit's Rest, [Lookout Studio](#), Phantom Ranch, [Desert View Watchtower](#), and [Bright Angel Lodge](#). In 1987, four were [designated](#) National Historic Landmarks.

To build Phantom Ranch, which is accessible only on foot,

by mule, or by river raft, Colter used on-site materials including fieldstone, river rock, and rough-hewn wood. This approach became the model for subsequent [National Park Service](#) structures which today are known as National Park Service Rustic. At Bright Angel Lodge, Colter built a "geological fireplace," and arranged rocks from floor to ceiling to replicate the rock strata along the trail down the canyon.



The Watch Tower, National Park Service

Some scholars consider Colter's masterwork to have been the 1923 El Navajo in Gallup, New Mexico which fused Native American design with Art Deco. But Colter's personal favorite was the 1930 [La Posada Hotel](#) in Winslow, Arizona. Constructed in the manner of a sprawling hacienda, she designed everything—its buildings, gardens, furniture, and china—even the hotel staff uniforms. Today, it is a museum at the heart of the [La Posada Historic District](#).



Mimbreno China, Harvey County Historical Museum

Colter's remarkable legacy was largely forgotten until 1980 when Virginia Grattan published her [biography](#). Other books and articles followed, and in 1987 many of Colter's buildings were listed on the National Historic Registry. But in 2018, Colter's achievements were undermined when architectural enthusiast Fred Shaw self-published a 900-page book entitled, [False Architect: The Mary Colter Hoax](#).

In his book, Shaw [claims](#) that while researching a different Fred Harvey architect, he uncovered inconsistencies in Colter's resume. He concludes that she suffered from a narcissistic personality disorder and took credit for other's work. Shaw believes the fabrication began in the early 1950s when Colter provided information to the National Park Service for its archive. Her responses became primary source material for the books that followed.

Today, some scholars agree with Shaw; others [argue](#) that it would have been impossible for her to perpetuate such an incredible hoax. Time will tell.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Often dismissed as a "mere decorator," Colter had to fight for her architectural designs by knowing more about her subject than her male counterparts.

Ask Yourself: When have you experienced similar challenges and how did you handle them?

Ask a Friend: Is this type of sexism increasing or decreasing today?

Share this Story



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent ten years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and book clubs, and was recently a moderator at the [San Francisco Writers Conference](#). She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com



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