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PUBLISHED SINCE 1923

This publication was supported in part
by the Josephine H. Miles Trust.

The Colorado Magazine (ISSN 2765-8856)
contains articles of broad general and educational
interest that link the present to the past, and is
distributed quarterly to History Colorado members,
to libraries, and to institutions of higher learning. Man-
uscripts must be documented when submitted, and
originals are retained in the Publications office (publi-
cations@state.co.us). An Author's Guide is available
at HistoryColorado.org. History Colorado disclaims
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THE
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2 The Past Is Always Present

by Dawn DiPrince, President/CEO & State Historic Preservation Officer

5 The Forum We Love Hearing From You

7 A Tree Grows in Trinidad

by Lori Bailey

11 What is Colorado's Oldest Photo?

by Sam Bock

13 Domestic Terror Strikes Denver

by Scott Spillman

19 What is Truth in History?

by Claire Oberon Garcia

25 The Domínguez-Escalante Expedition in Ute Country

by Nick Sainz

35 Against Great Odds

by Tara Kaufman

46 Interview

with Ben Ralston of the Sachs Foundation



Parents love cute photos of their children. Traveling photographers in the early twentieth century created a trend snapping pictures of children posing in carts pulled by goats, often adding the date and place to a placard on the front, for those parents willing to pay. The History Colorado Collection has numerous goat cart photos, including this one of a boy and girl in Pueblo. History Colorado, 92.202.1

COVER Illustration by Thomas Lusk

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THE PAST IS ALWAYS PRESENT



Dear Friends,

Just over two years ago, I received a surprising phone call from Harvard University. They informed me that something called the Woodbury Collection was in their possession—created by a curator at the Colorado Historical Society in the early 1930s. Dr. George Woodbury gathered

nearly 1000 clippings of hair, many from students at American Indian Boarding Schools from around the country—a harmful exploitation of children under the mantle of our organization.

Woodbury sought to compare Native hair with Anglo hair under a microscope: Our State Historical Society published a booklet of his findings. *The Denver Post* (March 1, 1931) expounded Woodbury’s “experiments” that “may help to determine the origin of American Indians,” noting “An investigation in Germany several years ago showed certain types of hair were to be found in certain races, and they were almost invariable in those peoples.” The eugenics-steeped pseudoscience of Woodbury was wedged between the Klan-tinged 1920s and the antisemitic Third Reich, seeking some scientific justification for racial hierarchy.

Woodbury used his hair collection to attract a new position at Harvard, taking it with him when he left. He abandoned this line of study shortly after, but Harvard kept the collection.

When Harvard called, they noted that hair (at the time) fell outside of federal repatriation laws—they needn’t take any action but were choosing to publicly acknowledge the collection’s existence. The Department of the Interior determined that the hair clippings were legally subject to repatriation, and Harvard acquiesced. In recognition of our own organizational complicity in the formation of the collection, we communicated with Tribal governments and repatriated hair clippings taken directly from our collection.

One horrific example was a hair clipping taken from a scalp in our collection. It was donated to the State Historical Society in 1909 by Mrs. Jacob Downing, whose husband stole the scalp as a war prize from the Sand Creek Massacre. After two separate US governmental reports deemed the slaughter “brutal and cowardly,” Jacob Downing worked to reclaim the narrative and was even a candidate on the Sand Creek Vindication Ticket. That same vindication movement inspired the Massacre’s description as a victorious battle on the pedestal of *On Guard*, the statue that once stood before the Capitol’s West Steps.

Our NAGPRA (Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act) Collections Specialist Chance Ward worked with Sand Creek Massacre descendant Tribes to pick up the

hair from Harvard then return, reunite, and bury the hair with the original scalp in August 2024. The Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site has designated a space where dedicated Tribal cultural leaders bury and return ancestral remains.

I recently attended a reading at our Fort Garland Museum for *Witness at Sand Creek*, a book of Silas Soule’s letters and his truth-telling testimony, which cost him his life and continues to serve as evidence of the Sand Creek slaughter. Making a plea at the end of her talk, author Nancy Niero implored anyone who may hold Native ancestral remains of any kind to return them. Chance Ward told me that calls about this are not infrequent. Alongside Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, Tribal cultural staff, and State Archaeologist Dr. Holly Norton, he helps to repatriate these ancestors from someone’s basement or attic to a more appropriate place for an honorable burial.

These actions, done with great care and reverence, are moral acts towards healing. The many cultural workers that I am privileged to work with, both within History Colorado and Tribal Nations, are so deeply committed to the power of truth-telling, preservation of cultural resources and traditional practices, and ongoing honorable care for ancestors. The work is heavy and hard to carry and I am reminded that the past is always present.

Recently, I stood with about two dozen people on Monument Hill at the Sand Creek Massacre site. Otto Braided Hair (Northern Cheyenne) faced east and sang an honor song. The grasses were rich with sunflowers. The piercing sun and nearly triple-digit temperatures were softened by a cool breeze and picture-perfect clouds. The grasslands welcomed the wind. History, living community, and our sacred obligations were all present to refresh our spirits.

Everyday I work with people who are servants to seeking and telling truth. History requires it.

Thank you for being part of the community of support who enable our ability to serve.

In partnership,

President/CEO and State Historic Preservation Officer

We acknowledge that the land currently known as Colorado has been the traditional homelands of Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. We are grateful to work in partnership with the fifty-one sovereign nations who continue to call this land home. Together, we plan exhibits; collect, preserve, and interpret artifacts; do archaeological work; and create educational programs to share the history of Colorado.

THE FORUM

WE LOVE HEARING FROM YOU. Drop us a line at publications@state.co.us

WRITING IN ON RIHA

In the last issue, Exhibit Developer Katherine Mercier brought us the story of disappeared CU professor Thomas Riha. Many readers have been writing in with their memories, and their praise!

Your coverage of the various aspects of my home state is first rate, and on my annual trips to Colorado, I have been able to visit more than one of the sites discussed in your articles. I was a student in the Department of History in March, 1969 when Dr. Riha disappeared. I recall the “hush” that descended over the department and there were a host of rumors circulating among the students. More than once over my career as a professor of history I have thought back and asked myself what might have happened. Your article brought back memories and offered considerable perspective as to what might have happened. Thank you for the article and *The Colorado Magazine*. —Thomas F. Armstrong, via post

In 1968, I was an undergraduate student at CU in Boulder. I went to see Thomas Riha about doing research on the Volga Germans who still remained in Russia. Riha seemed surprised and quite nervous. He explained that the Volga Germans (who were exiled en masse to Siberia by Stalin in 1941) were a “pariah people.” Riha said he could not help me and that the subject was a very touchy one. A few months later, when Riha disappeared in March 1969, I actually felt guilty for having brought up the topic of Volga Germans with Riha. Had the KGB come and taken him away? I no longer feel my brief visit with Riha had anything to do with his disappearance. But that fearful and nervous look in his eyes still haunts me. —Timothy J. Kloberdanz, via email

MURAMOTO MESMERIZES

Associate Editor Devin Flores delved deep into Frank Muramoto’s photography to reveal a side of Pueblo history few get to experience.

I had never heard of Frank Muramoto before reading *The Colorado Magazine’s* July feature, but now I can’t stop thinking about his story. As a photography enthusiast, I was amazed by his innovations—color film and home movies in 1930s Colorado! What really struck me was realizing how much history could have been lost without his camera. This article made me appreciate both photography’s power and the hidden diversity in Colorado’s past. Driving through Pueblo will never be the same. —Susan Martinez, via email

SOCIETY WOLF

Our last issue featured a sleuthing story from Jori Johnson delving into a previously unknown story about a high-society swindler.

The Colorado Magazine’s June detective story about Harry Silverberg was absolutely riveting! The author unraveled an international con man’s schemes like a master sleuth. Learning that this fake J. Coleman Drayton swindled Colorado’s governor and stole from J.J. Brown in Japan was shocking. What a brilliant example of how museum collections can reveal hidden history. —David Chen, via email

I couldn’t put down *The Colorado Magazine* after starting this incredible story about Harry Silverberg’s cons. Who knew that one photograph could unlock such an elaborate international fraud? The fact that he fooled Governor Thomas and Denver high society while posing as a

fake Drayton is mind-blowing. This kind of investigative historical work is exactly why I subscribe—turning dusty archives into page-turning mysteries. —Jennifer Walsh, via email

REMEMBERING DAVID WETZEL

David Wetzel served at History Colorado through many changes, shepherding this magazine and all of our publications through tumultuous times. In the wake of his recent passing, former Managing Editor Steve Grinstead offered a tribute to a fantastic colleague and mentor.

The Colorado Magazine’s tribute to David Wetzel was deeply moving. As someone who’s read the magazine for years, I now understand who shaped its quality and voice—what a wonderful way to honor someone who clearly loved both history and life.

—Margaret Foster, via post

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A Tree Grows in Trinidad

As it turns out, the rubber ball doesn't bounce far from the tree after a recent visit to Trinidad reveals history coming full circle.

