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Respectability Beyond Reproach: The Racial Construction of Western Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century Montana

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Abstract

This project investigates the racial construction of Western womanhood in post-Reconstruction era Montana. Though current historiography details Black women's labor and family life, few studies probe the social construction of Black womanhood in Montana. This paper utilizes feminist intersectionality theory and social-historical frameworks to comprehend how Black women's experiences in Montana differed from those of white women. In addition, this project focuses on the four pillars of Victorian true womanhood (domesticity, purity, piety, and submissiveness) and the racial constraints and obstacles that affected Black women's adherence to these ideals. This paper then utilizes vertical files, archival information, genealogical data, books, letters, newspaper articles, organizational records, and oral histories to construct a complex narrative of Black women's experiences with "true womanhood" in the American West. The paper places the lives of notable Montana women Sarah Gammon Bickford, Mattie Bost Castner, and Mary Fields within the context of both Victorian "true womanhood" and post-Reconstruction racial identity. It argues that though many Black women in Montana earned respect within their communities, their ability to claim the title of "true woman" was impacted by segregation, social prejudice, economic necessity, and racism. Black women's quest for respectability was further complicated by the burdens of respectability

politics and racial uplift. The paper also examines historical remembrance and how including accurate narratives of Black women in American Western history is vital to diversity and inclusion efforts.

Keywords: Women's History, Women and Gender Studies, American History, Race Studies, History, Public History

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"Womanliness is an attribute and not a condition. It is not supplied or withdrawn by surroundings." - "Woman's Place," *The Woman's Era*, September 1894, 8.

Mary Fields, also known as the legendary Stagecoach Mary, was one of the roughest and toughest citizens of Cascade, Montana. Born into slavery in Tennessee in the 1830s, Mary was known as a gun-totin', fast-talkin' "bad woman" who loved drinking, smoking, and fighting. Her fabled exploits, from an armed standoff with wolves in the course of her mail deliveries as a star route carrier [1] to a near-shootout with a staff member at St. Peter's Mission[2], framed her as a figure of almost mythic proportions. Mary earned lukewarm acceptance from the Cascade community during her life, including a position as the official mascot of the local baseball team.[3] However, nicknames like "Nigger Mary" and "Colored Mary" and portrayals of Mary as a mannish servant figure indicate that her race deeply affected her experiences as an American Western woman. The characters of African American women were judged by deep-seeded beliefs about morality rooted in ideas of race. Racial prejudice, economic necessity, and social and physical segregation influenced African American women's experiences with the cult of true womanhood in Montana. Mary Fields, Mattie Caster, and Sarah Bickford's lives illuminate the impact of these factors and describe how mythologies of African American women in the West correspond to long-held stereotypes about Black women.

The Cult of True Womanhood and Women of Color in the American West

[1] Ashawnta Jackson, "How Mary Fields Became 'Stagecoach Mary'," JSTOR Daily (JSTOR, March 19, 2021), https://daily.jstor.org/how-mary-fields-became-stagecoach-mary/.
[2] Sarah Nichole January, "Stagecoach Mary: The Postal Worker Who Became A Legend of the Wild West," explorethearchive.com (Open Road Media, July 17, 2020), https://explorethearchive.com/stagecoach-mary-fields.
[3] Dee Garceau-Hagen, "Finding Mary Fields: Race, Gender, and the Construction of Memory," in *Portraits of Women in the American West*, ed. Dee Garceau-Hagen (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 139.

The cult of true womanhood, or cult of domesticity, was a Victorian-era set of ideas that held that the ideal woman was pure, pious, submissive, and domestic. It claimed that women should be responsible for raising and teaching children, maintaining a household, and instilling proper morals and values in their families. Failing to live up to these ideals of femininity meant that one was less than a "true" woman and not a proper lady.[4] These ideals of womanhood were often applied only to white middle-class and upper-class women. Women of color, immigrant women, and working-class women were excluded from the cult of true womanhood by social prejudice and the financial and physical realities of their everyday lives. Whether a woman adhered to a particular manner of dress, speech, and movement or not could define whether she was perceived as a "lady" or as a sex worker,[5] and public and private behavior in general determined whether they were seen as ladies. Many Black women were excluded not only from the privileges of respectability but also from its very definition.[6]

Respectability politics were a weapon against racial barriers to entering the cult of true womanhood. In this ideology, Black women strove to prove themselves "respectable" and worthy of acceptance by adhering to standards of neatness, decorum, and sexual propriety, [7] including properly raising children, remaining sexually pure, presenting themselves as clean and orderly, and aiming for overall self-improvement.[8] Many of these ideals overlapped with the

[4] Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984), 47.
[5] Barbara Y. Welke, "Rights of Passage: Gendered-Rights Consciousness and the Quest for Freedom," in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000,* eds. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 76.
[6] Welke, "Rights of Passage," 76.
[7] Paisley Jane Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 212-220, doi:10.1353/jowh.2003.0025.
[8] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993), 139.

pillars of Victorian womanhood.[9] As a whole, respectability politics was intended to disprove negative stereotypes about African Americans. Though many African Americans engaged in the quest for respectability, Black women "bore the principal burden of 'proving' the respectability of their people generally."[10] Their attempts to lay claim to "true womanhood" functioned as an important part of the campaign for respectability for all African Americans. Black women's campaigns for social and political equality in the late nineteenth century, such as challenging their exclusion from streetcars, were also campaigns for the respect given to a lady.[11] Though Black women's experiences in the West differed from their experiences in the East and South, they still fought to prove themselves worthy of respect and entry into the cult of true womanhood.

The hardships of the American West modified women's perceptions of true womanhood. In addition, the American West as a whole changed in the late nineteenth century with the advent of new technology, access to national markets, and development of mining culture and labor. Women shared responsibilities with men on ranches and farms, and they entered the public sphere to accomplish goals connected to family needs.[12] In the East and South, the cult of true womanhood was a stronger social force and demanded stricter adherence to its ideals. However, true womanhood still had a foothold, albeit a weak one, in the West. In conventional Western history, women were gentle tamers of both land and men. They were expected to maintain ranches and farms by completing a seemingly never-ending

[9] Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking," 212-220.
[10] Welke, "Rights of Passage," 80.
[11] Welke, "Rights of Passage," 80.
[12] Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," in *The Women's West*, ed. Sue Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 159.

series of chores every day, raising their children, and creating a home in the oft-hostile wilderness of the American West. Most importantly, female settlers served in a dual role as "gentle tamers,"[13] assisted in taming the frontier and creating comfortable homes, and "sunbonneted helpmates" who completed domestic labor so that their husbands could work in the public sphere.[14]

Western American history also involves mythmaking and stereotyping. Historian Sue Armitage explains how nineteenth-century American Western women were often defined by stereotypical categories: the refined lady, the helpmate, and the bad woman.[15] Many women were also stereotyped as "civilizers" whose very presence on the frontier prompted the establishment of "civilized" institutions like churches, schools, and community centers. In this reconstruction of Western history, the presence of any woman meant that her feminine virtue would permeate the roughshod culture of the American West. Historian Elizabeth Jameson adds that women's roles could be simplified even further into good women, who were helpmates and civilizers, and bad women, who were hellraisers and acted outside gender boundaries.[16] She also points out that class and ethnicity meant that many Western women did not fulfill the ideals of true womanhood.[17] African American grappled with stereotypes of Western women as well as racial stereotypes.

