

Sarah Bickford: Virginia City's Pioneering Businesswoman

It was tough to make a life on the mining frontier. It was even tougher for women. And tougher yet for minority women. Sarah Bickford not only made a life, she made history of her own, and preserved history for Montana.

Sarah Bickford's background is not fully known. She was born into slavery, likely in Tennessee, and in 1852 or 1855. Owned by John Blair III, a wealthy man who had been a U.S. Congressman, she likely worked in his Knoxville hotel until Blair's death in 1863. As his estate was settled, her parents were sold and she never saw them again. After the Civil War, Sarah lived with an aunt and uncle, taking their surname of Gammon.



She chose to make her way to the gold rush town of Virginia City, also the territorial capital, working as a nanny to earn her way in 1871. She then worked briefly as a hotel maid before marrying an Irish immigrant named John Brown in 1872. Though she had three children with Brown, it was a difficult marriage. Brown was violent, beating Sarah and threatening to kill her. Her boys both died at very young ages. By 1880, Sarah initiated divorce proceedings, claiming grounds of abuse and abandonment against Brown. She was granted the divorce with full custody of her daughter, Eva.

To support herself and her daughter, Sarah Brown soon opened the New City Bakery and Restaurant near the Madison Hotel, offering meals at all hours and at short notice and noting that her selection of bread, pies and cakes were always freshly baked. She added a boarding house next to the bakery. But yet another trauma occurred. Eva contracted pneumonia, and died in June 1881. With nothing holding her in Virginia City, Sarah went back east to visit family in Tennessee, possibly considering whether to stay.

The following May, Sarah returned to a town with an uncertain future. The capital had moved to Helena, the gold rush was slowing, and the population was dwindling. But ranchers had moved into the area, and the railroad was rumored to be coming, so there was still hope for the community. By October, Sarah was remarried to Stephen Bickford, who was white. Bickford was nearly twenty years her senior, a partner in a mining concern. The following summer, their son Elmer was born, the first of their four children. There were no laws in Montana preventing an interracial union, though that would follow in 1909. It did raise far more comment than her first marriage, partly because Stephen Bickford was a far more prominent and admired citizen than John Brown had been. Newspapers in Helena, Butte and Fort Benton ran articles about the marriage.

Virginia City had created a water distribution system early on, running water through wooden pipes at first, then dealing with iron pipes that froze and cracked in the winter. A fire that destroyed a business in 1888 proved that the water supply was inadequate, barely trickling out of a hydrant. The beleaguered owner of the water works wanted out. Stephen Bickford bought them. Water services were expanded and improved. Though Sarah was not at the forefront, she tended the company when Stephen was working the mine. They sold a 1/3 interest to a partner for his financial management expertise in 1894.

Stephen grew ill in 1898, and died in 1900, leaving everything to his wife and children. Sarah became the first woman in Montana, and the first African-American woman in the nation to own a utility. She faced a crisis in 1902, when a severe cold snap froze and damaged all the pipes along the main street. She hired a large force of workers to replace the pipes, and soon got the water running again. Six years later, she developed a reservoir to maintain water supplies through the summer heat. There was a movement for a municipal takeover of the water company in 1913, but Sarah prevailed. She later regained full interest in the company, and ran it very well until her death in 1939.

At some point, Bickford had purchased the site where Vigilantes hanged five of Henry Plummer's road agents, and set up her offices for the water company there. Though the railroad never had come to Virginia City, cars did starting in 1909, and with them, the possibility of exploiting the town's history. Gold Rush structures were still there, and residents started creating facilities for tourists. Mary Pickford stopped by in 1918 en route to Yellowstone, and stirred up interest. Sarah joined the boosters, using half her building for public ladies' rooms, and renaming it the Hangman's Building. These and other efforts helped build the tourist trade in Madison County.

The state of Montana inducted Sarah Bickford into the Gallery of Outstanding Montanans in the Capitol building in 2012.

Sources:

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