BY LORI BAILEY

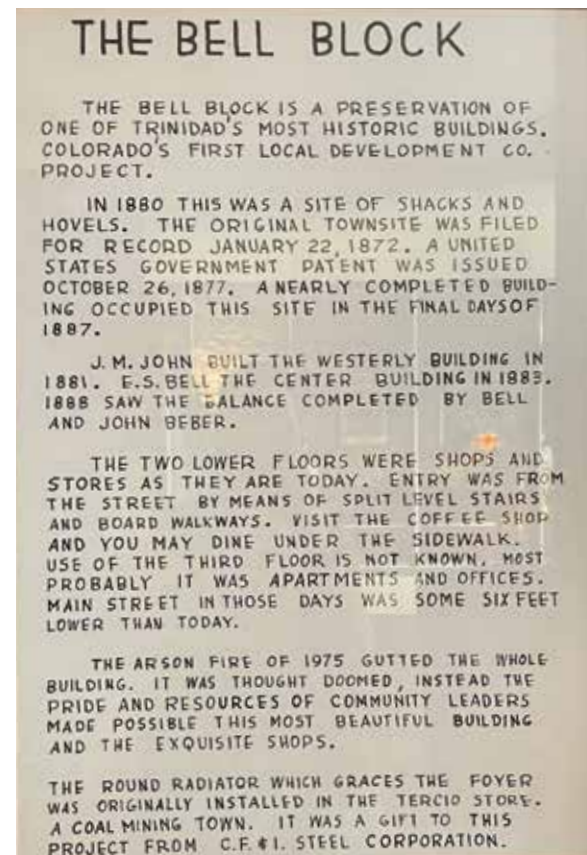


ABOVE The rubber tree that once decorated the Aultman Studios now reaches for the skylight of The Bell Block building in Trinidad, August 2025. Courtesy of Matthew Bailey

RIGHT Simple signage reveals more about the building's history. Courtesy of Lori Bailey

I had both heard and written about Trinidad, the town that sits about twenty-one miles by car north of the Colorado-New Mexico border. I'd also passed through several times on my way to destinations deeper in the American Southwest—Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Phoenix. Recently, we made a point to go and visit, this time intentionally making Trinidad the destination.

Like other travelers heading into town, we were welcomed by the “T-R-I-N-I-D-A-D” sign atop Simpson's Rest. (I admit to being ridiculously excited to see the sign illuminated at night—eight block letters poised as friendly sentinels suspended in the darkness.) Beautiful western Victorian buildings line the downtown streets. And the streets themselves are paved in red brick—several iterations of stamps mark bricks



TOP O.E. Aultman Residence, 1906. 2000.300.312

ABOVE Jennie Aultman and her son Glenn pose with a camera outside of their home in Trinidad. Photo by Oliver E. Aultman, about 1912–1914. History Colorado, 93.322.1553

with the town's name, a quiet display of pride in its brick kiln heyday. The downtown streets are vibrant with public art, the friendliest of folks, and music lofting from venues of all sorts. The museums and art galleries are plentiful, giving a spotlight to so many important stories of the people of southern Colorado.

All that, and it's also home to the largest rubber tree in Colorado.

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

One of my favorite Trinidad stories even before our journey is that of photographer Oliver E. Aultman. When we set out, I had no idea that his legacy would grow to include a tree. Aultman was a self-taught photographer who set up shop at 319 1/2 West Main Street in 1890. He hadn't planned to do so—in fact, it's one of the most charming aspects of his story. He was working as a bank clerk when a customer of his took out a loan for a photography studio. When the borrower defaulted on the loan and left town with the money, an enterprising Aultman moved into the studio space and set up the Aultman Photography Studio in order to recover the financial

loss. He quickly learned the craft of his fledgling business, and successfully so. His was the longest continually operated photography studio in the state. More importantly, Aultman's body of work is one of the best historical records we have of the people of southern Colorado during the first half of the twentieth century. His portraiture embodied a broad swath of the community, telling the story of a diverse population and capturing the beauty and dignity and joy in his signature style—sometimes with a delightful touch of humor.

This tree has a Trinidad story to tell, too.

O.E. Aultman's family helped with the business and his son Glenn Aultman became a photographer in his own right. After his father had a stroke and passed away, Glenn took over the studio operations and continued the family legacy until he died in 2000. History Colorado houses a collection of more than 50,000

images from the Aultman Studio, most of which are available online. The Trinidad History Museum also has an insightful exhibition of O.E. Aultman's work, including his camera and a reproduction of one of his iconic studio backdrops that happens to make for a fun selfie.

BENEATH THE CANOPY

But back to that rubber tree. While looking for a place to eat dinner and escape from a late-summer cloudburst, we stumbled upon The Bell Block building—the fascinating construction and preservation history of which is spelled out on a sign hanging on the wall inside the front doors. We walked around, marveling at the 1970s-era office building interior that seems to be in a symbiotic relationship with a massive—I mean really, really tall—tree, winding its way around the split staircase and stretching up to touch the skylights. We admired it in awe while visitors to the restaurant on the lower level commented amongst

Produced by Trinidad Brick and Tile Company (in operation from 1901 to 1978), four different patterns of these iconic stamped bricks line the streets of Trinidad. Courtesy of Lori Bailey



The subtle wayfinding sign tells a much bigger story about the rubber tree. Courtesy of Lori Bailey

themselves about how much it must have cost to create such a huge fake plant. The thought that it could be fake hadn't really occurred to me, and a yellowed leaf that had fallen on the ground concurred. I walked over and bent down to pick it up. Directly in front of me when I stood again was a small wayfinding sign—a blue and white color printout on letter-sized paper—that read “RUBBER TREE / Ficus Elastica / Before you grows the largest rubber tree in Colorado.” Two photographs on the sign told more: a photo of the young tree sitting on the floor in front of a white wall, along with a photo of the tree in more recent years, climbing the white wooden staircase in its present location. I read on, and actually gasped aloud.

This tree has a Trinidad story to tell, too. As it turns out, Glenn Aultman's mother and O.E. Aultman's wife, Jennie, purchased the tree from a local department store for their studio in the 1930s. It kept the Aultmans and their clients company at the studio until it was transplanted to The Bell Block plantar in 1991, when it was an already-impressive twelve feet tall. Others may not find this as stupendous as I did in that moment, but as I stood before this incredible rubber tree I thought of a few things. One, I haven't found any evidence that the tree has a name, although I think it ought to. Two, I thought of all of the people

it's seen and all of the history that it has witnessed, day after day, decade after decade, in its nearly 100-year lifetime. And then I thought of all those faces that walked past that very tree in the photography studio—Coloradans who brought richness to our state's landscape, whose photos portrayed strength, resilience, joy—captured through the lens of the Aultmans of Trinidad.

And now here stood that tree. Celebrating restaurants and medical offices and shops, and the broader thriving Trinidad community. Unbeknownst to us, our search for shelter from the rain became a full circle connection, writing another chapter in one of my favorite Trinidad stories. A forty-five-foot-tall, shiny green chapter, still supporting and beautifying the town and its people. I searched through the collection to see if I could

catch a glimpse of the tree in any of the Aultmans' photographs—maybe it had served as a prop in someone's portrait? Although I confess that I did not search all 50,000-some images, I looked through many—sadly, to no avail.

But on the upside, it gave me an opportunity to peruse this remarkable collection once again, reflecting on the Aultmans and Trinidad and our long-overdue visit to this charming town. It's probably much too obvious to be clever, but perhaps the tree's name should be Serendipity? 🍀

Lori Bailey is the associate editor in the publications department, and managing editor of History Colorado's *Weekly Digest* newsletter.

O.E. Aultman seemed to have fun with some of his subjects, like these three men photographed in 1901. History Colorado, 85.1.6



WHAT IS COLORADO'S OLDEST PHOTO?

A photo, it's said, is worth a thousand words. And I think we proved that's correct.

BY SAM BOCK

One of the best things about my job is that I'm constantly surrounded by historical questions and people who have a passion for answering them.

Case in point: One pleasant summer day over pastrami sandwiches, Jim England and I got to chatting about the past (as you do, or rather, as we do). Jim is our department's research volunteer extraordinaire, and as we chatted we found ourselves wondering what might be the earliest photo of Colorado. Neither of us knew what its subject might have been or who would have taken it. We were pretty sure it would have been a daguerrotype (a kind of early photographic method), but beyond that, we were stumped without doing a little digging.

So we got to work, looking to see if we could find a candidate. What we found turned out to be much more interesting than just turning up an old photo or checking the box marked "found." So interesting, in fact, that we had to share it with the readers of *The Colorado Magazine*.

THE PAST COMES INTO (HAZY, DAMAGED) VIEW

Jim quickly identified an image made by Solomon Nunes Carvalho in 1853 as a good candidate (above right). It was taken during John C. Frémont's 1853 expedition to explore and map the new United States territory acquired from Mexico following the Mexican-American War. According to the Library of Congress, the photo's current caretaker, the image portrays a "View of a Cheyenne village at Big Timbers [near Lamar], in present-day Colorado, with four large tipis standing at the edge of a wooded area. Frame with pemmi-



can or hides hanging at the right, two figures, facing camera, standing to the left of center."

Photo found and case closed, right? Maybe, but as it turned out, the photo's story revealed so much more than the image.

The obvious first thing you probably noticed about the image is the damage. Fortunately we specialize in blurry antique photos here at History Colorado. So our smart colleagues in collections care helped us confirm that the original plate had been in a fire, and Jim's research indicates this may have been the only one that survived. Lucky for us (maybe) this one lived on, but it's hard not to wonder what else Carvalho captured, and what else survives only in stories and memories passed down among the people he met and the men of the expedition.

The rest of the Library of Congress's historical record is necessarily matter-of-fact, only revealing tantalizing glimpses of the intersecting stories behind the photo.

The oldest photo, featuring a view of a Cheyenne village near Big Timbers (present-day Lamar). Courtesy of the Library of Congress

You see, Frémont's privately-funded expedition was scouting out a transcontinental rail route during a time of profound upheaval for the many peoples of southern Colorado. Frémont, Carvalho, and their fellow explorers were sent out just five years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War and made much of what is now the southwestern United States into American territory.

New maps drawn in the war's aftermath in 1848 may have shown a massive transfer of territorial control, but that shift didn't exactly mirror the reality on the ground. The Cheyenne, but also the Comanche, Kiowa, Arapaho, and Ute Tribes, among many other Native nations, were the dominant political and economic entities in the region in 1853. American and even Mexican settlements would continue to be sparse and small

for another decade. Most of the non-Native population were seasonal and transient: gold seekers heading to California hoping to strike it rich; Hispano settlers who were suddenly Americans—strangers in their own homeland and wondering what becoming American would mean.

