

Women Make History: Stories we should have learned in school

**“It isn’t who you are,
nor what you have,
but what you are that
counts.”**

Margaret Brown



*Margaret Brown, Library of Congress,
photo by Bains News Service*

Note: If you’re traveling to Denver, visit the [Molly Brown House Museum](#). Restored to the era when Brown lived there, the museum contains a wealth of information about Brown and other audacious women who dared to stand up and speak out for the rights of others. It’s also a short walk to the [Center for Colorado Women’s History](#), another must-visit!)



*Margaret Brown, Library of Congress, photo
by Bains News Service*

Unstoppable & Unsinkable: Margaret Brown

Margaret Brown was as unstoppable as she was unsinkable. Revered and reviled for her outspoken political activism, her fame catapulted to new heights when she [helped](#) to save others during the 1912 sinking of the RMS Titanic. Brown was later mythologized in film and on stage as [“The Unsinkable Molly Brown.”](#) Yet during her lifetime, she was [never known](#) as Molly, only as Maggie or Margaret. That said, Brown was an unstoppable force. An activist and philanthropist who focused on improving the lives of women and children, she was also a suffragist, an actress, and a candidate for a seat in the U.S. Congress.

Born Margaret Tobin in 1867 in Hannibal, Missouri, Brown was one of six children. Her parents were Irish Catholic immigrants, and from them she gained an ethic of hard work and a commitment to helping others. As a child, she attended a school taught by her aunt, but at age thirteen, she left school to help support her family by taking a job at a tobacco factory.

In 1883, one of Brown's sisters married and moved to Leadville, Colorado, a silver mining town. Another of her siblings, a brother, followed, and in 1886, at the age of eighteen, Brown joined him. Although prosperous, the town of Leadville was rugged and chaotic; everything was oriented around the mines. She found work sewing carpets and draperies at a dry goods store, and soon, she met and married J.J. Brown, a miner.

The couple struggled financially, but Margaret helped establish soup kitchens. Soon, they had two children, and as their family grew, so did their fortune. A small shareholder in the Ibex Mining Company, Brown's husband worked his way up to management as her efforts on behalf of others increased. The culture of the West was wilder than the buttoned-up East, and women of Colorado were active in the fight to win the vote. Brown joined the movement and began to see political activism as the path to equality for all.



Brown Family, Leadville, CO, www.mollybrown.org

In 1893, veins of gold and silver were discovered in one of the mines where her husband worked. Its success catapulted the Browns into financial freedom. A year later, they moved to Denver and took their places in society. It was also in 1893 that Colorado women won the right to vote.

In Denver, Brown used her wealth and position to advocate for social and political reform on a larger stage. She joined the Women's Press Club, co-founded the Denver Women's Club, and the Juvenile Association for the Protection and Betterment of Children. She also helped to establish one of the first juvenile courts in the country, while also building a playground and summer school for low-income children at the city's Riverfront Park.

But Brown's focus expanded beyond Denver. She began spending more time on the East Coast. Over the next several years, she worked with the National American Suffrage Association based in New York, and with suffrage leaders Alice Paul and Ava Vanderbilt Belmont, to pass the Nineteenth Amendment. She earned a reputation as a woman who could show "the iron hand beneath the glove of glistening silk."

As her political and civic involvement increased, so did the friction in her marriage. Brown's husband wanted his wife to assume a more traditional role. Margaret refused to give up her passion for social justice. They separated in 1909 and lived apart the rest of their lives.

Encouraged by others to run for office, between 1909 and 1914, she made several unsuccessful attempts to win a seat in Congress. When World War I erupted in 1914, she withdrew from her last campaign to focus on the war effort.



Margaret Brown and Capt. Arthur Henry Rostron of the Carpathia for his rescue of Titanic survivors. Photo: Bain News Service.

Brown loved to travel. In early 1912, she visited Egypt and Europe. In France, she learned that her young grandson was ill and immediately made plans to return home. She booked passage on the ill-fated maiden voyage of the [RMS Titanic](#), the largest and most extravagant ship of its time, considered to be unsinkable.

