

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Louis and Maybelle:

*Somewhere Out
in the West*

John W. Larson

—page 13

Winter 2011

Volume 45, Number 4

*“We Can Do Better with a Chisel or a Hammer”
Appreciating Mary Colter and Her Roots in St. Paul
Diane Trout-Oertel, page 3*



Artist Arthur F. Matthews painted the portrait of Mary Jane Elizabeth Colter seen above in about 1890, when she graduated from the California School of Design. Colter subsequently taught art for many years at Mechanic Arts High School in St. Paul and later designed eight buildings at the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona. Shown here is Hermit's Rest, located at the westernmost stop on the south rim, a building that Colter designed in 1914. The Colter portrait is reproduced courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, Flagstaff, Ariz. Photograph of Hermit's Rest courtesy of Alexander Vertikoff. Hermit's Rest copyright © Alexander Vertikoff.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 45, Number 4

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ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Sometimes Ramsey County is a jumping-off point. In this issue, Diane Trout-Oertel examines the career of Mary Colter, a St. Paul-born designer and architect who learned her craft here, taught at Mechanic Arts High School, and later moved west to design buildings and interiors for the Fred Harvey Company at the Grand Canyon. The article traces Colter’s ties with the Arts and Crafts movement and the integration of Native American traditions in her designs. On another level, John Larson portrays an evocative view of his aunt and her husband, who also “take off” for the West as proprietors of a nightclub hotel in a Montana boom town, which flourished during the construction of the Fort Peck Dam. And the use of the mail to move substantial goods became prevalent in the early twentieth century, as shown in Janice Quick’s sketch of the process of buying a tombstone from none other than Sears, Roebuck. Finally, we share a book review and some new perspectives relating to the life of Louis W. Hill Sr., as shown in Biloine Young and Eileen McCormack’s recent book, *The Dutiful Son*. Happy winter reading.

Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board

“We Can Do Better with a Chisel or a Hammer”

Appreciating Mary Colter and Her Roots in St. Paul

Diane Trout-Oertel

Like cities everywhere, St. Paul takes pride in its citizens who have made their mark in the world. St. Paul’s list of such notables is long, but it is not complete. One who is yet to be recognized is the remarkable Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter. Those few who recognize her name likely associate it with her architectural legacy at the Grand Canyon, where her iconic buildings fit into the landscape so well that they seem to have been there as long as the canyon itself. Thousands of St. Paulites have visited these amazing park buildings, which are on the National Register of Historic Places, without realizing that they are the work of someone from their hometown, a woman who was truly ahead of her time.

In recent years, belated recognition has been paid to Colter’s long career as chief designer for the Fred Harvey Company, the hospitality company that teamed up with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway to open the Southwest to tourism. However, less attention has been given to her years in St. Paul and her many accomplishments in Minnesota. Yet, the years she spent in St. Paul as a student, and later as a teacher and an artist, helped prepare Mary for her second career as an architect.¹ She first demonstrated her artistic sensibilities, intellectual curiosity, scholarly thoroughness, and astonishing industry in St. Paul. Here she developed skills that would make her a valuable asset to both the Fred Harvey Company and the Santa Fe Railway.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pa., Mary spent most of her youth and early adulthood in St. Paul, which she always considered her hometown. Her parents, William and Rebecca Crozier Colter, had originally emigrated from Ireland to join her father’s relatives who had already settled here. The Colters would move often during the following years, always returning to St. Paul. Soon after their first child Harriet was born, they moved to Pittsburgh because Rebecca wanted to be near her relatives. They established the Hats, Caps and Clothing Store near Butler

and Forty-fourth Streets with money that William had made in the furniture business. Rebecca worked as a milliner in the store for a few years prior to Mary’s birth on April 4, 1869.² Coincidentally, her birth occurred within weeks of the driving of the golden spike that signaled the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the first of five railways that opened the West for development in which Mary could later play a role.

In 1872, when Mary was three years old, the Colter family moved back to St. Paul. Four years later, they moved to Texas and then on to Colorado before resettling permanently in St. Paul in 1880.³ Now eleven, Mary was well-traveled, not only for her age, but for the times. She had seen a large part of what was then “the wild west,” which must have seemed colorful to a girl from a Midwestern city, and she had encountered a variety of less conventional cultures. Texas and Colorado were sparsely populated, relatively rough, wilderness areas, where the roles of men and women were more fluid.⁴ Her view of the world was almost certainly influenced by the natural and cultural diversity she observed in the West. Mary’s peripatetic childhood may also have encouraged the self-reliance, independence, and adventurous spirit that she later exhibited in her adult years.



Mary Colter about the time she started teaching at Mechanic Arts High School. This photo of Colter the Teacher, posing as a conventional young woman of the Victorian Age, can only be fully appreciated in the context of Colter the Architect, about whom noted Southwestern author Frank Waters wrote: “For years an incomprehensible woman in pants, she rode horseback through the Four Corners making sketches of prehistoric pueblo ruins, studying details of construction, the composition of adobes and washes. She could teach masons how to lay adobe bricks, plasterers how to mix washes, carpenters how to fit viga joints.” Photo courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park, #16950.

After their return to St. Paul, William Colter worked as a city sewer inspector and later as a city inspector. The family first resided at 57 Valley Street, where they lived for awhile before moving to 259 Carroll Avenue and later to 732 East Fifth Street.⁵ The seemingly restless Colters



One of a number of drawings made by Sioux Indians imprisoned after the Battle at Little Bighorn in 1876. Given to Mary Colter as a child, these drawings were treasured by her for the rest of her life, which was devoted to the study of Native American art and culture. As chief designer and decorator for the Fred Harvey Company, she frequently visited Indian villages to purchase authentic artifacts for her interiors and for her own extensive collection. Photo courtesy of Little Bighorn National Monument.

were often on the move, a pattern that would persist throughout Mary's lifetime.