Frémont, Carvalho, and the rest of their expedition entered this shifting world with military precision and the energy of a mobilized, victorious nation. The cultural, economic, and natural landscapes they were employed to photograph had yet to come into sharp focus for most Americans and their government. It would be Carvalho's job to provide that focused picture (and Frémont's to project the military's muscle) with a view towards massively expanding the country's economic and political reach.

A UNIQUELY AMERICAN STORY

The story of how the image came to be, how it survived, and the context in which it was made drew us in. But what really made us want to work up a longer article about the photo was the story of its maker. His is a fairly well-known adventure, but it touches on so many important stories of the American West, illustrating the tumultuous tale of how Colorado came to be.

Solomon Nunes Carvalho was born into a Portuguese-Jewish family in Charleston, South Carolina in 1815. His grandparents fled Portugal amid antisemitic violence in the late 1700s, eventually settling in England. Carvalho's father and uncle themselves then eventually emigrated to the US by way of Barbados, settling in the South and raising families of their own. Carvalho's father helped found the first reformed Jewish congregation in the United States while his brother became a rabbi.

Carvalho grew into a great artist while helping his family develop communities of safety for American Jews all up and down the Eastern Seaboard. By the 1850s, Both Carvalho and his business-minded father became interested in daguerreotypes and had started an

early portrait studio. Frémont's previous attempts to capture images in the West failed, but he took an interest in Carvalho's work while looking for investors in his expedition, and invited the emerging artist to join the expedition in 1853.

Carvalho barely survived. After enduring starvation, disease, and frostbite, he found refuge among the Mormon communities emerging in Utah, eventually making his way to Los Angeles. There he published his memoir from the trip and worked to develop a mutual aid society for the city's small Jewish population.

Carvalho's journey and the images he brought back were products of changing times in history. A Jewish man, openly serving not only his community but also his government, finding acceptance among the Mormons fleeing persecution in a time of American expansion into Indigenous homelands. These were things that would have seemed impossible just a few generations before and could have easily remained invisible if the fire that

claimed the other images had burned just a little hotter or a little longer.

The stories made visible by this one simple photo and the question that led us to it reminded us of why we love history, and Colorado's history in particular. They're reminders of the relative newness of our state in comparison with the homelands that came before. Reminders that Colorado's stories have always been deeply woven into the fabric of our nation's story.

As for Jim and me, a reminder that good sandwiches can always be excuses for interesting conversations. 

Sam Bock is History Colorado's director of interpretation and publications, and serves as managing editor of *The Colorado Magazine*. He hails from Boulder where his graduate work focused on the environmental history of the US West.

Solomon Nunes Carvalho around 1850. Courtesy of the Library of Congress



DOMESTIC TERROR STRIKES DENVER

BY SCOTT SPILLMAN

How Racial Violence Entrenched Segregation Around City Park

Editor’s note: This article contains a racial slur, quoted from a threatening letter the Carrington family received in 1926. We chose to print the slur in full as part of our ongoing commitment to fully and honestly confronting systems of discrimination, dehumanization, and violence that have long been a part of Black Coloradans’ lived experiences.

Early one Friday morning in December 1926, the Carrington family was jolted awake by an explosion. A bomb had detonated under their front porch in Denver’s City Park West neighborhood, ripping a hole in the porch and shattering their front window. None of the house’s residents—E.E. Carrington, his wife, their sixteen-year-old son, and their maid—suffered any injuries. But injuries were not the point, at least not yet. The point of this particular bomb was simply to scare the Carringtons, a Black

family, into leaving their lovely house located in what was then a fairly new middle-class neighborhood.

A letter in their mailbox explained: “Nigger tenant, 2253 Vine street, you have come into a district where you are not wanted. You have ruined property. Get out and stay out or take the consequences. They will be swift and merciless. The Committee that means business.”

As that threatening letter suggests, the Carringtons were considered urban pioneers of an unwelcome character. Early in Denver’s history, the city’s Black population was dispersed throughout town, with some larger clusters in cheap areas near the river and the railroad. As Denver developed, however, the frontier fluidity of the city’s early residential patterns hardened into neighborhoods that were defined more strictly by race and class. After the turn of the twentieth century, Denver’s Black population simultaneously grew in numbers and contracted in space, becoming increasingly concentrated in the aging Five Points neighborhood just northeast of downtown.

Yet Five Points had fuzzy boundaries and, by the 1920s, middle-class Black families like the Carringtons were testing its edges in an attempt to secure better housing in newer neighborhoods where they could raise their kids in a less-crowded environment. This meant moving into overwhelmingly white neighborhoods such as City Park West, where they did not receive a very warm reception.

E.E. Carrington (pictured) endured two bombings and two shootings after his family moved to Denver’s City Park West neighborhood in 1926. Courtesy of Denver Post/NewsBank



2253 Vine Street. The Carrington’s home still stands on Vine Street. Courtesy of Scott Spillman

Just three weeks after the Carringtons’ house was bombed in December 1926, the family suffered another series of attacks. This time Mrs. Carrington was out on the porch talking with a friend when a flurry of bullets flew past. The women ran inside and called the police, who came to investigate but found no leads. Apparently the police also offered no protection, because that very night, as the Carringtons slept, another shooter riddled their sleeping porch with more bullets.

Now the Carringtons requested nightly police protection, which the city provided. But they still were not safe. Early one evening in January, about two weeks after the shootings, E.E. Carrington was in his front room chatting with a friend when they heard something land on the porch. Carrington rushed outside and saw a bomb. Thinking quickly, he chucked it into the street, where it detonated with only minor harm to a neighboring house.

By that time, however, deeper damage had been done to the Carringtons and the surrounding community. The priest at nearby St.

Ignatius of Loyola Catholic Church presented a petition from the neighborhood to the mayor protesting the Carringtons’ residence there. At Cole Junior High, the principal had to call the police to prevent a riot when white and Black students got into what *The Denver Post* called “a heated discussion” about the Carrington attacks. And the Carringtons themselves had finally had enough. They sold their house to a white family and moved half a mile west, to a block well within Denver’s established Black neighborhood. A large crowd watched as the moving van carried their things away.

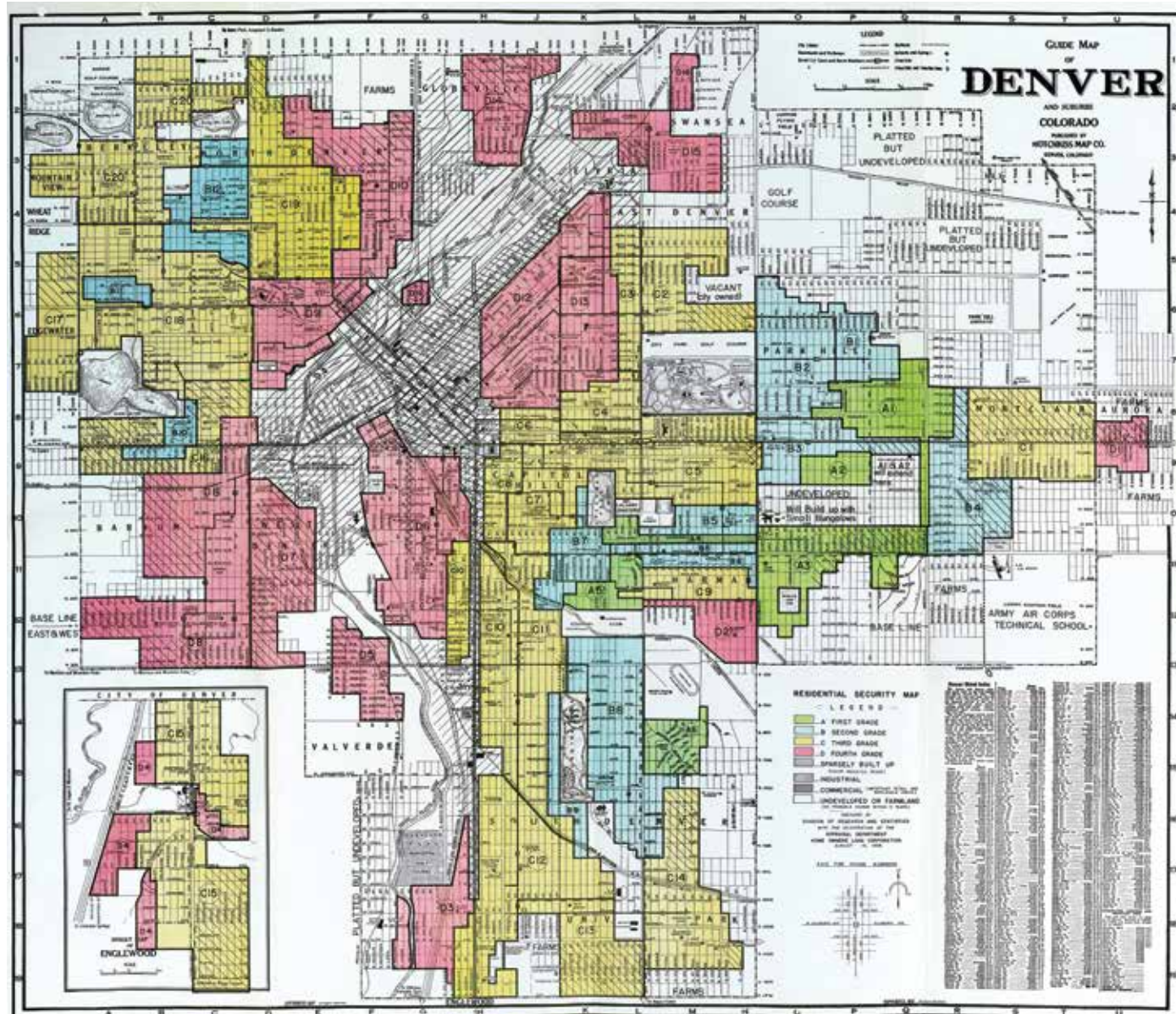
I came across the Carringtons’ story during my research for the Colorado Black Equity Study—a groundbreaking project, housed at History Colorado, that aims to document the constraints that Black people have faced in their quest to attain a decent quality of life in the Centennial State. The study started in late 2024, and our team of researchers is already hard at work examining subjects such as banking, business, criminal justice, employment, education, healthcare, infrastructure, and investment.