[13] Susia Huston, UM Women's Oral History Project Interview, UMOH 49, University of Montana Archives, Mansfield Library, Missoula.
[14] Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs, "Montana Women's Clubs at the Turn of the Century," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1986), 29.
[15] Sue Armitage, "Through Women's Eyes: A New View of the West," in *The Women's West*, ed. Sue Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 12.
[16] Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers," 145.
[17] Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers," 145.

Black women's attempts to assert themselves as ladies required them to battle against long-held ideas of Jezebels and Mammys. These stereotypes framed Black women as either openly promiscuous and interested only in sex (Jezebels) or highly maternal and focused on childrearing, particularly the rearing of white children (Mammys). Historian David Blight adds that Black women not only had to support the "progress of the race" but also seek out respectability in a society that "had for so long defined them only in maternal or sexual terms."[18] Nineteenth-century historian Philip Bruce articulated the Jezebel perspective by claiming that Black women were overly seductive and promiscuous[19] and that they would compromise the moral fabric of American society by seducing white men away from their wives. Social theories of the nineteenth century argued that Black women were unable to control their passions and that they lacked adult moral sensibilities. Additionally, white men's assumption that Black women's bodies were theirs for the sexual taking strengthened the perception of Black women as sexual objects.[20] The Mammy stereotype framed Black women as friendly, cheerful, and willing servants to white people, especially with raising children and maintaining homes. The Mammy image was a holdover from Black female slaves' roles as caregivers for the white children of their masters. The stereotype was intended to legitimize

[18] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 319.
[19] Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 31.
[20] Welke, "Rights of Passage," 80.

slavery and portray slaves as contented with their lives.[21] The Jezebel and the Mammy stereotypes dehumanized and objectified Black women while reinforcing white supremacy.[22]

Beyond racial stereotypes, other obstacles prevented Black women from entering the cult of true womanhood, including occasionally violent racial prejudice, the financial necessity of working outside the home, and exclusion from social clubs and community reform efforts that allowed white women to publicly prove their womanhood. While some Black women's obituaries read "lady," the majority of these women were denigrated and disrespected by wider white society. Black women's struggle with true womanhood was directly affected by the social and physical obstacles that prevented them from achieving the pillars of Victorian womanhood. Black women weren't considered to be pure paragons of virtue, but rather sexual wantons who led men astray. Complexities of freedom connected with the desire for partnership in marriage affected Black women's ability to adhere to the ideal of submissiveness. Finally, Black women did not always fit into the ideal of domesticity because they needed to work outside of the home to ensure their families' survival. While Black women were excluded from the cult of true womanhood as defined by white society, many of them easily obtained the status of lady within their own racial communities, who celebrated their achievements and accomplishments.

Three Black women in Montana serve as case studies to the debate over true womanhood. Sarah Gammon Bickford was the first African American woman to own a public

[21] "Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans," National Museum of African American History and Culture (The Smithsonian Museum, July 19, 2019), https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans.
[22] Joel R. Anderson et al., "Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype: The Impact of Target Race on Sexual Objectification," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (August 22, 2018): pp. 461-476.

utility in Montana and possibly in the entire United States. Mattie Bost Bell Castner, the "Mother of Belt," owned and operated the Castner Hotel. Mary Fields was the first Black female star route mail carrier in the United States. All of these women were born into slavery in the South and eventually achieved some measure of respect and fame in their communities in the West. However, they also experienced a toxic combination of racism and sexism that complicated their ability to attain true womanhood and respectability. Western racial prejudice and stereotyping affected their contemporary reputations and modern recollections of their lives.

Race Relations in Montana in the Nineteenth Century

Montana, with its ethnically diverse towns despite a high population of white people, was a complex geographical space for Western African Americans. As noted by historian Jennifer Dunn in her essay "Bozeman's Diversity Past and Present," Montana had very few African American citizens for much of its history, and many of the records on those people have not survived.[23] According to historian Laura Arata, African Americans never made up more than 1% of Montana's population.[24] The 1870 census listed 183 Montana residents as African American.[25] The 1880 census identified only 346 Montana residents as African American.[26] By

[23] Jennifer Dunn, "Bozeman's Diversity Past and Present," Bozeman Ethnic Groups Vertical File, Gallatin History Museum Research Library, Bozeman, Montana.
[24] Laura Joanne Arata, *Race and the Wild West: Sarah Bickford, the Montana Vigilantes, and the Tourism of Decline, 1870-1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020), 78.
[25] U.S. Census Bureau, "1880 Census: Volume 1. Statistics of the Population of the United States," Table IV - Population, by Race and by States and Territories: 1880, 1870, 1860, accessed March 4, 2021, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1880/vol-01-population/1880_v1-13.pdf.
[26] U.S. Census Bureau, "1880 Census: Volume 1. Statistics of the Population of the United States," Table IV - Population, by Race and by States and Territories: 1880, 1870, 1860, accessed March 4, 2021, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1880/vol-01-population/1880_v1-13.pdf.

1890, the count had jumped to 1,490 residents,[27] and 1,523 "Negro" residents were identified in the 1900 census.[28] Since many African Americans were racially misidentified, it is possible that these numbers were higher or lower, but generally these statistics show a low population of African Americans in Montana. However, Montana was not a racially or ethnically homogenous area. Instead, it was populated by Native Americans, Chinese, Irish, and many other races and ethnicities. The experiences of Black Montanans reveal how Montana was a racial "gray area" that technically provided more opportunity and freedom to African Americans than the South while still restricting them from full citizenship.