An excellent student, Mary developed a special interest and talent in art, which was an important component of the curriculum of the St. Paul public schools.⁶ She became particularly fascinated with Native American art, which was to become central to her livelihood and life-long intellectual pursuits. This interest may have been kindled by her observations and experiences in the West. In any case, it was nurtured by a relative of her father, John Graham, who gave the Colter family several Indian-made gifts, which included drawings that were done in 1877–78 by Sioux Indians who were imprisoned at Fort Keough after the Battle of Little Bighorn. In response to news of a smallpox outbreak among the Sioux, Mary's mother burned the Indian-made articles, all except for the drawings which Mary had hidden under her mattress. She was to treasure these sketches for the rest of her life. Shortly before her death, in a letter bequeathing the drawings to the Custer Battlefield National Monument, Mary wrote, "It was not until many years later that my mother learned I still had them."⁷

In 1883, when she was only fourteen, Mary graduated from St. Paul (later Central) High School, which was located downtown at Robert Street and Aurora and Central Avenues. Encouraged by her success in school, she dreamed of a career in art, but she was too young to go away to

school and obtain the education she needed to pursue her goals. Why she graduated from high school so young or what she did immediately afterward is not known. Her life-long penchant for self-education may have developed during this period. Three years later, her father died and left a family with modest savings but no steady source of income. Determined to take charge of the situation, Mary convinced her mother that attending an art school in California would enable her to obtain a teaching position and help support the family when she returned to St. Paul.⁸

In 1887, Mary moved to Oakland and enrolled in the California School of Design in San Francisco.⁹ How she came to select a school so far away from home is not known, but it turned out to be a good choice. Not only did the school offer a teaching degree, but its professors included two talented men, Arthur F. Matthews (1860–1945) and Bernard R. Maybeck (1862–1957), whose design philosophies had been influenced by ideas which collectively would become known as the Arts and Crafts Movement. Based on an underlying belief in the union of art and craft, the movement advocated sensitive handcrafting of simple, functional objects and the use of indigenous materials. Going forward, these ideals would



Mary Colter (second row, left) in class at the California School of Design in San Francisco about 1890. Her teacher and mentor, Arthur F. Matthews, is seated in the first row. Photo courtesy of the California Historical Society.

permeate her work, as a teacher, as an artist and later an architect.

Both teachers would become prominent in the Arts and Crafts Movement on the west coast at the turn of the century. Maybeck became an influential architect who was known for his use of indigenous forms and materials.¹⁰ Matthews became best known for his paintings, but he also had architectural experience and came from a family of architects.¹¹ He was likely instrumental in getting Mary a position as an apprentice in an architectural firm in San Francisco, where she worked part time while going to school.¹² If Mary considered a career in architecture at this time, she would have done so with skepticism, since the architectural profession was entirely male-dominated.

After Mary graduated in 1890, she returned to St. Paul and embarked on a sixteen-year career as a teacher. Arts and Crafts sensibilities were just beginning to take hold and the educational community was responding with programs that emphasized the manual arts. With her background, Mary was well-positioned to play a leading role in both of these developments. She first took a post teaching drawing and architecture at the newly established Stout Manual Training Schools (later the University of Wisconsin-Stout) in Menomonie, which was at that time one of the largest cities in western Wisconsin.¹³ The following year, she was able to find work in St. Paul as one of the first teachers of the recently formed Manual Training School. A report by the Board of School Inspectors, which was published in the *St. Paul Globe*, noted: "We have appointed Miss Mary Colter teacher in the high school at \$50 per month, from Nov. 8, 1892."¹⁴

For nearly fifteen years, Mary would teach drawing and literature at St. Paul's manual training school, renamed Mechanical Arts High School in 1895. Shortly after she started teaching there, the school became independent of the main high school and moved into a building of its own at Park and Central Avenues next to Madison School. As if to validate this upgrade in the school's stature, the students won the Gold Medal for an exhibit put together for the World's Columbian Exhibition held in Chicago in



Mary Colter taught drawing and literature at Mechanic Arts High School (building on the right) for many years. When she started teaching at the school in 1892, it was named Manual Training School and was housed in an annex to St. Paul High School. In 1893, it moved into a facility of its own located at Park and Central Avenues, next to Madison School. Photo courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

1893.¹⁵ The extent of Mary's involvement is not known, but as the school's drawing teacher, it is possible that she had a hand in the exhibit. By 1900 MAHS, as the school had become known, was beginning to acquire a reputation, and Mary helped students design its original logo which, though modified over the years, retained the dominant cogwheel that became the school emblem.¹⁶

Mary became a high-profile member of the teaching staff due in part to public acclaim for the work of her students. By the turn of the century, the Twin Cities had become an important center for the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Minnesotans were acquiring an appreciation for the new aesthetic. Describing an industrial exhibit that featured work of students from every department of MAHS, a newspaper reporter wrote, "Especially is the drawing exhibit fine, and that showing the various tools made by the boys of the school. Artistic hall seats, cabinets and numerous other pieces of house furniture show not only mechanical skill, but a fine appreciation of the artistic possibilities in pieces of wood as well. Much of this work has been done under the supervision of Miss Mary Colter, and credit

is due to her for the wise direction that has resulted in such capable work from the pupils."¹⁷