My own research has focused on housing. I started by looking at early twentieth-century Denver. Why, I wondered, did the city’s growing Black population become increasingly concentrated in Five Points? What combination of social, economic, and legal constraints caused the majority of Black Denverites to live in decaying old houses in one relatively small corner of the city? And what effects did that housing situation have on their quality of life as well as their ability to accumulate wealth?

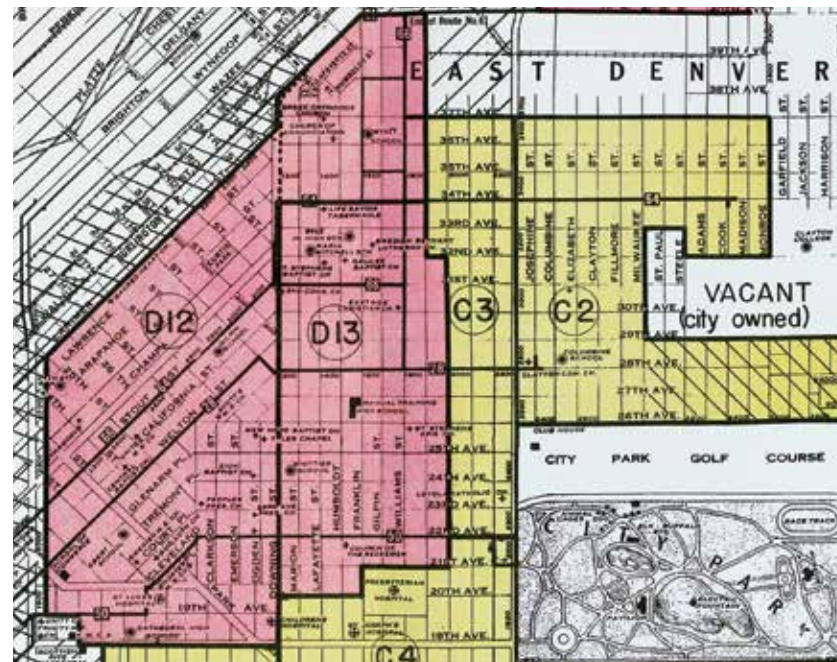
Those were the questions that led me to the Carringtons. Aside from the violence and the persistence of the people who wanted the Carringtons gone, the other thing that stood out to me about the Carringtons was their address, 2253 Vine. It’s just two blocks from where I live. I must have walked by it dozens of times with my kids and my dog.

The house, built in 1910, still stands; it’s near the corner of a pleasantly leafy block of attractive old brick





The locations of the bombings of Black families in the 1920s (indicated by circles on the map) track closely with racial boundaries that would later be enforced through legal means such as restrictive covenants, zoning, and redlining. Five Points Neighborhood and City Park detail shown at right.



Courtesy of Denver Public Library Special Collections, CG4314.D4E731938.U556.

GILPIN STREET HOUSE BOMBED IN RACIAL WAR

Blast Shatters Windows 200 Feet Away; Shakes All Buildings Within Several Blocks.

FAMILY NEARBY ESCAPES DEATH BY CLOSE MARGIN

Police Find Owner in Front Yard Shooting Rifle at Random.

residences located just steps from City Park and two miles from downtown. With modern updates, the house would now be worth more than one hundred times what the Carringtons paid for it a century ago. But the Carringtons never got to enjoy the appreciation of their property, nor the simple pleasure of living in the area, because they were bombed and bullied out of it.

Sadly, the Carringtons' experience was not uncommon during the 1920s. As the Great Migration brought an influx of Black newcomers to many northern and western cities, white residents across the country pushed for stricter residential segregation.

At first they resorted to the violent means of mobs and bombs. Chicago saw fifty-eight bombings of Black houses from 1917 to 1921, and cities

such as Detroit and St. Louis were also rocked by racial terrorism.

Denver followed a similar pattern. As middle-class Black residents like the Carringtons began to push east from the older Black neighborhoods of Five Points and Whittier into newer and more desirable neighborhoods near City Park, they faced violent efforts to evict them.

LEFT The bombings near City Park were big news in the 1920s, with stories often appearing on the front page of local papers under tabloid-esque headlines that hyped the violence. Courtesy of *Rocky Mountain News/Colorado Historic Newspapers*

BELOW 2112 Gilpin Street. Bombs terrorized two different Black families living at this house on Gilpin Street, over the course of several months in 1921. One of the bombs, which targeted the Starr family, was strong enough to shatter windows up and down the block. Courtesy of Scott Spillman



In 1920, a Black fireman named Claude DePriest moved into 2649 Gaylord Street, just northwest of City Park, with his wife and mother-in-law. Soon some 250 whites marched on the house two nights in a row to demand a sale. The Denver police declined to offer protection even as the group's leader, Foster Cline—a lawyer who would later be Denver district attorney during the Carrington attacks—declared that he could not guarantee the DePriest family's safety from the mob.

"In my opinion, sooner or later, there will be serious difficulty and perhaps bloodshed, when colored people move into the midst of a white neighborhood," Cline wrote. "...It may not come this week, this month, or this year, and perhaps it may not come to you people, but sooner or later it must come." Within weeks, the DePriest family sold the house to Cline's group for \$6,000. Today it is worth more than \$650,000.

Cline's prediction of violence soon came true. A year later, Walter Chapman, a longtime government mail clerk and secretary of Denver's Colored Civic Association, moved with his wife to 2112 Gilpin Street, a few blocks west of City Park. Chapman received threats and reported them to the police, but no one followed up. Then, around 10:30 one night, someone in a passing car threw a bomb onto the lawn. It ripped a hole in the grass and shattered windows at Chapman's house and the house next door. Sitting inside, Chapman and his wife were knocked from their chairs but not injured.

The Chapmans moved out, and another Black family, the Starrs, moved in. Charles Starr worked for Denver's parks department, and the house's location near City Park must have appealed to him. But like Chapman before him, Starr was not welcome there.

In November 1921, another bomb exploded at the house with such force that it was reportedly heard as far away as Broadway and "felt all over East

Denver." It tore holes in Starr's walls and shattered windows all along the block. Inside, Starr, his wife, and their ten-year-old daughter, Ceressa, were unharmed. But they must have been shaken. Starr stepped outside carrying his Winchester rifle and began to fire wildly into the street, spraying bullets into the doors and walls of nearby houses.

Denver police soon arrived and pledged to protect Starr's family, but the promise must have rung hollow. The Starrs soon sold the property and moved. Today the house is worth roughly \$900,000.

As in other northern and western cities, Denver's reign of domestic terrorism did not last long. By the late 1920s, the mobs and bombs that terrorized the Chapmans and the Starrs began to go out of style as segregationists turned to other, less violent tactics—methods of containment and constraint that were less likely to blow out the windows of other homeowners and give their city a reputation for lawlessness. They shifted, in other words, to even more powerful barriers: the kind that can hold up in court.

It ripped a hole in the grass and shattered windows

One of these tactics was zoning. In 1922, the same neighborhood improvement associations that often promoted residential segregation began to push for a comprehensive zoning plan to regulate residential, commercial, and industrial areas across Denver.

The city's Black press saw the proposal as "nothing more nor less than a residential segregation scheme." The zoning proposal was considerably more than that, and would shape the city in far-reaching ways that went well beyond race. But it is also true that the commission advocating for a citywide zoning law included at least three men who were or would soon

be members of the Ku Klux Klan. A subsequent commission to draft the zoning plan included one Klansman, Edgar H. Coykendall, who lived a few blocks from 2112 Gilpin Street and was active in efforts to prevent Black people from living in the neighborhood. Perhaps not surprisingly, the city's zoning map, implemented in 1925, drew a line about three blocks west of City Park, beyond which it required larger lots and dwellings that were less likely to be affordable to Black Denverites.

Even more powerful than zoning was the restrictive covenant—an agreement written into property deeds, or made between neighbors, stipulating that houses would not be sold to Black people (and often other groups as well). In 1926, the US Supreme Court ruled that property owners could enforce such restrictions, and four years later the Colorado Supreme Court followed suit; racial restrictions would continue to be enforceable until 1948.

Neighborhood improvement associations near City Park were advocating the use of restrictive deeds by 1922, sometimes in collaboration with the Denver Real Estate Exchange. In 1925, for example, representatives from the McCullough, Columbine, and Clayton Improvement Associations met at the City Park golf course clubhouse to discuss segregation. Coykendall, the Klansman on the zoning commission, was on hand to explain how to file racial restrictions on property deeds.

Soon racial restrictions reportedly covered the McCullough and Clayton Additions at the northwest edge of City Park—the neighborhoods where the main acts of domestic terror had taken place in the 1920s—as well as the Berger and Ashley Additions north of the park. These agreements effectively made the blocks on both sides of York Street into a racial barrier. They could not eliminate Black residents entirely, especially west of York, but they came close enough that one part of the neighborhood would later be known to some Black Denverites as "Snow

White Row." This legal regime of residential segregation was considerably less flashy than the mobs and bombs that characterized the early 1920s, but it would prove more enduring, leading to limited mobility and lower wealth for countless Black Coloradans in Denver and beyond.

I live in City Park West and walk these blocks every day. When I started my research for the Colorado Black Equity Study, I didn't expect to be

studying my own neighborhood. Yet perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. Even in the short time our team has been at work, we've found Black history nearly everywhere we've looked. All it takes is a little digging. I hope the Black Equity Study can bring more of these stories to the surface—and prove, in the process, that we will never fully understand our state's history without a better understanding of its Black history. 