Black Montanans were often refugees in the West seeking safety from the racialized brutality of the South. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, African Americans fled the South's sharecropping, tenant farming, and racial prejudice. Many of them journeyed to Midwest, Plains, and Far West states.[29] The American West was known as a land of freedom and plenty[30] in the late nineteenth century, and this migration increased Black populations in Montana. Inexpensive and plentiful land, military assignments, and jobs on the railroad also encouraged Black settlers to make their way to Montana.[31] According to historian Paula Giddings, Black women's main motivations for moving to the American West were to protect their families, defend their daughters from sexual exploitation by White men, and find greater

[27] U.S Census Bureau, "Montana - Race and Hispanic Origin: 1870 to 1990," Table 41, accessed March 4, 2021, https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/shpo/AfricanAmerican/CensusData/MontanaRace_HispanicOrigin1870_1990.pdf.
[28] U.S. Census Bureau, "1900 Census: Volume I. Population, Part 1," Table 17 - Negro, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian Population, Classified by Sex, By States and Territories: 1900, accessed March 4, 2021, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p10.pdf.
[29] Riley, "American Daughters," 167.
[30] Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: the History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 172.
[31] Anthony Wood, "The Erosion of the Racial Frontier: Settler Colonialism and the History of Black Montana, 1880-1930" (master's thesis, Montana State University, 2018), 27, https://scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/handle/1/14597.

economic opportunity.[32] Unfortunately, though Black women hoped to find safety in the West, they were not always met with freedom and acceptance since the ideologies of the South and West were interconnected.[33] While Black settlers were able to capitalize on economic and social opportunity, they still experienced racial prejudice and discrimination.

Racism existed in the American West as it did in the rest of the United States. Most Western racial prejudice was directed toward Asian immigrants, particularly the Chinese, but African Americans still experienced intolerance. African American communities across the West struggled to gain civil rights legislation, and "black laws" restricted African Americans from settling or even voting in many areas.[34] Racism was codified in the legal system and occasionally practiced in education and housing. In 1872, the Montana legislature passed a law that permitted the segregation of Montana schools,[35] though educators abandoned separate schools by the 1890s.[36] The small number of Black students in the state meant that segregation was simply not financially viable, though educational racism persisted. Some cities, especially those with higher numbers of Black citizens like Butte and Helena, clearly demarcated housing for Black and white populations.[37]

Typically, though, racial prejudice was more subtle and varied from Montana city to city. Some cities, like Butte, spoke overtly about the racial makeup of their population, while

[32] Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 71.
[33] Tiya Miles, "The Long Arm of the South?," *Western Historical Quarterly* 43 (Autumn 2012): 275.
[34] Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830-1970* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 196.
[35] Laws, Memorials, and Resolutions of the Territory of Montana Passed at the Seventh Session of the Legislative Assembly, 1871-1873, Montana Territorial Legislative Assembly Records, Montana Historical Society, Helena.
[36] Loralee Davenport and Thos. W. Eva, "A Journey Towards Sovereignty and Security: The African American Community of Butte, MT from 1885 to 1995," June 2001, 7, Ethnic Groups/Blacks File, VF1049, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.
[37] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 113.

others, like Virginia City, were silent.[38] Often, racism in Montana consisted of acts like racial caricature and stereotyping, described by W.E.B. DuBois as "those petty little meannesses," and infrequently resulted in acts of violence.[39] At best, the norm was racial ambivalence, and as historian Laura J. Arata puts it, "ambivalence is not true acceptance."[40]

Subtle social racial prejudice fueled some of the most painful experiences for many Black Montanans. White Westerners refused to serve Black Westerners at businesses, snubbed them at social events and parties, and insulted them on the basis of their skin color. When Black Westerners proved negative stereotypes wrong, white communities scrambled to qualify these individuals as exceptions to the rule. One example is Samuel F. Lewis, a barber, performer and musician whose estate was valued at $25,000 when he died in 1896 (roughly $720 million in 2021).[41]

African Americans were infrequently identified by their race in newspapers. When they were, it was within the context of a death, interaction with other ethnic groups, or improper behavior.[42] Race was often unacknowledged if the person in question was a well-respected or eminent citizen. While Lewis was a respected member of the Bozeman, Montana community, this respect was tempered by his status as a mixed-race person. His obituary said, "Although he was generally known as 'the colored barber' Sam Lewis was very much of a white man. He was white in his entire make up-physically, socially, intellectually, morally-and the best citizens of

[38] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 59.
[39] William Lang, "The Nearly Forgotten Blacks on Last Chance Gulch, 1900-1912," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (April 1979), 51.
[40] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 59.
[41] B. Derek Strahn, "Samuel Lewis House," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1998), Section 8.
[42] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 81.

Bozeman were his firm friends and constant patrons."[43] Clearly, Bozeman struggled to attribute positive characteristics to people of color, even if they were generally respected and wealthy.

Another type of informal racial prejudice was performances of racial stereotypes. Social clubs often held racist events. For instance, minstrel shows were a common feature of the American Western landscape. In 1896, the Virginia City chapter of the Ladies of the Maccabees hosted a minstrel show titled "One of the Big Events of the Year" where white Virginia City residents put on blackface to imitate racial stereotypes and perform "coon songs."[44] Minstrelsy was a way to mock the alleged habits and behavior of African Americans to neutralize the threat of racial equality and African American citizenship.[45] Coon songs caricatured African Americans as rural buffoons concerned only with gambling, drinking, and sex, thereby supporting slavery-based stereotypes of African Americans as lazy, selfish, and sexually promiscuous (like the Jezebel stereotype).[46] Grand masquerade balls each year also included costumes that depicted racial caricatures, such as a "colored gentleman" in 1896,[47] a Topsy (a slave child from the popular play Uncle Tom's Cabin) and a "negro dude" in 1900,[48] and a "Darky Sambo" in 1904.[49] Blackface was performed across Montana as a means to fortify racial social boundaries.[50] These costumes propped up African American racial stereotyping and revealed that white supremacy was alive and well in the West.

[43] "Biography of 'the Bozeman Barber: Sam W. Lewis- His remarkable Personal History-Life and Death of a Colored Pioneer whose Friends were Legion," *Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Montana), April 6, 1896.
[44] *The Madisonian* (Virginia City, Montana), March 21, 1896.
[45] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 76.
[46] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 141.
[47] *The Madisonian*, February 29, 1896.
[48] *The Madisonian*, February 15, 1900.
[49] *The Madisonian*, February 18, 1904.
[50] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 78.