On the fourth night of its voyage, April 14, 1912, the ship struck an iceberg and sank. It claimed the

lives of more than fifteen hundred people, most of whom were in steerage. There were not enough lifeboats on board, and evacuation priority was given to those in first class. Brown jumped into action to help stunned passengers into Lifeboat Six before she herself was pushed aboard, and the raft was cast into the frigid North Atlantic. Even then, Brown encouraged the group to rescue others and tried to maintain morale as they waited for help. Rescued by the RMS Carpathia, when Brown was safely home, she was at the [forefront](#) in organizing relief efforts for destitute passengers, survivors, and their families.

Two years later, miners went on [strike](#) in Ludlow, Colorado. The Colorado National Guard was called up, and employees of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company were armed. They opened fire on the miners and burned the workers' camps, killing twenty-four people, including children. Brown rushed aid in the form of food and medical supplies. Although she understood both the workers' and the mine owners' perspectives, she aligned herself with the workers. Their fight for safer conditions, shorter hours, higher wages, and improvements for their families extended beyond Ludlow, and Brown [worked](#) to generate national awareness of what became known as the "Ludlow Massacre."



Ludlow Massacre, University of Denver

During World War I, she donated her summer home in Newport, Rhode Island, to the American Red Cross and also traveled to France. There, she drove ambulances and tended to wounded soldiers. She also served as a director for the American Committee for Devastated France. In 1932, the French government [awarded](#) her its Légion d'Honneur.

In 1922, Brown's husband [died](#). Although she never remarried, rumors about possible matches swirled. When gossip columnists speculated that she was engaged to a seventy-six-year-old French Duke, Brown [quipped](#): "Me marry that old geezer- never. Give me every time the rugged men of the West."

In her later years, Brown [lived](#) primarily in New York at the Barbizon, a hotel for women only. She continued to travel, [visiting](#) Russia, India, Japan, Egypt, and other countries. In 1925, while on vacation in Palm Beach, Florida, she escaped a second disaster when [fire](#) erupted in the hotel where she was staying. Once again, Brown helped others to safety by leading them down a fire escape.

Brown [died](#) in her sleep on October 26, 1932, in New York City. She was sixty-five. She is buried next to her husband in the Cemetery of the Holy Rood in Westbury, New York.

As for her notoriety today, much of her story is [untrue](#). During her lifetime, she did nothing to correct inaccuracies about her in the press. She told a family member: “I’d rather that the papers say something about me than nothing at all.”

After Brown’s death, the *Rocky Mountain Times* published an obituary inventing facts, including that she was illiterate and had been rescued from drowning in the Mississippi by Mark Twain. A year later, a *Denver Post* reporter, Gene Fowler, known to “spice up a story,” added to the myth, claiming that she was born during a tornado and was a saloon girl in Leadville. This led to more stories based on [fabrication](#), including the 1960 Broadway show “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” and the 1964 film of the same name starring Debbie Reynolds.

Regardless of the myth surrounding this titan of an activist, when it came to fighting for the rights of workers, women, and children, Margaret Brown was unstoppable. [Read](#) Brown’s harrowing account of the Titanic’s sinking.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: When have I been afraid to speak up for others and why?

Ask a friend: How does Margaret Brown’s story inspire you?

What I'm reading: *If You're Seeing This, It's Meant for You*, a novel by [Leigh Stein](#). I'm not finished, but so far, it's an engaging, modern mystery with a good dose of satirical commentary on our social media selves. Stay tuned!



I specialize in the life and times of reproductive rights activist, Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). In 2020, [Time](#) magazine included her among the nine most important women in American history. I curate Dennett's family archive, and am at work on a novel about her life. In 2024, my manuscript was named runner-up in [Book Pipeline's General Fiction category](#).

My essays have been published in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and more. I live in the Wasatch Mountains near Salt Lake City with my husband and black lab, Hank.

If your business, book club, school, church, or social group needs a speaker, [reach out](#). My passion is sharing the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century.



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