Scott Spillman is an American historian and the author of the book *Making Sense of Slavery: America's Long Reckoning, From the Founding Era to Today* (Basic Books, 2025). He currently serves as senior research historian on the Colorado Black Equity Study at History Colorado.

2649 Gaylord Street. When the Black fireman Claude DePriest moved into this house on Gaylord Street in 1920, a mob of some 250 whites marched on it two nights in a row to demand that the DePriest family leave the neighborhood. Courtesy of Scott Spillman



What is Truth in History?

A Black Studies Professor's View on "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History"

BY CLAIRE OBERON GARCIA

Over 150 executive orders, hand-signed in front of TV cameras, have been a centerpiece of the second Trump presidency. As a scholar who specializes in Black Diasporic Studies and the former Colorado State Historian who continues to serve on the State Historian's Council, I am involved in several history and humanities projects and initiatives, and some of the orders have had direct impacts on my work. The executive order focusing on history—"Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History"—however, in particular provides all

of us with an opportunity to continue ongoing discussions about the role of history in the public square and in framing narratives of national identity. It can be another catalyst for urgent discussions about how we present history (both in and outside of the classroom) and, ultimately, how we think about the most highly treasured of American values: freedom of speech and thought.

As an interdisciplinary scholar, my focus has always been on how stories—remembered, imagined, preserved, or overlooked—are the foundation

of knowledge about human life and experience. Whether around a rowdy kitchen table or in front of a box of crumbling newsletters in a quiet archive, at academic conferences or in solitude with a novel that allows us to hear the voices of characters very different from ourselves, through myths and religious rituals or museum exhibits, stories connect us across time and place in powerful, complex ways, as human beings and Americans. We

Civil Rights Memorial in Kelly Ingram Park.
Photo by Claire Oberon Garcia



Detail of Civil Rights Memorial in Kelly Ingram Park.
Photo by Claire Oberon Garcia

can use our shared stories to build a more just, humane society in which all peoples and individuals are free to thrive and participate. For it is not enough to simply be exposed to other people's stories—to witness, for an afternoon in a museum or a few days with a book—what it might be like to see the world from a time and place different from your own. If we are in agreement that a strong, inclusive, democracy that allows all of its peoples and citizens to be respected and free is a good thing, then uncovering stories, understanding stories, and sharing stories is just a first step, and a prelude to hard work that must be done together in the project of creating "a more perfect Union."

Like many other executive orders we have seen this year, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" justifies its actions by asserting they are responding to years of dominance of "improper ideology" that is not aligned with the worldview and policy goals of the Trump Administration: "Over the past decade, Americans have witnessed a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation's history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth." This "revisionist movement... casts[s] [the US's] founding principles

and historical milestones in a negative light." They claim that bringing attention to the roles of racism, sexism, exclusion, and other forms of systemic and social oppression is "corrosive" and "divisive" and based on lies.

This particular Executive Order (EO) echoes a worldview included in many other presidential EOs and policies that emphasize the Administration's commitment to eradicating any activities in any realm of American society that support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Ironically, this EO on history proposes a strictly ideological and highly partisan approach to a field that is dedicated to uncovering, sharing, and discussing the complex facts of our shared past. The Administration seeks to purge what it considers "improper partisan ideology"—from the Smithsonian museums, the national parks, Independence Hall, and other historic institutions and spaces—and replace it with a different partisan ideology. In short, this document and other executive orders and policies are seeking to control and define the definition of "proper" ideology, and to silence any work that diverges from the narrow path laid out and approved by the White House. This is nothing short of an attempt to ensure all depictions of US history conform to a narrow range of ideas regarding what and who is important in American history, and this involves the erasure of those communities and individuals who struggled to achieve their human, civil, and citizenship rights in the face of social, legal, educational, and economic policies designed to exclude them.

Americans have long harbored a distrust of "ideology" and an almost instinctive rejection of the imposition of it. Playing on the suspicion of "ideology" was a powerful rhetorical tool in the US government's fight against Communism, socialism, and other "left-wing" radical movements since at least the 1930s and plays into the moral panic created during periods of

"Red Scare," most recently during the Cold War. The Trump Administration is using the same term to inspire distrust and fear rather than a robust discussion among a multiplicity of viewpoints based on critical thinking, verifiable evidence, and an understanding of democracy that includes all Americans.

We have already seen examples of the implementation of what constitutes the appropriate partisan ideology. In June 2025, President Trump restored the names of US military forts that had been named for Confederate military leaders who led an insurrection against the United States government and lost the Civil War. In an effort that started more than ten years ago, these forts had been renamed for military heroes whose sacrifices and patriotism had not gotten the recognition they deserved: people like Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, a civilian battlefield surgeon during the Civil War and the only woman to receive a Medal of Honor; Lt. General Hal Moore for his leadership in Vietnam and his wife Julia Moore for her advocacy for military families; and President Dwight Eisenhower for his actions as Supreme Allied Commander during World War II. Fort Bragg, named after a particularly brutal white supremacist general, was renamed Fort Liberty. Long an advocate for those committed to honoring Confederate heroes of the "Lost Cause," President Trump worked around the Congressional law banning the honoring of (though not the historical recognition and inclusion of) secessionists whose commitment to the slavery of African-descended peoples sparked the Civil War. The President and the Secretary of Defense found obscure, undistinguished, and in many cases emphatically unheroic soldiers with the same names as the Confederate generals. In honoring those who attempted to destroy the United States and were unsuccessful in doing so, this move is clearly an act of partisan

ideology rather than a tribute to outstanding patriotism and courage. It is a move intended to control a narrative of American history that venerates those who held and wanted to continue to hold millions of Americans in the bondage of forced and unpaid labor with no legal or social rights and protections.

The ideology that the current administration seeks to implement is aimed at airbrushing the inhumane and difficult aspects of our long and complicated shared history. It demands instead that history focus only on the positive, innovative aspects of American society that have made it a beacon of hope for those throughout the world—those who still suffer the pangs of oppression and prejudices against their identities and beliefs. The executive orders issued forth from Washington seem to call for an erasure of the role of race and culture in the social, political, economic, and legislative history of our country.

For example, they suggest the focus of history should be celebration, not analysis, understanding, and appreciation of facts. While there is much that is wonderful, innovative, and worthy of pride and celebration in our shared history, this approach keeps Americans and those around the world who look to the United States as an exemplar of freedom and democracy from fully valuing the enormity of the

struggles Americans of all backgrounds have pursued and endured in the never-ending pursuit of the basic freedoms guaranteed in our nation's founding principles. Without understanding the costs, risks, and seeming intractability of the obstacles to individual freedom,

The ideology that the current administration seeks to implement is aimed at airbrushing the inhumane and difficult aspects of our long and complicated shared history.

we can't truly appreciate and celebrate the triumphs, values, and groundbreaking ideas that make our nation unique. History, in this Administration's view, should only focus on American "greatness" and "innovation." In the section of EO 14253 focused on "Restoring Independence Hall," the order states that "all public monuments, memorials,

statues, markers, or similar properties within the Department of the Interior's jurisdiction do not contain descriptions, depictions, or other content that inappropriately disparage Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), and instead focus on the greatness of the achievements and progress of the American people or, with respect to natural features, the beauty, abundance, and grandeur of the American landscape."

At its core, it's plain that this order's approach to history is itself ideological and partisan, but also comes with an implicit threat to disparage and punish with funding cuts and staff reductions those agencies and educators who do not agree with the prescribed view of American history. This full-throttle rejection of thoughtful and evidence-based research by trained historians rests on a laundry list of willful obfuscations: the authority of those whose lives have been impacted by larger historical trends and events; the ideas expressed in original historical documents and primary sources; laws enacted by those elected to represent our values and hopes; court decisions; and federal, state, and local policies. Importantly, in the wholesale rejection of these diverse viewpoints, the only-celebration approach to history sees as unpatriotic any attention to or study of how racism, exclusion, sexism, heteronormativity, and other barriers to the full participation of all American citizens in our democracy. It sends a loud and clear message that those who at various points in our history have been intentionally excluded still have no place in stories of American history and development. It turns a blind eye to truly noble efforts and struggles that have allowed us to advance so far as a nation, one in which we can be rightfully proud.

The Birmingham Police Department building and "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" Historical Marker in Alabama. Photo by Claire Oberon Garcia

What many Americans see as noble efforts to tell more-inclusive stories are identified in recent orders as the "influence of a race-centered ideology" that is especially bad because it "portrays American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive." One can certainly say that there have been some exhibits, lectures, books, particular students, or organizations that may espouse this view. But this is just one perspective in conversation with many others. As a longtime and avid reader, museum-goer, and professional scholar whose research, teaching, and personal interests lie mostly in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, I can say with some confidence that a critical mass of African American appeals for freedom and justice have been based firmly in arguments that have their roots in Christian values and democratic principles as professed in the US Constitution and other literature of American democracy. While some particular exhibits may in some of our eyes "over-emphasize" passive victimhood at the expense of a focus on agency and self-determination, the diversity of perspectives and experiences is crucial to the substantive and inclusive conversations that we must have among and between communities to understand both our shared past and common future.

In a society that highly prizes individualism, the sin of United States racism has primarily been against the individual: for example, treating African Americans as if just because they were members of the "African," "negroid," "colored," "Negro," "Black," or "African American group" that they were inherently inferior. Less intelligent. Not suited for particular jobs. Not worthy of having access to education at the level that white and other groups had. To keep African Americans in an inferior position and to limit their access to educational, social, and job opportunities. To bar their full political participation as citizens of the United



States. To prevent them from reaping the benefits of their tax dollars such as being able to attend state universities. The list goes on and on.