Mary's reputation as a teacher was also enhanced by her lectures, such as a talk on "Spanish Art" she gave in connection with an art series sponsored by the Teachers' Federation in 1901.¹⁸ That year, Mary delivered two well-received lectures to the Women's Civic League of St. Paul. On February 8, her presentation entitled "Color in Our City Streets" was illustrated by a large collection of posters hung on the walls of the Commercial Club for the occasion. Mary expanded the topic from posters in St. Paul to their prolific use in Paris and she also gave a brief history of the poster dating back to Roman times.¹⁹ On December 6, she read a paper entitled "Primitive Arts and Crafts," which was illustrated with slides and an exhibit of handiwork by Native Americans.²⁰

At the same time, Mary was gaining a reputation as an artist in her own right. The Arts and Crafts Society held an exhibit in February 1901 that was extremely successful according to an article in the *Minneapolis Journal*, which stated, "In the metal work [category] that of Miss



Mary Colter designed a bookplate in 1899 in the Arts and Crafts style that included a quotation from British poet Rudyard Kipling's "The Feet of the Young Men" (1897) that captured her life-long desire for exploration and adventure. Photo courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park, #13231.

Mary Colter of St. Paul ranked with the best, her leaden casket for cigars being a very clever idea. It has on the cover in raised letters Portia's description of the leaden casket. The fittings are in wrought copper."²¹

Mary Colter had become a close friend of MAHS principal, George Weitbrecht. Sharing a deep conviction of the importance of arts and crafts in education, they were instrumental in attracting support for MAHS, which was blossoming into a highly respected institution, locally and throughout the Midwest. In so doing, they increased the school's visibility and enhanced their own reputations as well. In 1902, Colter and Weitbrecht both spoke at the second annual Civic League Convention, which was held in St. Paul. The conference was attended by twenty-five delegates representing eleven states including New Jersey, Wisconsin, Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Kentucky, Illinois, Texas, New York, and Minnesota.²²

The purpose of the convention was to advance various ideas on civic im-

provement ranging from beautification of American cities and social welfare reform to quality of education and the Arts and Crafts Movement. None other than Jane Addams, founder of Hull-House, the social settlement house in Chicago, was one of the convention's speakers. A Mrs. Sherman of Milwaukee spoke of the application of Arts and Crafts in the home, while Colter and Weitbrecht stressed its importance in the school and in the workshop. The *Globe* reported,

Miss Colter spoke interestingly of art education and decoration in the school. "Decoration of the school room is one of the most effective ways of teaching art," said Miss Colter. "We no longer attempt to teach drawing with a pencil or brush alone. We find we can do better with a chisel or a hammer." Deploing the plain white walls and lack of color and detail in the typical school room, she continued, "The child who daily beholds such a lack of beauty unconsciously forgets what beauty and harmony are." Revealing her understanding of the interrelationship between architecture and décor, she added, "More floor space is needed in our school rooms, and a better construction of woodwork. Paneling would relieve the monotony of the walls, and fresco designs could be paneled in—not stuck on. . . . Pottery, and a few pieces of rug weaving or of ancient tapestry might be placed there."²³

Weitbrecht followed with a talk entitled "The Hand Raises the Machine." He was introduced as "the man who had made the St. Paul Mechanic Arts School one of the very best in the country." He was quoted as saying, "What we need is a combination of a machine to make beautiful things and a designer behind it. We must unite mechanic and art ideas. We want mechanics who are artists and artists who are mechanics. The combination is rare."²⁴

The convention concluded with a reception in the New York Life Building that was jointly sponsored by the Women's Civic League and the Art Worker's Guild. The event featured exhibits of arts and crafts by several artists, including Colter, as well as a display of the work by students of MAHS and John Ericsson School.²⁵ The MAHS exhibit was sponsored by the League, which had become a strong sup-

porter of the school and held other exhibitions of student work in 1901 and 1902, including "Arts and Crafts" and industrial education exhibits, the proceeds of which were used to purchase manual training supplies for St. Paul schools and a china kiln for MAHS.²⁶

Mary's participation in such organizations as the Women's Civic League clearly benefited MAHS and increased her own visibility as well. Colter was active in various other organizations which offered her opportunities to demonstrate her knowledge and skills. The many women's clubs, guilds, and societies which proliferated around the turn of the century, not just in St. Paul but across the nation, interacted with one another and with similar clubs in other cities, forming a network that gave Colter exposure to women in many other Midwestern cities.²⁷

Mary had begun to hone her lecture skills as early as 1899, when she joined the New Century Club, which was associated with the Federation of Women's Clubs from 1894 to 1903. Formed in 1887, the group's purpose was to provide intellectual stimulation to its members



Colter was especially skilled in metalworking, the craft which brought her the most recognition in Arts and Crafts circles in Minnesota at the turn of the century. Here she is hammering the finish on a metal bowl she designed and crafted. Photo courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park, #16952.

through social and literary activities. The club usually met at various venues in St. Paul, but occasionally it ventured into other cities in Minnesota and Iowa. Two joint meetings were held with the "Peripatetics," a similar club formed in Minneapolis in 1890. Most of the papers presented at the monthly meetings were by its members. Colter presented a paper entitled "The Utilitarian Basis of the Aesthetic" on November 14, 1900, and "The Red Craftsman" on May 1, 1907. She remained a member in the New Century Club through 1907, her last year in St. Paul.²⁸

1902 was a turning point in Mary's life. Seemingly out of nowhere, she was given the opportunity to design the museum and sales spaces for the interior of the "Indian Building" adjacent to the Alvarado Hotel in Albuquerque, N.Mex., her first paid commission for the Fred Harvey Company. Although she clearly had a regional reputation as a designer, decorator, and expert in the arts and crafts, with a special interest in the American Indian, the circumstances surrounding Mary's selection for the job are not clear.