More violent forms of racial prejudice, often linked to gender, also occurred in the West. Violent acts like lynching, beatings, and sexual assault served as ways to reinforce the new social castes created after Reconstruction. White people sought out ways to prove that, though slavery had ended, they still had social and physical power over Black people. Racial violence was a means of not only physically destroying property and human life but also constructing a social narrative of white supremacy. Sexualized racial violence was perpetrated against Black women to terrify Black communities during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. White Montanans sought to exclude African Americans from their communities through racial violence.[51] For example, in Glendive, Montana in 1893, John Orr, a white man, married Emma Wall, a black woman. A mob of white residents surrounded the couple, stripped off their clothes, and painted John black using lampblack and Emma white using alabastine. The mob gave the couple 24 hours to leave town.[52] In this case, Montanans used violent disapproval of interracial marriage to signify intolerance of African Americans. Glendive residents violently rejected Orr and Wall to physically separate Black residents and their associates from White residents. This assault on a Black woman's body to police interracial interactions reveals that the fear of miscegenation and race mixing was an important aspect of racial violence in Montana. Miscegenation will be discussed later in this paper when dealing with issues of Victorian purity.

Sarah Gammon Bickford, Mattie Bost Castner, and Mary Fields

[51] Wood, "The Erosion of the Racial Frontier," 18.
[52] Garceau-Hagen, "Finding Mary Fields," 136.

Sarah Gammon Bickford, Mattie Bost Castner, and Mary Fields are three case studies in how Victorian womanhood, respectability politics, and race intersected in late nineteenth-century Montana. Sarah Gammon was born into slavery in the mid-1850s in Tennessee. After the Civil War, she lived with her aunt and worked briefly in Tennessee before traveling to Montana in 1870. Sarah worked at the Madison Hotel and married miner John Brown. The couple had three children, all of whom died in childhood. By 1880, Sarah had opened the New City Bakery and Restaurant and begun running a boardinghouse.[53] She divorced John in 1880 based on marital abuse. Stephen Bickford, an affluent white miner and farmer from Maine, began courting Sarah soon thereafter. The historical record indicates that the two were "genuine in their affections,"[54] and they married on October 10, 1883. Stephen purchased a two-thirds share of the Virginia Water Company in 1888. Sarah managed the company's books for several years while still operating other business endeavors, including a bakery, truck farm, and orchard. By 1900, Bickford, her children, and another resident named Jack Taylor were the only remaining African Americans in Virginia City.[55] In 1900, Sarah bought out the final share of the company and operated it on her own after her husband's death. Additionally, Sarah purchased and maintained several historic buildings in Virginia City, including the Hangman's Building.[56] Sarah transformed the Hangman's Building into a flourishing tourist location that she

[53] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 85.
[54] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 110.
[55] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 134.
[56] Mabel Bickford Jenkins, "A Black Woman on the Montana Frontier," in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000,* ed. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003): 143.

managed until her death in 1931.[57] Sarah is remembered as Virginia City's "first career woman"[58] or "The Water Queen."[59]

Mattie Bost (possibly Bell) was born into slavery in the late 1840s or early 1850s in North Carolina. Following Emancipation, she moved to St. Louis to work as a hotel maid and nanny for the white Sire children. In 1876, Mattie accompanied the Sire children to Fort Benton, where she worked as a laundress at the Overland Hotel[60] and eventually owned and operated her own laundry.[61] In 1879, she married John K. Castner, a wealthy white miner from Pennsylvania. The two built the first log cabin in Fort Benton, which evolved into the stage stop for the Great Falls-Lewiston stagecoach line. Mattie transformed the cabin into a successful hotel and restaurant that gained a reputation for delicious cooking and warm hospitality.[62] Mattie also stocked and maintained her ranch in the Highwood Mountains while John owned and operated the first commercial coal mine in Montana.[63] She also occasionally worked in the mines alongside John's laborers.[64] By her death on April 2, 1920, Mattie was the largest single landowner in Belt[65] and had the nickname "Mother of Belt."[66]

[57] "Finding Sarah Bickford," Bill Peterson and Orlan Svingen, Ford Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, accessed April 20, 2021, https://virginiacitymt.com/Preservation/Sarah-Bickford.
[58] Jenkins, "A Black Woman on the Montana Frontier," 142.
[59] Kelly Larson, "'The Water Queen'," *The Madisonian* (Virginia City, Montana), March 18, 2020.
[60] Miles, "The Long Arm of the South?", 275.
[61] Miles, "The Long Arm of the South?", 277.
[62] Ethel Castner Kennedy and Eva Lesell Stober, *Belt Valley History, 1877-1979* (Great Falls: Advanced Litho, 1979), 21.
[63] Peggy Riley, "Women of the Great Falls African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1870-1910," in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000,* eds. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 129.
[64] Miles, "The Long Arm of the South?," 275.
[65] Tom Stout, ed., *Montana Its Story and Biography: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial Montana and Three Decades of Statehood, Volume III* (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1921), 725.
[66] Biography, "Mattie Bost Bell Castner 1848-1920: The Mother of Belt," 1992, Mattie Castner Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

Mary Fields was born into slavery in the early 1830s in West Virginia. After Emancipation, she worked on steamboats on the Mississippi River. Mary eventually took up a position at the Ursuline Convent of the Sacred Heart in Toledo, Ohio. After several years at the convent, Mary journeyed to Saint Peter's Mission near Cascade, Montana. She was dismissed from the mission for unladylike language and behavior, including an incident where she and another staff member pointed guns at each other before both backed down. Mary then settled in Cascade and tried to open several eateries. Though her restaurant businesses failed, she succeeded in establishing a laundry shop. In 1895, while in her sixties, Mary applied for and received a contract from the United States Post Office Department as a star route carrier. She spent eight years delivering the mail in Montana before her contract concluded. Mary ran another laundry shop and eatery, babysat local children, and performed as the mascot for the local baseball team until her death in 1914.[67] Mary was called "Stagecoach Mary," "Black Mary," "Colored Mary," or "Nigger Mary."

Pillar One: Piety

The full version of this paper covers purity, submissiveness, and domesticity in more detail. The abbreviated version published in this journal focuses on purity and submissiveness as the key aspects of Victorian womanhood when it came to issues of race. The first pillar of true womanhood, piety, was an important facet of American femininity. However, since the topic of African American piety in the American West has been well-researched, it will not be explained in this paper beyond a brief summary. Religion was an important aspect of the

[67] Shelby Amspacher, "Stagecoach Mary Fields," Stagecoach Mary Fields | National Postal Museum (Smithsonian National Postal Museum, April 1, 2020), https://postalmuseum.si.edu/stagecoach-mary-fields.