So it is no surprise that some Black Radical traditions—based on the evidence and consistency of discriminatory laws, actions, and teachings—may indeed agree with Thomas Jefferson and Marcus Garvey that it is impossible for free Black people to live alongside free white people in the United States because it is "inherently oppressive" (see Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1781 and Marcus Garvey's "Africa for the Africans," *Negro World*, 1922). But this should be a matter of informed debate that involves evaluation of the evidence on both sides of the argument, not a refusal to present the ideas of both white and Black advocates of segregation, "back to Africa" movements, or Black nationalism and other forms of government.

President Trump's "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" actually advocates substituting one-sided partial stories and factually inaccurate claims for the tales of what real people lived through, and ideology for truth. Although the order makes the broad and vague claim that "Americans have witnessed a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation's history, replacing objective truth with a distorted narrative driven by ideology," this

Notices requesting that visitors report to the federal government if they feel any signage at parks or monuments is "negative about past or present Americans" have been posted at national parks around the country. This one is at the Gateway Arch National Park in St. Louis, Missouri. Photo by Gwen Lockman

Executive Order is calling for the Smithsonian and other historical organizations and entities that present history to do exactly this.

Ideology—proper or improper—has no place in the study and sharing of historical knowledge. Genuine historical research—whether by a scholar or a family historian—is driven by questions, usually attempts to recover the significant unknown that has an impact on the present or to resolve an apparent paradox or contradiction in the evidence, such as how a brilliant man committed to democracy who believed that enslavement was contradictory to democratic values could be a slaveholder himself.

Our nation's history is rich, complex, and still in the making. Different individuals are affected by different aspects of our shared history in multiple ways, depending on point of view, background, regional characteristics, class, and culture, to name but a few. It has unfolded over hundreds of years, influenced by peoples, explorations, and terrain that pre-existed the revolutionary war that set us free to create our own government and vision of citizenship.



The National Monument to Freedom, a memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, lists the surnames of every individual who was freed from enslavement by the Thirteenth Amendment. Photo by Devin Flores

Simplifying complicated stories to erase unpleasant truths and excluding people or factors because you don't like them is propaganda, not history. Propaganda fears the truth. It is a tool wielded by those who want to hold on to their own power and privilege at all costs because at root they feel their actions and values could not support the scrutiny of truth. All ideologies work against truth, which is messy and complicated, because they try to wedge it into a neat, simplistic story that fits current political needs. Replacing what the Executive Order refers to as "improper partisan ideology" with "proper partisan ideology" is inconsistent with traditional American democratic values and principles. The current administration sees any dissent or divergence of opinion from its own as unpatriotic and perhaps even criminal, and so seeks to silence, erase, discredit, and threaten those who disagree, rather than engage in respectful and fact-based debate.

Communications from the Administration often target Black or African American-related people and activities as egregious examples of demands to include historically oppressed and excluded communities. It is an indisputable fact that for the vast majority of our nation's existence, local governments, state governments, and the federal government created a series of laws in just about every realm

of civic and social life to constrain the freedom and liberty of African Americans. The vast majority of schools in the United States until the last three decades of the twentieth century were formally and informally segregated according to race, and not because non-white people preferred this arrangement. This changed in a major way only in the last sixty to seventy years with laws such as the Voting Rights Act and educational institutions' efforts to develop curricula that included the experiences of women, LGBTQ+, and non-white people. If this isn't an example that "[s]ocieties including the United States have used race to establish and maintain systems of power, privilege, and disenfranchisement," then what is?

The fact—and it is a historical fact—that African Americans have been struggling to be free and fully participating citizens in the United States against what might seem an overwhelming combination of laws, social practices, economic exploitation, and government barriers to education makes the story of African American liberation and triumph over the odds even more impressive. Of course, it took years and years. Of course, there was backlash along the way. Of course, African Americans worked with Americans of many different backgrounds who shared their vision of a true and inclusive

democracy that gave all Americans respect, opportunities, and the ability to be judged on their individual talents, aspirations, and pursuit of happiness. White women in the North played a significant role in helping Black abolitionists reach wide audiences and bring an end to chattel slavery. During the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement, people of faith—including many white ministers, pastors, and Jewish rabbis—travelled to southern states to fight racial segregation. White and Jewish college students were incensed by the unfairness and injustice they learned about and risked their lives to fight for voting rights and an end to discrimination both in the North and South. What a testament to faith in American democracy that they felt it their duty as citizens to ensure that all Americans enjoyed the respect and fruits of citizenship! Their efforts were met with violence by white supremacists who at the time held all the political and social power. But the activists' courage and patriotism led them to persevere.

The claim in this order and other statements from the government that the US record of progress on the racial front has been "consistent" and "unmatched [in its] record of advancing liberty, prosperity and human flourishing" is simply not true. Basic human and civil rights were hard won for many Americans. To truly be able to marvel at and celebrate the courage, persistence, faith, and risk taken by those who wanted to see democratic principles put into practice in the United States, we have to know what they were fighting against and that the majority of powerful white Americans for many years resisted these demands for fairness and fought back with laws, violence, and social exclusion. True American democratic ideals did not always prevail, and often took generations to be realized.

This goes for describing freedom struggles of all groups and individuals: the Norwegians' patience in coaxing dry and wild plains into productive farms; the Chinese in California and elsewhere using community resources and meager earnings from excruciating physical labor to build economically and culturally thriving Chinatowns; the fur-trappers from many backgrounds who married into the communities of their trading partners; the variety of people of different classes, national origins, and genders who set out in ships, canoes, covered wagons, military caravans, and on foot not knowing what they would find in two months or two years. To only celebrate the happy endings while forbidding talk of the journeys or not sharing what they were liberating themselves FROM makes these celebrations ultimately disrespectful and superficial. Freedom is precious, and often, attaining it demands much of our nation.

Personally, my respect for Thomas Jefferson's genius is enhanced by knowing that he wasn't a saint, but a highly intelligent person committed to democracy but who also profited directly from living in and promoting a slavocracy. He actually struggled to make sense of his conflicting ideas that all human beings deserved to be free but that African-descended people could not coexist in a democracy with white people. History is a discipline based on evidence and arguments for how that evidence could be interpreted given particular questions we have about who we are as a nation or evolving socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts. Ideology, be it "proper" or "improper," has no role in historical research and presentation. However, as human beings, the questions that we ask and the topics that interest us are inflected by our values, individual and collective, and there is nothing wrong with that as long as we maintain a free, uncensored marketplace of ideas where people can evaluate arguments

and the evidence used to support them for themselves. Suppressing certain topics, arguments, and ideas that meet disciplinary standards is antithetical not only to intellectual freedom but to democratic principles. Narratives of the struggle for liberation and freedom unite us as Americans. Erasure, silencing, and contempt divide us. Conversations based on evidence and due respect to varying experiences and perspectives will help us articulate our shared values, and allow all to play a part in supporting and advocating for not only preservation of our common past but understanding how it relates to our present and future as Americans. It is our responsibility as citizens of this great and unprecedented democratic experiment to know our history and integrate it into the role that we each play in constructing a "more perfect Union," and a future in which all have

the opportunity to thrive. The study and presentation of US history should inspire questions, reflection, and conversation; open doors rather than close them; foreground and work through paradoxes and contradictions rather than pretend that they don't exist; and include all of our experiences and dreams. 🇺🇸

Dr. Claire Oberon Garcia serves on Colorado's State Historian's Council and as Colorado State Historian from 2023 to 2024. She is an interdisciplinary scholar whose work at Colorado College focuses on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century American literature and writing by women of the African diaspora.

A statue of Rosa Parks in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, commemorating the spot where she was arrested for refusing to surrender her seat to a white woman. Photo by Devin Flores



The Domínguez-Escalante Expedition in Ute Country

Two Spanish priests launched a pivotal chapter in North American history just weeks after American colonists declared their independence from Great Britain.