In her pioneering biography of Colter, Virginia Grattan wrote that Mary visited a friend who worked in a gift shop in San Francisco and indicated to the manager of the shop that she would be interested in working for Fred Harvey. Some time later, the company sent her a long telegram offering her a job with the Fred Harvey Company.²⁹

In his scholarly biography of Colter, Arnold Berke cited research by Karen Bartlett that pointed to Minnie Harvey Huckel as the key. According to this biographer, Huckel, who may have met Colter through art circles either in St. Paul or another Midwestern city, recommended Mary to her husband Stuart Huckel, who was looking for a designer with an understanding of Native American crafts. In any case, Minnie Harvey Huckel was known to be an active supporter of Colter within the Harvey organization.³⁰

Regardless of the circumstances, Mary Colter was not listed as a teacher at MAHS for the first half of 1902, suggesting that she was working on the Indian Building at the Alvarado Hotel at this time.³¹ The project involved much more



This photo shows the display of native crafts in the main sales room at Hopi House in the Grand Canyon. As one of the countless Fred Harvey Company sales rooms that Mary Colter designed, it went far beyond displaying the artifacts tastefully, bewitching scores of tourists and introducing them to the Native American culture. Photo courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park, #11426.

than a curio shop or sales room. Colter designed a sequence of spaces in which visitors progressed from a museum displaying antique Native American artifacts to a workshop where Navajo Indians demonstrated their crafts to a shop where blankets, baskets, and rugs could be purchased.³² In addition to getting decorating ideas for their own homes, visitors left with an education and an appreciation for Native American art and culture.

When her project in Albuquerque was complete, Mary returned to St. Paul and she and her mother and sister rented an apartment at 269 Selby Avenue.³³ For the next few years, in addition to teaching at MAHS, she continued to participate in art and literary organizations. On January 23, 1904, under a section entitled "In Art Circles," the *Minneapolis Journal* reported:

At a discussion of the evening industrial school by the Associated Charities of St. Paul, Miss Mary Colter spoke on the development of the artistic sense by such training. The pos-

sibilities of art for the poor was an interesting feature brought forward. Miss Colter said, "More houses are saved from outrageous ugliness by the binding necessities of poverty than by the possession of wealth.

"Art is economy. It is economy of decoration and the putting aside of unnecessary things. Necessity is the greatest teacher of art sense, and the exactions of economy naturally bring out the simple, effective ideas which embody art principles.

"Artists develop themselves. There is no necessity of seeking for art genius. When it occurs it will make itself apparent. What we need more is the cultivation of an appreciation of art, which is seldom attained except when the individual applies himself to the production of something with his own hands. Trying to do for oneself is the surest way of learning to appreciate the work of others."³⁴

During this time, Mary likely played a key role in the MAHS exhibit for the Minnesota Building at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, which won a Gold Medal in art craftsmanship. MAHS

students were credited with developing the color scheme and furniture design for the Minnesota Building and for making half of the furniture, the other half produced by students in Minneapolis high schools. Dr. M. Baumfield's critique of the exhibit for the *New York Staatszeitung* stated that it included "furniture in an independent variation of the mission style, [which] harmonizes well in color with the wood-work and carpet of perfect design. Well worth seeing."³⁵ Works made by the students included pottery, statuary, furniture, freehand drawings, a steam engine, and other machinery.³⁶ It is interesting to note that the Fred Harvey Company also participated in the "Louisiana Purchase Exhibition" and won an award for their exhibit of Indian artifacts.

In 1905, evidently pleased with the results she achieved at the Alvarado in Albuquerque, the Fred Harvey Company contacted Mary again, this time to design an "Indian Building" to be located near El Tovar, a new hotel (designed by Charles Whittlesey) being built at the Grand Canyon. This was her first commission as an architect and she approached it with scholarly thoroughness, researching Indian building traditions at prehistoric sites and ultimately interpreting a Hopi pueblo. "Hopi House," as the building was called, offered a unique educational experience to tourists, who visited the curious building and observed the Native Americans who lived and worked in it.³⁷

Colter had shown she was versatile, leaping from decorator to architect/decorator, proving that the results were especially fine when she had the opportunity to do both. While there, she also decorated the cocktail lounge for El Tovar. When her work at the Grand Canyon was complete, Mary returned to St. Paul and moved to an apartment building further west on Selby called the Seville Flats, where she and her sister and mother lived for the duration of their residency in St. Paul.³⁸

Mary had established herself as a player in the Arts and Crafts Movement in Minnesota and was invited to serve as a juror for the Minnesota State Art Society. She was also active in the Art Worker's Guild of St. Paul, to whom she gave a talk on metalworking and jewelry in 1906.³⁹

The Fred Harvey Company

The Fred Harvey Company, in collaboration with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway, became a leader in promoting tourism in the American Southwest in the late nineteenth century. This mutually beneficial relationship was one of the most successful and influential business partnerships in the early American West.

In 1875, Frederick H. Harvey, then a freight agent for the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, recognized the need for high quality food and service at railroad dining facilities. His longtime employer, the Burlington Railroad, declined his offer to establish a system-wide dining operation, but the Santa Fe Railway subsequently gave Harvey the opportunity to operate several restaurants on an experimental basis. Harvey opened his first depot restaurant in Topeka, Kansas, in January 1876. In 1878 Harvey started the first of his eating house-hotel establishments along the Santa Fe tracks in Florence, Kansas.

The subsequent growth and development of the Fred Harvey Company was closely related to that of the Santa Fe Railway. The Santa Fe agreed to convey fresh meat and produce free-of-charge to any Harvey House via its own private line of refrigerator cars. The Harvey Company and the railroad established a series of signals that allowed the dining room staff to make the necessary preparations to feed an entire train in just thirty minutes. At more prominent locations, the restaurants evolved into hotels, many of which survive today.