African American community in Montana. Two churches, the Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal in Great Falls[68] and the St. James African Methodist Episcopal in Helena,[69] were particularly significant in African American history. Churches functioned as centers of political activism and community development. They were often the focal points of the fight for racial equality and justice as well as spaces where African Americans could join together in communal solidarity against widespread racism.[70] Historian Anthony Wood explains that many community groups, including fraternal organizations, benevolent societies, and women's clubs, grew out of these churches.[71] Many Black women in the American West easily fit into the pillar of piety, especially since the church was not only a religious institution but also a space for socializing, racial solidarity, political activism, community development, and racial uplift. Black women's participation in Sunday school and church groups was evidence of their adherence to the ideal of piety.[72]

Pillar Two: Domesticity

Western women's roles as domestic workers formed tension between expectations of femininity and the reality of surviving on the Western frontier. Since the American West was a demanding and ever-changing environment in which to construct a home and family, women

[68] Karen Ogden, "Union Bethel Lies at Heart of Great Fall's [sic] Black Community," *Great Falls Tribune*, February 4, 2007.
[69] Anthony Wood, "After the West Was Won: African American Buffalo Soldiers Invigorated the Helena Community in Early Twentieth-Century Montana," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* vol. 66, no. 3 (Autumn 2016): 38.
[70] Barbara Behan, "Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church National Register Nomination Form," Montana State Historic Preservation Office, 2003. Sec. 8, Page 2.
[71] Anthony Wood, "Montana's African American Heritage Resources," African American Churches of Montana, accessed March 27, 2021, https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/AfricanAmericans/History/AfricanAmericanChurches.
[72] Susan Bragg, "'Anxious Foot Soldiers': Sacramento's Black Women and Education in Nineteenth-Century California" in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000,* eds. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 106.

struggled to meet standards of domesticity.[73] Within the prevailing nineteenth-century viewpoint, which left out the experiences of indigenous women and women of color, white female settlers functioned as “civilizers” of the American West.[74] Despite the difficulty of achieving domestic ideals and the differences between Eastern and Western domesticity, white women often had the opportunity to limit their labor to the domestic sphere, as was appropriate for “true women.” When white women worked in the public sphere, they often pursued jobs like schoolteaching because it “offered more respectability.”[75] On the other hand, Black women often labored outside of the home, particularly if they were unmarried. Their labor was often barely socially acceptable compared to white women’s labor.[76]

Despite Black women’s attempts to retire to the home and serve as housewives, it was clear by the 1800s that the Victorian dream of remaining within the home was impossible for many Black women. Black families in the late 1800s struggled with financial insecurity due to generational poverty from slavery and low wages for African Americans, and many African American men in the West made less money than white men. Many Black women had to work outside the home to supplement their husbands’ income.[77]

Urban middle-class Black women strove for work considered to be “genteel,” such as sewing and school teaching, though it was difficult to obtain employment.[78] Often, racial

[73] Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 42.
[74] Riley, *The Female Frontier*, 54.
[75] Suzanne H Schrems, "Teaching School on the Western Frontier: Acceptable Occupation for Nineteenth Century Women," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 1987), 56, accessed February 22, 2021, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4519070.
[76] Schrems, “Teaching School on the Western Frontier,” 56.
[77] Glenda Riley, “American Daughters: Black Women in the West,” in *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, eds. Roger D. Hardaway and Monroe Lee Billington (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1998), 160.
[78] Riley, “American Daughters,” 143.

prejudice in the West limited opportunity for African Americans through segregation policies, exclusion from land buying, lack of civil rights, and attacks on black workers. Consequently, with fewer jobs available to them, Black female settlers often worked in labor-intensive, low-paying domestic or agricultural jobs.[79] According to historian Glenda Riley, white employers saw Black women's employment in servant roles as "logical and appropriate derivations of the roles black women had fulfilled as slaves."[80] This perception of Black women in white society fits into the Mammy stereotype. While they often prioritized maintaining their homes and families over regular jobs in the public sphere, many rural Black women worked irregularly out of the house. They marketed and sold vegetables, eggs, and dairy from their family farms, took in laundry, and provided domestic service for whites.[81] Within the home, rural Black women took on the responsibilities of childcare, meal production and preparation, and domestic chores.[82]

Cultural standards of femininity also constrained the places where African American women worked, and Black women protected themselves from assumptions of immorality by working traditionally feminine jobs.[83] Often, jobs performed by free Black women in the American West corresponded to the work that they did as enslaved people, including tasks like cooking, laundry, and cleaning. Many African American women in the West owned, operated, or worked at restaurants and boardinghouses.[84] During the first decade and a half of Sarah Gammon Bickford's life, she was a slave to John Blair III, a prominent citizen of Jonesboro,

[79] Riley, "American Daughters," 163.
[80] Riley, "American Daughters," 169.
[81] Riley, "American Daughters," 89-90.
[82] Riley, "American Daughters," 105.
[83] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 82.
[84] Arata, *Race and the Wild West,* 82.

Tennessee.[85] Sarah probably worked alongside her mother and performed domestic labor like cooking and washing.[86] Following Emancipation, Sarah spent much of her life working in domestic and food service. For instance, as a young woman in 1870, she worked as a "washer" in the home of a Confederate lawyer and former Congressman named John Crozier.[87] She then took a job as a nanny accompanying Major John Murphy and his foster children on their journey to Montana. In Virginia City, Bickford worked as a domestic servant at the Madison House Hotel in the 1870s,[88] then operated the New City Bakery in the early 1880s. Following her marriage to Stephen Bickford in 1883, Bickford kept the books for the couple's business, the Virginia City Water Company. Sarah also raised cows, chickens, a plethora of fruits and vegetables, and ducks, which she sold to the town's Chinese residents.[89] After Stephen's death, Sarah bought out the last share of the Water Company and became the first African American woman to own a public utility in Montana. While Sarah's work in domestic and food service fit with the social expectation that Victorian women should be proficient in household management, the public nature of her work stepped outside the bounds of domesticity. Additionally, her labor could be perceived as fitting into the Mammy stereotype, which held that African American women were naturally skilled in domestic and food service and that their proper place was serving their white communities. However, the Virginia City Water Company business records provide evidence that Sarah's community respected her as a businesswoman,

[85] "Finding Sarah Bickford,"Peterson and Svingen, https://virginiacitymt.com/Preservation/Sarah-Bickford.
[86] Arata, *Race and the Wild West,* 33.
[87] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 41.
[88] "Finding Sarah Bickford,"Peterson and Svingen, https://virginiacitymt.com/Preservation/Sarah-Bickford.
[89] Arata, *Race and the Wild West,* 135.

indicating that although she transgressed the formal boundaries of domesticity, she still gained acceptance through her work.[90]

