

## **BLACK AMERICAN WEST MUSEUM & HERITAGE CENTER: FORMER HOME OF PROMINENT FIVE POINTS RESIDENT NOW SERVES AS MUSEUM**

### **Are you aware of the contributions of African Americans to Denver's early history?**

The Black American West Museum in and of itself is not a single historical place, but a collection of artifacts, photographs and stories of Black Americans who helped settle the west. The museum is housed in the former home of Dr. Justina Ford, Colorado's first Black woman doctor. The museum is located in Denver's Five Points neighborhood. Five Points is unique among Denver's neighborhoods because of the rich contributions of its diverse community, particularly African Americans (Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History).

### **Structure**

In 1983, when community leaders learned that a developer planned to raze the Dr. Justina Ford House, they requested a delay to allow them to find funds and a location for its removal. The developer complied and Historic Denver, Inc., a private nonprofit organization, gave preservation funds to move the home in 1984 to its current California Street location in Five Points. Under the supervision of a newly-formed Board of Trustees, the home was restored and opened to the public in 1988. The exhibits included Dr. Ford's examining room on the main floor, a black homesteader's room, a farming and ranching room, and a room honoring Black cowboys of the early West on the second level (Black American West Museum).

### **Museum Collection and History**

Founded in 1971 by Paul W. Stewart, the museum is dedicated to collecting, preserving and disseminating the contributions of Blacks in the Old West. While famous for telling the story of Black cowboys, the museum also tells the stories of many early Blacks who came west and worked as miners, soldiers, homesteaders, ranchers, blacksmiths, schoolteachers, lawmen, etc.

Stewart grew up in Iowa playing cowboys and Indians with his friends, who always made him play an Indian. They assured him that there were no Black cowboys and thus he had to play the role of the Indian. As an adult living in Denver, Stewart discovered this was not true and began a lifetime search for stories, photographs, clothing, memorabilia and papers to document the existence of Black cowboys in the West. Stewart's passion led him beyond cowboys and he accumulated an extensive collection related to Black Western pioneers that he wanted to share with others. In 1971, the collection served as the nucleus of a small museum that opened in the basement of Denver's Clayton College (Black American West Museum).

### **Neighborhood**

Five Points had long been home to African Americans, but it was in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Five Points became the seat of Denver's African American community. By the 1870s, African American railroad workers from Georgia had established themselves and their families on 22nd

Street, a precinct known as “Deep South.” An analysis of residential patterns during the early 1890s demonstrates that a majority of Denver’s African Americans resided within the bounds of Five Points. By the 1920s, more than 90 percent of Denver’s African Americans lived within the bounds of Five Points and the adjacent Whittier neighborhood (Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History).

#### **Dr. Justina Ford**

Justina L. Ford (1871–1952) was a medical pioneer and Denver’s first licensed African American female doctor. Ford is best known for her obstetrics and pediatric work in Denver’s Five Points Community. Patients knew Dr. Ford as “the Baby Doctor,” and it is estimated that she delivered over 7,000 babies during her fifty years as a doctor in Denver.

Justina graduated from Galesburg High School, an integrated high school, in 1890. She then attended Hering Medical School in Chicago to obtain her osteopathy training. While attending Hering, Justina met the Reverend John L. Ford, and the two were married on December 27, 1892. Justina graduated from Hering a few years later in 1899.

Dr. Ford began practicing medicine in Chicago shortly after graduation. The Fords moved to Alabama shortly after that, but the state’s unwelcoming atmosphere prompted them to move to Denver in 1902. On October 2, 1902, Justina Ford became Denver's first licensed African American female doctor under license number 3800. When Ford went to pay for her license, the examiner famously told her: “I'd feel dishonest taking a fee from you. You’ve got two strikes against you. First of all, you’re a lady, and second, you’re colored.” Dr. Ford was unable to get medical privileges to practice in any of Denver’s hospitals, since all of the medical societies turned down her application. Instead, John and Justina purchased a two-story brick house in the Five Points neighborhood so that she could practice medicine on her own (Justina Ford).

#### **References**

Denver Public Library. Five Points-Whittier Neighborhood History. Retrieved from <https://history.denverlibrary.org/five-points-whittier-neighborhood-history>.

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