The company's phenomenal success was based on vastly improving dining standards in the "Wild West," where previously a passenger's only option had typically been rancid meat, cold beans, and stale coffee in one of the roadhouses located near the railroad's water stops. Such poor conditions had understandably discouraged many Americans from making the journey westward. In 1883, after having problems with his male waiters, Harvey implemented a policy of hiring only single, well-mannered, educated waitresses, who became known as the "Harvey Girls." After their service ended, about half stayed on and helped turn railroad outposts into towns. By the late 1880s, there was a Fred Harvey dining facility located every 100 miles along the Santa Fe line. When dining cars began to appear on trains, the Santa Fe contracted with the Fred Harvey Company to operate the food service in the diners.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Fred Harvey Company began expanding into other locations beyond the reach of the Santa Fe Railroad. The restaurant-hotel chain lasted until 1968 after which scattered facilities have continued to operate as part of a larger hospitality industry conglomerate.

There are several books about Fred Harvey and his company. The most recent one is Stephen Fried, *Appetite for America: How Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire That Civilized the Wild West* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).

Mary was valued for her expertise in other areas as well as art. As literary editor for two years at the *St. Paul Globe*, Mary reviewed books. As an adjunct professor in evening classes at the University of Minnesota Extension School, she lectured on world history and architecture. A perennial student herself, she studied history, architecture, and archeology on her own.⁴⁰

Although there is no documentation that Mary worked on any building projects in Minnesota, she was commissioned to design at least one high-profile exhibit. Describing temporary decorations Colter designed for a convention at the Armory Building in downtown St. Paul, a newspaper reporter who felt that the decorations should remain a permanent installation wrote:

When the City has produced a thing of admirable beauty, this should not be permitted to remain an episode, but should be preserved as an attainment and an inspiration.

It has surprised even St. Paul, which has learned to think reasonably well of itself, that the scheme and execution of the decorations at the armory hall should have been of such unique, such individual quality, so perfectly adapted to its uses in space and proportion, so finely adapted toward a higher use in resting eye and stimulating spirit. . . . It was something more than meer decoration; it was the creation of an integral part of the building plan. . . .

[It] should not be permitted to pass with the passing of the convention for which it did service, but it should become a permanent possession of lasting service to the city. Miss M. E. J. Colter has contributed very definitely through her work in the Mechanic Arts High School, to the art and craft development of the city. She was assisted in the manifesting of this scheme by the pupils of this school. In another country, say, in Japan, whence she has drawn much of her inspiration, this decoration would be rewarded with a permanent place. . . .

More and more it is felt that a small hall for club and rehearsal purposes should be provided in the Armory. There has been too widespread [an] appreciation of Miss Colter's designs for the city to lose what the country has found good.⁴¹

This passage suggests that even the general public could perceive that Colter's designs were much more than superficial decoration and were based on an understanding of architectural principles. With her talent and perseverance, Colter could probably have been able to find a job with an architectural firm in the Twin Cities, had she been willing to risk her stable position at MAHS. As the family's chief breadwinner, she would have thought twice about forfeiting her steady income and status as a valued teacher for the perils of an entirely male-dominated, highly competitive profession which was, at that time, already crowded with men with degrees from schools like Harvard and MIT. Many of them came from wealthy families and were well-connected to potential clients who could



In this photo taken about 1931 at Oval Tower Ruin at Hovenweep, a driver helps Mary Colter observe ancient building techniques. Colter made trips to several other pre-historic sites in preparation for design of the Watchtower, her signature building at the Grand Canyon. Colter typically began projects with research that enabled her to impart authenticity to the buildings she designed. Photo courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park, #16966.

afford their services, two advantages that Colter clearly did not enjoy.

Ultimately, Mary Colter had won her first architectural commission in an unconventional fashion. Hired initially as a decorator for an employer who then recognized her broader talents, she was offered the opportunity to prove herself as an architect. That this commission involved an experimental building, one which required a knowledge of Native

American culture, is also a significant factor in the Fred Harvey Company's decision to take a chance on someone (a woman!) who had never before designed a building professionally.

Encouraged by her success on the Hopi House project, Mary would certainly have entertained an architectural career by 1906. Her work for the Fred Harvey Company to date had, however, been on a project-by-project basis and there was no guarantee that she would be called back, and in fact, she was not offered another job by the company for some time. Ready to move on from teacher to designer, Mary may have sought work elsewhere.

In any case, when the Frederick and Nelson Dept. Store in Seattle, Wash., commissioned her to develop a decoration department and improve their displays, Mary and her mother and sister moved to Seattle. When Rebecca died there on December 17, 1909, Mary and Harriet brought her body back to St. Paul to be buried in Oakland Cemetery, where Rebecca had purchased a family plot at the time of her husband's death in 1886.⁴²

This time Colter did not remain in St. Paul very long. In 1910, Mary, now forty-one, was offered a permanent job with the Fred Harvey Company.⁴³ She moved to Kansas City, which would serve as her home base for years to come, although she was more often at one of her construction sites in the Southwest. Her first project as a full-time employee took her to New Mexico to design the interiors of the new station hotel at Lamy. For the next thirty years, Colter worked on projects jointly conceived by the Fred Harvey Company and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway, which helped pay her salary. With characteristic pluck and determination, she successfully negotiated between the two corporate giants to make her visions a reality.