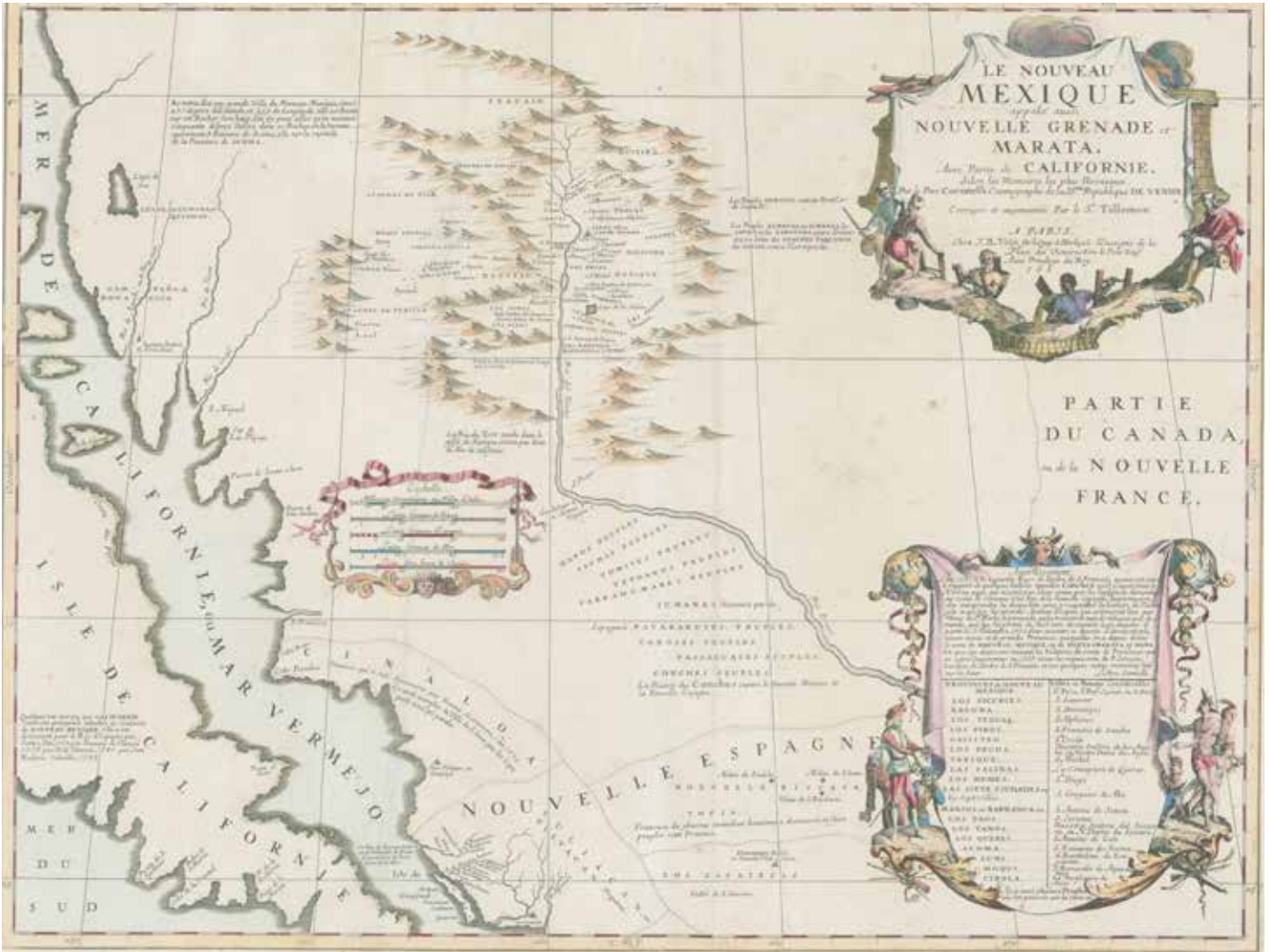
BY NICK SAENZ

In the late summer of 1776, ten men traveling out of New Mexico into the heart of modern Colorado stopped along the Dolores River and gazed at a ruin on its south bank. The ruin was in one respect unsurprising; similar in so many ways to the pueblos of New Mexico. At the same time, it confirmed the existence of a previously unknown, if abandoned, Native

settlement situated beyond New Mexico. Likely over 600 years old at that moment, the ruin glared back at them from across the centuries. It presented an indication of how very little these men knew about the interior of North America and the deep connection between Indigenous communities and their homelands. For generations, these remains of depopulated

Native settlements fueled fantastic imaginings of what lay just beyond New Spain’s northernmost frontier, filtering southward where they took on a life of their own. In the early years of Spanish influence in

This rare map of California depicts early missions on the California coast. Catholic priests from both the Jesuit and Franciscan orders established these churches, and the creator of this map was likely a member of either brotherhood. Courtesy of the Wesley Brown Map Collection



North America, the wild exploits of Álgvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and the rumored Seven Cities of Cibola propelled a series of expeditions into the continent’s interior, lured by the prospect of riches in gold. Francisco Vázquez de Coronado’s 1540 expedition discredited some of these myths and legends, but also established new horizons of mystery still further beyond the grasp of comprehension.

For the men gazing across the Dolores River deep inside the Ute homelands in 1776, the place that is now Colorado constituted an unexplored expanse of exotic and lucrative possibilities—a place where the bearded descendants of wayward Spaniards lived in concert with Native Tribes and the potential discovery of silver deposits lay around every corner. Contemporary maps marked the region as Teguayó and alluded to the existence of legendary locations such as the Sierra Azul and Lake Copala. The men who traveled through Colorado in 1776, however, were not seeking merely to confirm or dispel myths. Instead, they were part of an ambitious effort to bring the land and peoples of the Colorado Plateau and Great Basin into closer view and forge points of entry that would allow the Catholic faith and Spanish Empire to project their influence deep into the heart of the continent.

DEPARTING FOR PARTS UNKNOWN

Having departed from Santa Fe two weeks earlier, the party was attempting a traverse of western North America to the recently-established Spanish settlement of Monterey on the Pacific Coast. Their path stretched through canyons,



over mountains, across rivers, and beyond forests in a space almost wholly unknown to Spanish mapmakers. The expedition was led by two Franciscan friars, Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante. These fathers organized the expedition at the behest of their superiors—administrators who desperately sought to find ways to provision the remote corners of an expanding network of mission churches while also increasing the potential for making new converts among Indigenous peoples.

Conventional histories of the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition, as the undertaking became known despite the unfortunate shortening of Vélez de Escalante, have tended to situate the friars at the core. This practice has emphasized the Spanish, and by extension, European aspects of the expedition. The expedition nonetheless represented a critical encounter with Native America. Significantly, the friars enlisted a team that consisted of In-

Miera y Pacheco’s map offered one of the first detailed European views of the American Southwest based on firsthand observation of the land. It became a vital tool for Euro-American colonial expansion. Courtesy of the British Library

digenous participants with varying degrees of connection to Tribal communities along the route they traveled. These participants contributed in profound ways and, like the friars, engaged in the intercultural exchange that was perhaps the most lasting and consequential impact of the entire trip. For Indigenous communities, the arrival of these men marked the intensification of an era of change that would witness ever-increasing interruptions, emanating first from New Mexico and eventually from across the Great Plains.

The friars’ journey through Colorado and throughout present-day Utah and Arizona was aided by Native peoples who provided vital guiding services in a land that quickly lost all resemblance to New Mexico and which could have swallowed the



These are pages from Escalante's journal of the expedition. Unfortunately, the original journal is lost, but these pages come from one of the oldest known copies. Courtesy of the University of Arizona Libraries, Special Collections

party whole. Just days after visiting the ruins—likely those that now bear the name “Escalante” located behind the present-day Canyons of the Ancients Visitor Center and Museum—the expedition’s cartographer, Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, became entirely lost in a canyonland that Vélez de Escalante called the “labyrinth of Miera.” Emerging from this expanse of stone, the expedition encountered Utes for the first time, securing the aid of a Ute man named variously Panchucunquibirán, or “Great Talker,” and Red Bear—later named Silvestre—on the way to Utah Lake. At around the same time, the travelers were joined by a young man they named Joaquín who would accompany them for their entire circuit back to Santa Fe. These men and a host of other Indigenous people would serve as collaborators and informants, routing the party through mountain passes and along water corridors in search of what lay in the distance. Without them, the expedition would have floundered and likely could have never escaped from the clutches of the Intermountain West as fall turned to winter. While the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition failed to complete its journey to California, it returned to New Mexico with a wealth of knowledge and experiences that served to broaden an appreciation of the immensity of North America.

The Domínguez-Escalante Expedition occurred at a moment in time when the Ute country came into clearer view for the Spanish. For generations, the Spanish kept a nervous watch on the northern frontier of New Mexico—a line of demarcation roughly equivalent to the contemporary Colorado-New Mexico border—viewing the Utes as a particularly warlike Tribe and seeking to limit contact that might provoke extended conflict. The 1760s saw the Ute country opened up to New Mexican explorers and traders, perhaps the result of the collapse of the informal Comanche-Ute alliance in place from the turn of the eighteenth century to its midpoint. Pushed westward by the Comanches, the Utes viewed closer ties to Spanish New Mexico as a strategic opportunity and evidently welcomed increased contact. Spanish governors meanwhile continued to enforce an official ban on trade with the Utes like other nomadic Tribes. But the visit of a Ute trader carrying an ingot of silver to Abiquiú in 1765 spurred great interest in the San Juan Range where it was supposed to have originated. The allure of wealth, the possibility of shoring up Spanish North America, and the mystique of the unknown all drew colonial attention—attention that ultimately sent a group of men trekking into the heart of Ute country.

CAUGHT BETWEEN NECESSITY AND UNCERTAINTY

Along with rumors of silver and gold, the need to find an overland route to support new California missions spurred the search for a trail linking Alta California to New Mexico. Beginning in

1769 with the establishment of Mission San Diego de Alcalá (modern San Diego), the Spanish began an impressive spate of colonization along the California coastline. The effort followed, in part, from efforts to thwart Russian fur hunters migrating southward along the western seaboard. But projecting Spanish influence that far north taxed the reach of crown resources centered in Mexico City far to the south, so planners looked to New Mexico as a potential buttress. Already well over 150 years old—excepting years of abandonment after the Pueblo Revolt of 1680—New Mexican colonies were in New Spain’s northernmost zone of settlement. A thriving trade between Alta California and New Mexico, if it could be generated and protected, would serve as a mutually reinforcing development in the interest of commercial opportunity for both colonial zones. Despite evident returns, the precise distance between Santa Fe and the nascent capital of Alta California established at Monterey remained uncertain. More curious still was the variety and temerity of the Native Tribes that along the route.

Despite local knowledge and stories filtering into New Spain from Indigenous peoples in the area, Spanish knowledge of the Tribes of what would become Colorado remained shrouded in mystery, contributing to a sense of both uncertainty and excitement for the friars who were eager to preach the gospel to new peoples. New Mexicans were repeatedly banned from trading within the Ute country by Spanish governors intent on forestalling the sort of interactions that might provoke widespread conflict. This circumstance left infor-

mation regarding the Ute bands—their language and distribution among the innumerable mountain ranges and watersheds of the North American West—uncertain and unreliable. Some members of the expedition knew at least the points of entry to modern Colorado, having accompanied the expeditions of Juan Antonio María de Rivera during the 1760s. Evidence suggests that these same men returned to the region to pursue tentative trade forays. But the friars would later chastise these same men for possessing a limited

knowledge of the territory, their frustrations possibly hinting at the reality that the men had only visited the area on a limited basis. After all, Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín (no relation to the friar) had authorized the Rivera expeditions fueled by the possibility for resource extraction and little desire to pursue conversion.