Likewise, Mattie Bost's labor was concentrated in childcare, hospitality, and food service. Following her emancipation from slavery, Mattie worked in St. Louis as a domestic servant, nanny, and hotel maid. In 1876, Mattie traveled to Fort Benton while accompanying two small children as a caregiver. In Fort Benton, Bost established a successful laundry business where she often hired other African Americans.[91] After marrying John Castner in 1879, Mattie and her husband constructed the Castner Hotel. Mattie managed the hotel and cooked many of the meals served.[92] She was also a successful rancher who owned 640 acres in the Highwood Mountains (which eventually sold for $17,000 in 1918) and maintained a garden at her home in Belt, Montana.[93]

Like Sarah, some facets of Mattie's work beyond the home were considered culturally appropriate because she labored in traditionally domestic, feminine fields, but some of her work transgressed domestic boundaries. As a hotel manager and businesswoman, Mattie carried out publicly involved labor in the male gender sphere. As a cook and homemaker, she completed private domestic work in the female sphere. Both Sarah and Mattie walked the line between public and private spheres and gained limited respect for their adherence to feminine ideals. Like Sarah, Mattie's work could be seen as corresponding to the Mammy stereotype. It is

[90] Business records, Virginia City Water Company Records, 1902-1931, Montana Historical Society, Helena.
[91] "The John Castner Story," *Belt Valley Times*, 1985, Mattie Castner Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena.
[92] Mary Pickett, "Successful Ex-Slave Key in Belt's Founding, Growth," *Billings Gazette*, February 8, 2009, https://billingsgazette.com/news/features/magazine/successful-ex-slave-key-in-belts-founding-growth/article_874e1919-8ca4-50e6-bbc7-dbad105562dc.html.
[93] Stout, *Montana Its Story and Biography*, 725.

clear from the historical record that the Belt community and other historians perceived her as a motherly figure. Her biography says she was a "hardworking woman; there was no task too great for her to undertake."[94] Her community best remembered her as a Mammy figure, or happy, loyal servant who loved hard work.[95]

For most of her life, Mary Fields adhered to traditional expectations of female labor. As a young woman, she worked in the Ursuline Convent of the Sacred Heart in Toledo, Ohio. At the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Mary washed laundry, cooked, gardened, and purchased supplies. When she traveled west to Montana, she worked for Saint Peter's Mission near Cascade. There, she washed laundry, managed supplies, and performed maintenance and repair work. After leaving the convent, Mary moved to Cascade, Montana and attempted to establish several eateries. She set up a laundry shop and worked there for several years. After she retired from her position with the postal service, Mary returned to domestic and food service. She started another laundry business, opened an eatery, babysat local children, and worked as a janitress at the Cascade school.[96]All of these positions were in female-dominated fields that fit with the Mammy stereotype.

However, Mary also defied convention and worked in an almost exclusively male sphere. In 1895, Mary obtained a contract from the postal service as a star route carrier. She was the second woman and first African American woman to hold the job. Fields often wore trousers under her skirt and apron to keep warm. She carried a rifle and a revolver, protected

[94] Biography, Great Falls Yesterday, 1939, Mattie Castner Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena.
[95] "Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans," https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans.
[96] Amspacher, "Stagecoach Mary Fields," https://postalmuseum.si.edu/stagecoach-mary-fields.

the mail from thieves and wild animals, and traveled through the rough terrain and brutal weather of the Montana wilds. Though much of Mary's labor was concentrated in traditionally feminine fields like food service and childcare, the legend of her life centers on her masculine labor. Though she was only a star route carrier for eight years, it is the best-remembered part of her life. Her masculine style of dress and behavior transgressed the boundaries of traditional womanhood and defined public memories of "Stagecoach Mary." Mary effectively resisted gender norms and stereotyping, but white residents defused this resistance to the gender and racial hierarchy by portraying her as a masculine figure.[97]

Pillars Three and Four: Purity and Submissiveness

Another pillar of womanhood, purity, proved especially difficult for African American women in the West since they were often heavily sexualized as promiscuous Jezebels. Black women in the 1880s and 1890s collectively aimed to defend their moral integrity as women, making purity a communal issue. Black women campaigned for recognition of the unique issues they faced, especially the threat of sexual exploitation by White men, and respect for their status as "true women." One prominent example of Black activism on the point of true womanhood is the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, where prominent Black women spoke on problems like sexual exploitation and Black women's ability to protect their families.[98] In contrast to white women, who were put on a pedestal by much of society and treated with the utmost politeness, Black women were vulnerable to casual verbal and physical assault everywhere they went. Historian Lynne Olson posits that this flagrant disrespect of Black

[97] Garceau-Hagen, "Finding Mary Fields," 143.
[98] Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 87.

women stemmed from stereotypes rooted in slavery that declared Black women "sexual wantons who led men astray."[99] White men believed they had free sexual access to Black women's bodies, which made Black women vulnerable to sexual exploitation.[100] These dangers prompted many Black women to move to the American West, but they couldn't escape the risk of sexualized violence, as seen in the example of Emma Wall.

Issues of individual purity deeply affected the lives of Black women, particularly when it came to marriage and divorce. The states and territories of the American West were still divided on the issue of interracial marriage in the late nineteenth century.[101] The first and second legislatures of Montana dismissed laws in 1864 and 1866 that would have criminalized interracial marriage and cohabitation.[102] This decision was made primarily because many white men in Montana were married to Native women in the late 1800s. Despite the legality of interracial marriage, newspaper coverage revealed that white Montanans expressed insecurity about the potential for miscegenation, or interracial reproduction.[103]

As Montana became more demographically stable, fears about appropriate interracial interactions made their way into the state government. In 1909, a miscegenation law that prevented white people from marrying Black, Chinese, and Japanese people and penalized people who performed interracial marriages passed the legislature.[104] Wood argues that this

[99] Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 35.
[100] Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 35.
[101] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 62.
[102] "House Bill 27," MT Territorial Assembly Records, 2nd: 1866, Montana Historical Society, Helena.
[103] Wood, "The Erosion of the Racial Frontier," 136.
[104] "1909 Senate Bill 34," MT Governors' Records, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

law was part of a larger effort to whiten the West through excluding Black Westerners from social practices like marriage and community building.[105]

It also functioned as part of white Montanans' attempts to solidify racial caste systems and assert that white people were socially superior to African Americans. Wood also argues that colonial power rests on sex, whether it is the prohibition of interracial sex or the complexities created by mixed-race people.[106] Sexual exploitation of Black women was a means of enforcing white superiority, as were anti-miscegenation laws that prevented interracial sex. Refusing to allow interracial marriage hearkens back to the illegitimacy of slave marriages and white masters' control of Black enslaved people. The anti-miscegenation law was not repealed until 1953, which demonstrates continued fear of interracial unions and racial equality in Montana well into the twentieth century.[107]