In 1916, Mary bought a small house in Altadena, Calif., just north of Pasadena, where her sister Harriet would live and Mary would stay on her buying trips.⁴⁴ Harriet died in October, 1923, and Mary brought her body back to St. Paul.⁴⁵

Mary never returned to the classroom, but she remained both a student and a teacher for the rest of her life. As a decorator and architect, her design process

always began with meticulous research and resulted in buildings and interiors that educated those who experienced them. After she became an architect, Mary continued the intellectual pursuits that had made her an exceptional teacher, studying art history, natural history and human civilization, especially Native American culture. Likewise, she continued to lecture after she moved to Kansas City. In Arnold Berke's words, "Mary Colter the designer, occupied as always with buildings and interiors, never left behind Mary Colter the scholar and teacher."⁴⁶

Although Mary never resided in Minnesota again, she maintained contact with MAHS and people she had known there, coming back often to visit. She remained close to George Weitbrecht and his daughter Susan. When the widely respected and much-loved principal died in 1916, an entire issue of "M," the Mechanic Arts Literary Society's publication, was devoted to his memory. The contents included "A Letter to the Alumni" by Mary's cousin, Mabel Colter, who taught history at MAHS, and two entries by "M. E. J. C." In "Boom-a Lac-a," Mary described the birth of the school's yell and Weitbrecht's role in its selection. In "A Song to the Cause," Mary recalled a poem that Weitbrecht read to students in 1897, when the school was still struggling for survival: "I shall never forget the high tense silence in which his 'children' filed out or the light in Whitey's eyes as he watched them go. Those were the days when we felt things hard! The Mechanic Arts had to prove its right to live."⁴⁷

Mary had also developed an enduring friendship with a favorite pupil named Arthur Larkin, who graduated in 1903. For many years she spent holidays in the Twin Cities with Arthur and his wife, whose children called her Aunt Mary.⁴⁸

Among others she came back to visit was a friend named Catherine Beatrice Baker Power, who lived at 1074 Linwood Avenue in St. Paul. Catherine's son, Jim Power, was quite young at the time, but he remembers that Mary Colter was "quite a character" and that she was always wearing lots of Indian jewelry. He described Mary as "unconventional" and "super interesting." Years later, after graduating from Macalester

College in the fifties, Jim Power and others took a motor trip out west, stopping to see people along the way and staying at Harvey Hotels. One of the stops was Mary Colter's house in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she had retired. She showed them her "storage room," which was filled with artifacts and jewelry that she had collected over the years. Jim remembers a turquoise hand for which Mary explained the symbolism. Mary indicated she had acquired the

tower architect," "decorator," "woman architect" or "national figure."⁵¹ Both St. Paul newspapers were on strike at the time and the *St. Paul Sentinel*, an ad hoc newspaper published in the interim, did not mention her death. A notice under the heading "Deaths Elsewhere" in the *Minneapolis Star* stated briefly, "Santa Fe, N. M.— Mary E. J. Colter, 90, Architect, designer and decorator for the Fred Harvey Co., who designed the tower at the Grand Canyon."⁵² Mary



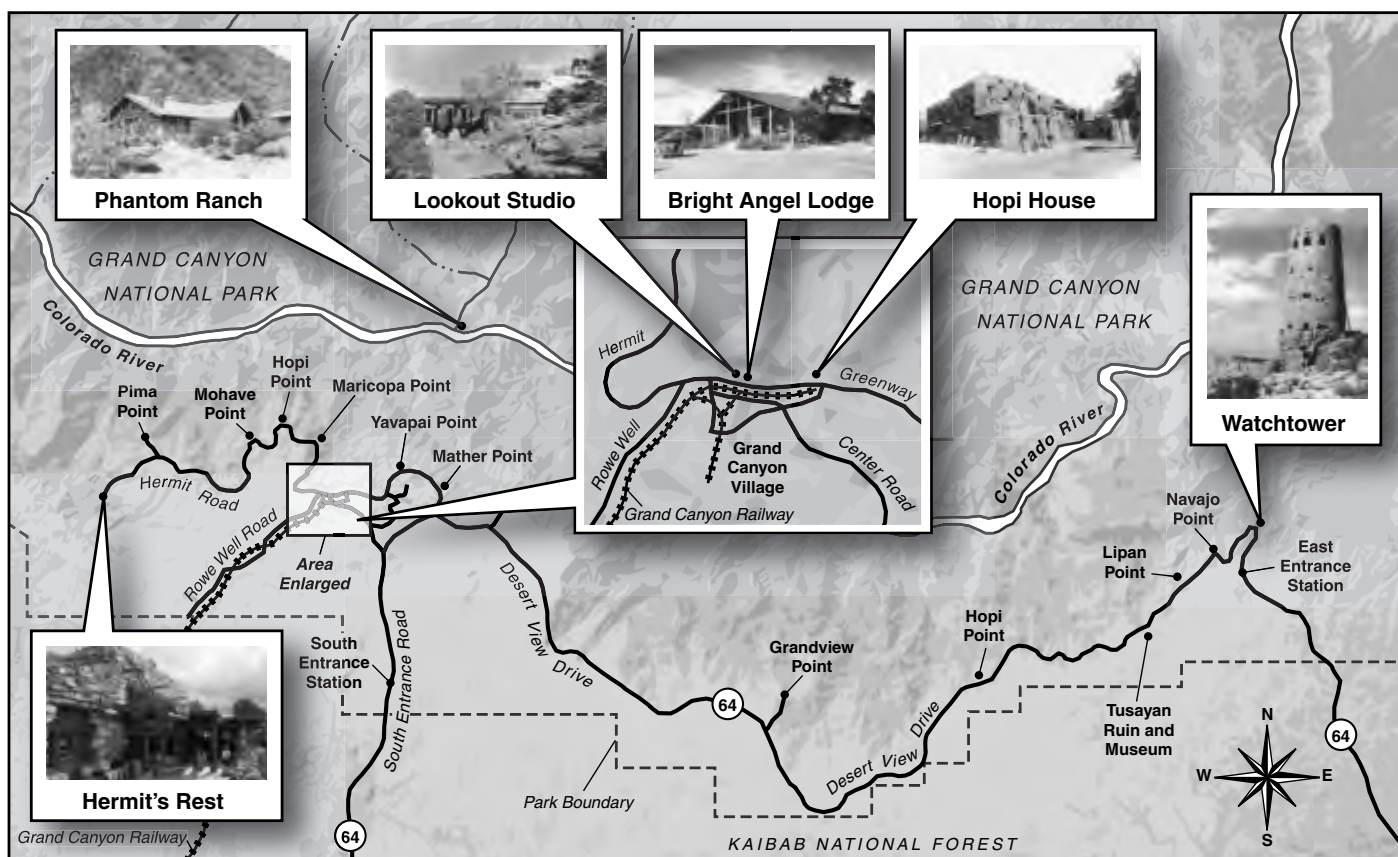
Taken about 1935 when Mary Colter was sixty-six years old, this photo shows Colter (right) discussing plans for Bright Angel Lodge with Miner Tillotson (left), superintendent of the Grand Canyon National Park, and Anna W. Ickes, an advocate for the culture, archeology, and welfare of Native Americans and the wife of Harold Ickes, Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of the Interior. Photo courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park, #16942.

