

BLACK AMERICAN WEST MUSEUM & HERITAGE CENTER

3091 California Street, Denver, Colorado 80205



Year Built: 1890
Architect: Unknown

The Black American West Museum is housed in the former home of Dr. Justina Ford, Colorado's first African-American female doctor. What is now known as the Justina Ford House was originally built in 1890 on Arapahoe Street in the Curtis Park neighborhood of Denver. The house was a simple two-story rectangular box of red brick with an Italianate façade on a stone foundation. When the house was built, Germans, Irish, Jews and other European immigrant groups were settling the neighborhood, and the Ford House's first owner was a Jewish Denverite named Isaac Kohn. Kohn's son, Samuel E. Kohn, also lived in the house. In 1898, he cofounded the American Furniture Company, now known as American Furniture Warehouse, which he ran until his death in 1943.

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.

Founded in 1971 by Paul W. Stewart, the museum is dedicated to collecting, preserving and disseminating the contributions of Blacks in the Old West. 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.

Justina L. Ford (1871–1952) was a medical pioneer best known for her obstetrics and pediatric work in Denver's Five Points neighborhood. 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. Dr. Ford began practicing medicine in Chicago shortly after graduation. She moved to Alabama and then Denver where, on October 2, 1902, she became Denver's first licensed African-American female doctor under license number 3800.

References

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