Divorce cases were rare in Eastern America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, the West experienced a surge in divorces during this period, particularly on the grounds of abuse or abandonment.[108] Though divorce grew more common, divorcées were still stigmatized in some communities. While some Montanans seemed unconcerned by the high divorce rate, many others expressed discomfort at the breakdown of traditional marriage. For instance, in 1876, the editor of *The Madisonian*, a Democratic newspaper in Virginia City, worried that the rising number of divorces in Montana would make "men think that the Montana air was too light, and feminine fidelity too uncertain for them to be away from home

[105] Wood, "The Erosion of the Racial Frontier," 153.
[106] Wood, "The Erosion of the Racial Frontier," 1829.
[107] "House Bill 8," MT Legislative Assembly Records, 33rd: 1953, Montana Historical Society, Helena.
[108] Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier* (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 1990), 71.

long at a time."[109] The low ratio of women to men in the American West most likely exacerbated these anxieties. Concerns that there were not enough women in the American West to form stable homes and properly "civilize" the frontier worsened fears about marriage breakdowns.

African American women had a complex relationship with traditional marriage and submissiveness, another pillar of Victorian womanhood, within it. During slavery, Black families were under constant threat. Not only were African American slave marriages not legally recognized, but families could be separated through sale at any time. Following Emancipation, pressure increased on Black families to create stable family structures. According to historian Mary Frances Berry, freedmen wanted their wives to stay at home after Reconstruction to emulate White nuclear family patterns.[110] Under slavery, male slaves were often unable to fill the role of protector, since any defense of their sisters, mothers, or wives could be met with physical violence. After Emancipation, freedmen hoped to prove that they could serve as the protectors and breadwinners of their families and obtain freedom from the control of white people.[111] [112] Many Black women defined marriage as a partnership and strove to bond with their husbands while still asserting their own freedom. Ida B. Wells's struggle to balance "her desire for male companionship and attention and her reluctance to get married and give up her

[109] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 67.
[110] Mary Frances Berry, *My Face is Black is True* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 108.
[111] Élise Vallier, "African American Womanhood: A Study of Women's Life Writings (1861-1910s)," *Transatlantica*, no. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/10220#quotation.
[112] Anya Jabour, "'Freedom of Matrimony': Celebrating Love in an Era of Emancipation," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, March 7, 2017), http://www.pbs.org/mercy-street/blogs/mercy-street-revealed/freedom-of-matrimony-celebrating-love-in-an-era-of-emancipation/.

freedom" is a particularly relevant example of Black women's attempts to adhere to a dominant cultural goal of stable marriage while preserving their individual autonomies.[113]

Sarah Gammon Bickford married her first husband, John Brown, in 1872, a few years after moving to Virginia City. The marriage ended in divorce in 1880 after John physically abused Sarah and threatened her life.[114] Sarah hid the facts of her divorce and abusive marriage from her children by claiming that her first husband had died. Sarah's daughter Mabel Bickford Jenkins believed that her mother's husband's name was William and that he died in 1877,[115] a narrative disproven by Sarah's divorce testimony.[116] So why did Sarah lie to her children? Although Sarah divorced Brown to protect her freedom and safety, she may have also felt shame over the breakdown of her marriage and considered it a point of failure in her quest for respectability.[117] Arata posits that Bickford's marriage to Brown would not have improved her standing within the community. She claims that Bickford's abusive marriage would have been a source of embarrassment and that her eventual divorce was a mark of inability to live up to the ideal of Victorian domesticity. The cult of true womanhood and ideals of domesticity placed a high value on marriage and a successful home, and abuse and divorce did not dovetail with these goals.[118]

Sarah's second marriage to Stephen Bickford elicited no comment from the local newspaper. *The Madisonian*'s silence indicates that the local press may have tried to cover up news of the union. However, several other newspapers in Montana discussed the marriage,

[113] Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 44.
[114] *The Madisonian*, May 29, 1880.
[115] Jenkins, "A Black Woman on the Montana Frontier," 142.
[116] "Finding Sarah Bickford," Peterson and Svingen, https://virginiacitymt.com/Preservation/Sarah-Bickford.
[117] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 67.
[118] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 207.

especially the fact that Stephen was both white and twenty years older than Sarah. Newspapers across the state ran a poem that objectified Sarah as a sexual commodity, claiming that Stephen "struck color at last" when he married Sarah.[119] The *Butte Semi-Weekly Miner* published a "special correspondence" signed by X that commented on the rarity of interracial marriages in the Montana territory and sarcastically remarked that "it is to be hoped that the Faber shovers of other towns will not take advantage of occurrence and discard the sobriquet of the 'Social City' when alluding to Virginia City and replace it with the more alliterative but less acceptable one of the 'Miscengenate Metropolis.'"[120] While the Bickfords were not physically attacked for their interracial marriage, they certainly experienced social disapproval and prejudice. Publicity across the state and possible gossip in Virginia City prompted the couple to move to a cabin near Granite Gulch, several miles outside of town. The two had their first child eight months after the wedding, which likely only provided more grist for the rumor mill.[121] Because of Sarah's race and multiple marriages, her community did not see her as a pure woman by the standards of Victorian womanhood.

Oddly, according to Wood, there was little negative attention surrounding Mattie Bost and John Caster's marriage.[122] Mattie married John, an eminent and well-respected white member of the Butte community, in 1879. Together, the couple ran the Castner Hotel and purchased wide swaths of land in the Belt area. They were generally accepted by their community. Though Sarah and Stephen experienced social disapproval, Sarah likely also

[119] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 115.
[120] X, "Virginia City Letter," *Butte Daily Miner*, October 18, 1883.
[121] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 111.
[122] Wood, "The Erosion of the Racial Frontier," 137.

benefited from her marriage. Both John Castner and Stephen Bickford were already financially prosperous and respected by their communities before they married Sarah and Mattie. Mattie and Sarah's marriages to distinguished white men may have provided them with "insulation against racism and social ostracism,"[123] helped them avoid outright racial violence in Montana, and even allowed them to gain respect.