collection through many visits to Indian reservations and that she spoke Indian languages. In addition to the artifacts, Jim remembers seeing a large portrait of Mary, dressed in riding gear, on a horse. Jim recalls that Mary was "quite old" and talked about her plans to bequeath her extensive collection to museums.⁴⁹

Not long after Jim Power's visit, Mary fell and broke her hip. She eventually recovered but never regained her strength. Mary died on January 8, 1958, in Santa Fe.⁵⁰ Several newspapers, primarily in cities along the Santa Fe route, published obituaries which identified her as "Grand Canyon

was actually eighty-eight, three months short of her eighty-ninth birthday. Her body was returned to St. Paul and buried beside her parents and sister in Oakland Cemetery, where a large granite marker reads simply "COLTER."

Mary Colter did not receive much public recognition during her lifetime, but a long overdue biography written by Virginia Grattan was published in 1980. The book was reissued in 1992 by the Grand Canyon Natural History Association in response to repeated inquiries from visitors to the Canyon. Colter's career as an architect was covered in depth in a second biography,



Mary Colter's legacy at the Grand Canyon in Arizona includes eight buildings located on the south rim of the canyon. The six Colter buildings pictured on the map above are some of the most important buildings in our National Park system, and they influenced park design for years to come. Not pictured are the Men's Dormitory and the Women's Dormitory, two buildings Colter designed in the 1930s to house park employees. Photos courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park (left to right, #T06, #7514, #9669, #11422, #04439, and #17010b); map by John Hamer. Map copyright © 2011 by Ramsey County Historical Society.

Mary Colter's Work for the Fred Harvey Company

The largest concentration of Mary Colter's work is located in Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona. Her eight buildings there, which are still in use today, include Hopi House (1905), Hermit's Rest (1914), the Lookout (1914), Phantom Ranch (1922), the Watchtower (1932), Bright Angel Lodge (1935), the Men's Dormitory (1936) and the Women's Dormitory (1937).

Of the other buildings she designed, the only one that is still standing is La Posada, a hotel built in Winslow, Ariz., in 1930. In 1956, when Mary heard that the hotel was up for sale and that its unique furnishings were being auctioned off, she said, "There is such a thing as living too long." Despite the change in ownership, the building survived and was later restored,

but Colter's words were prophetic because her most architecturally acclaimed building, El Navajo, a modernist hotel with Native American motifs, built in Gallup, N.Mex., in 1923, was demolished about nine months before she died.

Many of the buildings that Colter worked on are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and four of her buildings at the Grand Canyon are singled out as National Historic Landmarks. The latter are rugged, landscape-integrated buildings that influenced a generation of subsequent park structures built by the U.S. National Park Service as well as many built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. Of the many brilliant interiors designed by Mary Colter, only fragments remain

at most sites, but a few spaces are still largely intact, most notably the cafeteria at Union Station in Los Angeles, Calif., and the interior of the La Fonda, an upscale hotel in Santa Fe, N.Mex.

Colter's work for the Fred Harvey Company and the Santa Fe Railway was not limited to designing buildings and interiors. She personally decorated the spaces, selecting the art as well as the furniture, and designed every detail, sometimes even the uniforms worn by the waitresses. When dining cars began to appear on Santa Fe trains, she designed the table service, including the china. Mary Colter created environments that enchanted generations of tourists and many of her buildings and spaces are still delighting visitors today.

written by Arnold Berke (2002). In “Mary Jane Colter: House Made of Dawn,” a 1998 television documentary that aired on PBS several times, Karen Bartlett celebrated Colter’s architectural legacy, as have several magazine articles in recent years. These biographers focused primarily on her architectural achievements and, for the most part, only touched on the significance of her accomplishments in Minnesota. A

closer look at her early years reveals that St. Paul is where she developed skills that prepared her for an architectural career and acquired a reputation that brought her to the attention of the Fred Harvey Company. Ironically, Colter’s story is not well known in Minnesota, where few people recognize her name, much less her remarkable accomplishments. Recognition of Colter in St. Paul is long overdue and she surely deserves

to be added to the city’s honor roll of outstanding citizens.

Diane Trout-Oertel holds a B. A. degree from Knox College and a master’s degree in architecture from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. An architect with a special interest in historic preservation, Trout-Oertel resides in St. Paul and currently serves on the city’s Heritage Preservation Commission.

Endnotes

1. Colter was not a formally educated, registered architect, which was not a requirement for practicing architecture in her era, as it is today.
2. Virginia L. Grattan, *Mary Colter: Builder upon the Red Earth* (Grand Canyon, Ariz.: Grand Canyon Natural History Association, 1992), 2.
3. Ibid.
4. Gail Collins, *America’s Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 220, 236–237. (In the West, women had a different status. Due to the shortage of labor, women were able to find work in traditionally male occupations and were paid accordingly. Political status followed, and women won the right to vote earlier than in other parts of the country. In 1870, women had the vote in Wyoming and Utah.)
5. *St. Paul City Directory* for the years when the Colters lived in St. Paul.
6. Grattan, 4.
7. Arnold Berke, *Mary Colter: Architect of the Southwest* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 27.
8. Ibid, 28. Nemesis Productions, *Mary Jane Colter: House Made of Dawn*, documentary film, 1998.
9. The San Francisco Art Association opened the San Francisco School of Design in 1874. Its name was changed to the California School of Design in 1893 and was affiliated with the University of California in Berkeley. Today the school is known as the San Francisco Art Institute.
10. Karen J. Weitze, “Utopian Placemaking: The Built Environment in Arts and Crafts California,” in Kenneth R. Trapp, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in California: Living the Good Life* (New York: The Oakland Museum and Abbeville Press, 1993), 57–62. Earlier, as an apprentice to Carreer and Hastings, Maybeck had worked on two buildings in Florida which are widely considered among the earliest to incorporate indigenous form and materials.
11. Kenneth R. Trapp, “The Arts and Crafts Movement in the San Francisco Bay Area,” in Kenneth R. Trapp, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in California: Living the Good Life*, 129–30, 137, 280; Berke, 29.
12. Grattan, 4; Berke, 28–29.
13. Berke, 31.
14. *St. Paul Globe*, December 9, 1892. (By 1898, Mary was earning \$90 a month. *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 23, 1898.)
15. Berke, 32–33.
16. Mechanic Arts Literary Society publication, *M*, volume IV, no. 2, April 1916, 24. Special Collections, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.
17. *St. Paul Globe*, “Pupils’ Handiwork,” December 27, 1901.
18. *St. Paul Globe*, February 28, 1901. (According to the newspaper, Colter’s talk was postponed until March 8. *St. Paul Globe*, March 1, 1901.)
19. *St. Paul Globe*, February 8, 1901.
20. *St. Paul Globe*, December 6, 1901.
21. *Minneapolis Journal*, February 9, 1901.
22. *St. Paul Globe*, September 25, 1902.
23. Ibid; *St. Paul Globe*, September 26, 1902.
24. *St. Paul Globe*, September 26, 1902.
25. Ibid.
26. Marcia G. Anderson, “Art for Life’s Sake: The Handicraft Guild of Minneapolis,” in *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi, 1890–1915: Minnesota 1900*, ed. Michael Conforti (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994), 142, endnote 11.
27. Collins, 247–48.
28. New Century Club Records, 1900–1907, Special Collections, Minnesota Historical Society.
29. Grattan, 5–8. (Grattan writes that it was summer and Mary was repairing the roof of her cottage when the telegram arrived. Since the Colter family rented throughout their years in St. Paul, it is more likely that they rented one for the summer.)
30. Berke, 55, 81.
31. Room sheets, Mechanic Arts High School records, Special Collections, Minnesota Historical Society.
32. Berke, 56–57. Karen Bartlett, “Mary Jane Colter,” *American Bungalow*, no. 26 (Summer 2000): 41–42.
33. *St. Paul City Directory*. When she started teaching at MAHS, Mary and her mother and sister first boarded at 176 14th Street on the northern edge of downtown. Later they moved to 880 Lincoln Avenue, where they resided until 1902, when they moved to 269 Selby Avenue.
34. *Minneapolis Journal*, January 23, 1904.
35. Marcia G. Anderson, “Art for Life’s Sake: The Handicraft Guild of Minneapolis,” in *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi*, 141–42, endnote 11.
36. Unidentified St. Paul newspaper, January 19, 1905, Mechanic Arts High School records, Special Collections, Minnesota Historical Society.
37. Grattan, 14–19.
38. *St. Paul City Directory*.
39. Appendix III: Minnesota Arts and Crafts Index, *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi*, 184.
40. Berke, 34.
41. “The Armory Decoration,” unidentified, undated newspaper article in an MAHS scrapbook, Mechanic Arts High School records, Special Collections, Minnesota Historical Society. (The building referred to in the newspaper article was likely St. Paul’s second armory, which was erected at Sixth and Exchange Streets in 1904.)
42. Grattan, 19; Oakland Cemetery records.
43. Grattan, 20–22.
44. Berke, 113.
45. Grattan, 44.
46. Berke, 113.
47. Mechanic Arts Literary Society publication, *M*, volume IV, no. 2, April 1916, 24, 40. (Weitbrecht chose to read the poem by Gellet Burgess in the “Lark,” because, for him, it summed up the spirit of MAHS as it struggled for survival in the early years.)
48. Grattan, 46.
49. Author telephone interview with Jim Powers, March 10, 2010.
50. Grattan, 110–11.
51. Berke, 272.
52. *Minneapolis Star*, January 9, 1958.

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Mary Colter designed Hopi House at the Grand Canyon National Park in 1905. It is one of the eight buildings at the Grand Canyon that Colter designed over a period of about thirty years. For more on Mary Colter and her connection to St. Paul, see page 3. Photograph of Hopi House courtesy of Alexander Vertikoff. Hopi House © Alexander Vertikoff.