Mary Fields never married, which contributed to the masculinized mythos of her life. There is no evidence that she was sexualized as a Jezebel figure, even as a young woman. Fields spent much of her young life in convents, and her association with nuns should have meant that she fit into the pillars of purity and piety. However, she was remembered as "not quite respectable"[124] because of her hot temper, sharp tongue, and unladylike behavior. It is unclear why she left the Ursuline Convent of the Sacred Heart in Toledo, but a bishop removed Mary from Saint Peter's mission for "crass behavior, unruly temper, and penchant for drinking and smoking in saloons with men."[125] After leaving the mission, Mary continued to ignore Victorian purity standards. She worked and socialized in the public sphere, the realm of men. While running her businesses in Cascade, Mary frequently smoked and drank in the local saloon with white men.[126] As a star route mail carrier, Mary interacted almost exclusively with men and engaged in many "bad habits" like swearing and fighting[127] that also transgressed the boundaries of Victorian purity. Perhaps it was her masculine attitude that protected her from

[123] Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 84.
[124] "Nuns' Servant Brawled Her Way Into Local Legend," *Great Falls Tribune*, November 19, 1995.
[125] Amspacher, "Stagecoach Mary Fields," https://postalmuseum.si.edu/stagecoach-mary-fields.
[126] Jerome C. Krause, "Mary Fields," n.d., Mary Fields Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena.
[127] Newspaper article, "'Nigger Mary' Noted Carrier," 5 June 1939, Mary Fields Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

being sexualized. People considered Mary too rough and tough to even be a woman, let alone a pure and proper lady.

Public Recognition and Historic Remembrance: Mythologization and Stereotyping

Mattie, Mary, and Sarah were publicly recognized in their obituaries. When Mary Fields died in 1914, her body was laid out in the Cascade opera house, where a large crowd of friends and acquaintances gathered. The *Great Falls Tribune* said the funeral was "one of the largest ever held in Cascade"[128] and called Mary a "lady of color."[129] The *Helena Independent* printed that Sarah was a "prominent pioneer woman" and "active and fearless" in her obituary on July 21, 1931.[130] Other obituaries hail Sarah as an enterprising pioneer and commercial success,[131] although none refer to her or her children as "ladies" as they refer to white women in the society pages. Upon Mattie's death, The *Great Falls Tribune* reported that the "Mother of Belt"[132] was "one of the best-known residents of the county,"[133] and had a well-attended funeral. Additionally, the *Great Falls Tribune* covered the division of Mattie's extensive estate following her death, noting that a considerable amount was left to charity.[134]

Montana historians have covered all three of these women to some extent. Sarah and Mattie were both also honored in the Montana Historical Society's Gallery of Outstanding Montanans, which honors Montana citizens who embodied the spirit of the Treasure State and made substantial contributions to their fields. The Hall of Fame titles Mattie a "booster of

[128] "Great Crowd at Fields Funeral," *Great Falls Tribune*, December 9, 1914.
[129] "Mary Fields Celebrates Her 83rd Birthday at Her Home in Cascade," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 3, 1913.
[130] "Sarah Bickford" (obituary), *Helena Independent*, July 21, 1931.
[131] "Pioneer Dead," *Havre Daily News*, July 20, 1931 and "Bickford Rites," *Montana Standard* (Butte), July 25, 1931.
[132] "'Mother of Belt' is Dead; Was Born a Slave in the South," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 3, 1920.
[133] "Mrs. Castner Funeral Today," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 5, 1920.
[134] "Colored Woman Pioneer Leaves $10,000 to Reward a Friend," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 7, 1920.

community spirit,"[135] putting her into the role of a motherly figure tending to the white community of Belt. Sarah is honored as "Virginia City's first career woman," highlighting her work with the Virginia City Water Company. However, all of these women were excluded from the cult of true womanhood because of their skin color. While their stories are recorded in the historical narrative, many narratives of their lives are one-dimensional and rely on stereotypes like the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the Strong Black Woman.

Mary Fields, Mattie Castner, and Sarah Bickford exemplify how Black Western women grappled with the ideals of Victorian womanhood. Upper-class white women strove to adhere to the standards of piety, domesticity, purity, and submissiveness. Though Black families hoped to create stable family structures after Emancipation, low wages associated with Black men's labor in the American West meant that Black women had to work outside of the home. Mary, Mattie, and Sarah's labor traditionally corresponded to the tasks of the female private sphere and revolved around domestic service because of feminine ideals and roles forced upon Black women in slavery and after Emancipation. Black women also carried the burden of constructing and maintaining families and homes in new and challenging environments. Black women were often ineligible for the pillar of domesticity since they worked in both the public and private spheres. Black women also struggled to adhere to the tenet of purity because of long-held beliefs about Black women's sexuality rooted in slavery. The persistent stereotype of Black women as Jezebels left them socially and physically vulnerable to sexual exploitation by white men. While Sarah's marriage to Stephen protected her physically, the social prejudice that surrounded divorce affected perceptions of her as a lady. Mattie's marriage to an eminent

[135] Miles, "The Long Arm of the South?," 276.

white man and conformation to traditional feminine expectations may have been the only reasons why she was not framed as a Jezebel. Mary escaped sexualization only by taking on a masculine persona. The moral guardian and public reform aspects of purity also proved to be challenges for Black women, who were segregated from white community spaces. Despite the perceived failures of Black women to live up to Victorian ideals, African American communities celebrated Black women and hailed their accomplishments in public forums. Black newspapers like *The Colored Citizen* and *The New Age* confirmed that Black women were "true women" despite how white society viewed them. The stereotypes of the Jezebel and the Mammy still haunted the daily experiences of Mary, Mattie, and Sarah and changed the way that white society viewed them. Despite their uniqueness and small measures of fame achieved during their lifetimes, historic recognition of Mary, Mattie, and Sarah remains often one-dimensional and stereotypical.

By studying Bickford, Castner, and Fields, we can also gain an understanding of how the past affects the modern daily experiences of Black women. Racism and sexism have not died, and the toxic combination of the two still impacts on Black women's lives. The end of the nineteenth century, including the growth of modernism and questioning of Victorian values, signaled a transition from ideals of Victorian womanhood to the concept of the "New Woman." The New Woman was far more active in the public sphere, challenged the constraints of Victorian gender roles, and even exercised her sexuality. The Victorian hierarchy of race also began to break down in the early 1900s.[136] The rise of the "New Woman'' coincided with a

[136] Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 192-198.

change in the racial demographics of Montana. The economic depression of the 1910s and 1920s in Montana combined with a rise in Western racism and Northwestern factory jobs prompted an exodus of African Americans from Montana.[137]

However, the stereotyping, social prejudice, economic concerns, and blatant racism that plagued early Black settlers' lives did not come to a close at the turn of the century. Sexual stereotyping and exploitation of Black women continued. The racial pay gap that prompted Black women to work outside the home did not close. Acts of racial violence progressed in the early twentieth century. Even in the twenty-first century, the struggle for civil rights is not over, and comprehending the long roots of Black oppression can help us understand why the task of creating a better, more equitable world is a long struggle.

[137] Wood, "After the West Was Won," 47.

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