This map, the first to depict the Río Grande Valley as far north as Taos, shaped how Europeans thought about New Mexico for nearly a century. Note how the terrain surrounding the Río Grande Valley is blank. Courtesy of the Wesley Brown Map Collection



At least in a few respects, the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition was a profound failure. It never made its way to the California coastline, reversing course in modern Utah after two months in the field. The return would take nearly another three months to complete through some of the roughest terrain in North America. Despite promises to do so, the friars did not return to missionize among the Utes or other Tribes for that matter. Indeed, despite a recommendation presented by Miera y Pacheco to King Carlos III himself encouraging the establishment of military garrisons in the Four Corners region and near Utah Lake, the Spanish did not extend their presence into the region in any substantial way. All the same, the geographic knowledge produced by the expedition was used by countless individuals to understand the region and plan for its conquest well into the era of US expansionism.

By contrast to countless other Spanish entries into North America, the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition was notably peaceful. Although the arrival of such a strange group unsettled some Indigenous communities who likely feared enslavement, the friars were temperate in their admonition of Native practices and often earned the respect of Tribal leaders even while proselytizing about a religious system so far removed from them. In the short term, relations with the Utes prospered and before the close of the decade Utes warriors campaigned with New Mexicans to police the continued pressure of Comanche expansion.

A MOTLEY MIX OF TRAVELERS

Reflecting on the importance of the Colorado ruin that in time would carry his name, Vélez de Escalante conveyed a desire to contextualize the site in a frame that was still new to him, having lived in New Mexico for little more than two years among the Zuni. The ruin, which he described in the expedition journal as “a small settlement of the same type as those of the Indians of New Mexico,” presented an encounter with a world that was at once familiar and foreign. It also pressured him to consider that the expedition had entered Native space—distinctly non-European and ancient. Vélez de Escalante could hardly imagine the age of the ruin. As he wrote, a short distance away the co-leader of the expedition, Domínguez, convalesced from a severe head cold that forced the party to halt for a day’s rest. Domínguez’s brush with malady was a harbinger of the rough days ahead in a terrain that grew increasingly harsh. Guided from July 29 to August 13 into modern Colorado by countrymen who previously had visited the region to explore its mineral and trade prospects, they approached a point where their knowledge of the land became increasingly sparse. The friars and their team stood on the cusp of a land unknown to them.

The Franciscan friars Domínguez and Vélez de Escalante have garnered the bulk of attention surrounding the expedition, but the actual group was much larger and encompassed a number of men with deep ancestral ties to North America. While formally sanctioned by Spanish officials, the expedition was not strictly Spanish in nature. The identity of the participants when considered collectively represented

a cross section of New Mexico society. Only four participants in the expedition were born in peninsular Spain and might rightly be considered Spaniards in a formal sense. Vélez de Escalante hailed from the mountains in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. Three other peninsulares—Juan Pedro Cisneros, Joaquín Laín, and Miera y Pacheco—carried the honorific title of “Don” in the journal and had entered New Mexico during their lifetimes. Seven of the ten men who set out from Santa Fe were born in the Americas, and well over half of the expeditionaries taking in consisted of men possessing Native ancestry or who were in all possibility wholly Indigenous. Of this number, Domínguez was the odd man out as a native of Mexico City. The Muñiz brothers, Andrés and Lucrecio, appear to have had close ties to the Utes and moved rather fluidly between quasi-Native status and recognition as Spaniards. Andrés was the only person who stayed in the New Mexican hamlet of Ojo Caliente at the height of an intense cycle of Comanche raiding on that community, and in all possibility his Indigenous ancestry spared him from the worst. Andrés figured as the expedition’s principal interpreter. Simón Lucero may have been of Pueblo origin based upon his indenture to Cisneros, the alcalde, or district magistrate of Zuni. Juan de Aguilar’s place of birth at Santa Clara may hint at the participation of a second Pueblo. Only the identity of Lorenzo Olivares has remained shrouded in complete mystery.

At least two men who went by the name Felipe and Juan Domingo were genízaros, members of a community of detribalized Indians who inhabited Abiquiú on the far northwest corner of New Mexico

at the juncture of New Spain’s remotest zone of settlement and the Ute country. For the better part of a generation, the genízaros of Abiquiú inhabited a key point of entry to New Mexico along the Chama River. Subject to intense religious scrutiny in the 1750s and 1760s for alleged ties to sorcery, the genízaros of Abiquiú represented a living reminder of New Mexico’s ties to a thriving trade in Indian slaves. Disconnected from their kin networks, they were nonetheless powerfully connected to the land and Native lifeways. Felipe and Juan Domingo—effectively stowaways but for lack of a seaborne route—joined the expedition on August 14, just after the party’s visit to the ruins on the Dolores River. Although the exact timing of their departure from Abiquiú is impossible to know, they likely shadowed the expedition for the better part of two weeks. The friars conceded their participation as companions in the expedition “to forestall the mischief which either through their ignorance or through their malice they might do by wandering any further.” Vélez de Escalante’s remark obscures the ties these men may have possessed to the region north of Abiquiú.

A CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

The Domínguez-Escalante Expedition presents clear indications of the shift in Spanish and Ute relations. On several occasions the friars preached to groups of would-be

converts. Significantly the Ute responded politely, even suggesting an eagerness to learn more about Christianity. Taken from the vantage of 250 years, it would be right to question Vélez de Escalante’s description of these events and the encounter between Christian worship and Ute lifeways. The Utes and other Native peoples were eager to forge bonds with the Spanish that might facilitate trade and the language barrier limited a full appreciation of the friars’ message. Significantly, the friars did not make demands of onlookers and do not appear to have diminished Native forms of worship except

in the company of their fellow expeditionaries. Upon discovering that several men, Miera y Pacheco included, sought the aid of some Paiutes to cure the cartographer of an apparent malady, Vélez de Escalante reported in the journal that the two friars were “extremely grieved by such harmful carelessness and we reprimanded them.” Long-standing European beliefs associated contact with Indigenous persons as corrupting influence. The friars also reprimanded Andrés Muñiz for running an illicit trade with the Sabuagana Utes that they thought would undermine the religious message of the expedition.



This map depicts the Reserve, New Mexico region. At the top, celestial elements hover above Eagle Peak, the region’s tallest sacred mountain. The middle brings to life key archaeological sites, portraying ancestors engaged in their daily work, alongside the Salt Woman deity guiding her people to essential salt resources. At the bottom, a harvest dance unfolds at Zuni Pueblo, with dancers gazing toward the Reserve. History Colorado, 2020.60.1



Ornate decorated pottery has long been an important part of daily life and cultural practice for Zuni peoples like those the expedition encountered on their journey. History Colorado, 974.49

They were, in fact, quite dismissive of the value to be garnered from trade and harbored negative views of the intentions of traders among Indigenous peoples. In late October, Vélez de Escalante expressed the criticism that some of these traders “go after the flesh which they find here for their bestial satisfaction.”

The seemingly positive reception of their attempts at proselytization, on the other hand, filled the friars with great joy and contributed to their enthusiasm for the expedition. Among the Sabuaganas, Vélez de Escalante noted that “All assembled listened with pleasure.” Domínguez’s preaching of the gospel was interrupted by a man who offered an interpretation of the crucifix possibly derived from an earlier interaction with New Mexicans. Stunned by the man’s excitement as he stood “beating his breast with his hand,” the friars appealed to the Sabuagana chief to foster a path toward eventual conversion. At Utah Lake, the fathers had a fascinating exchange with the Timpanogos. There the friars explained their

desire to build a mission nearby. According to Vélez de Escalante, “All [the Utes] unanimously replied that the padres should come...and that they offered all their land to the Spaniards for them to build their homes wherever they pleased.”

The friars likely misunderstood what the Utes meant to say to them. The journal suggests that the Utes made use of the reverential title of “tata” with the fathers in this instance, which suggests a warm reception. They were evidently excited by the arrival of the expedition and eager to establish a shared defense and promote trade. On September 25, the Laguna presented a painted token of their affection that was later given to the Spanish governor at the completion of the expedition. The gift followed from a prompting on the part of the friars to obtain an indication of Laguna investment in their return. The desire of the friars to seek the return of a larger missionizing force appears to have been a common thread of their worldview, which served to frame their interactions with Native peoples.

On October 2, Vélez de Escalante remarked: “They all replied very joyfully that we must come back with the other padres.” As they later abandoned the route to California and turned their attentions southward toward the canyonlands of the contemporary Arizona-Utah border, the friars were apparently filled with excitement for the prospect of evangelizing the Cosninas, or Havasupai.

NATIVE GUIDANCE

The expedition relied on several Ute guides to navigate through the interior of the Colorado Plateau and western Great Basin. Their participation represented the longest and most consequential cultural encounter of note. Of these men, Panchucunquibirán warrants enormous appreciation. A Timpanogos or Laguna as Vélez de Escalante referred to him, he made contact with the expedition at a moment when the knowledge of those men who accompanied Rivera into the north had reached its maximum extent, accompanying them into a Sabuagana Ute encampment in late August. The expedition floundered when the Sabuaganas quickly broke camp on September 2 and his intervention placed its participants on track to California once again. In a telling journal entry, Vélez de Escalante conceded “We did not know what direction to take.” Panchucunquibirán’s navigational skills were not without fault, so far as he was from the Utah Valley. On September 6, a dispute arose over the direction to take at a fork in the road. Laín and others pro-

tested a route chosen by Panchucunquibirán that they feared would take them too far north. A chance encounter with a Sabuagana encouraged a more westerly route. The Laguna man nonetheless directed the party over the Colorado River and through northwestern Colorado and eastern Utah before arriving at Utah Lake, flamboyantly returning to his people donning a blanket provided in exchange for his guiding services along with an all-purpose knife and white glass beads.

Panchucunquibirán held an important political role among the Timpanogos, described as a chieftain by Vélez de Escalante. In addition to his services as a guide, Panchucunquibirán secured the calm of his compatriots on the banks of Utah Lake. As the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition made its arrival at the shores of the lake, the Timpanogos confronted them with weapons in hand. According to Vélez de Escalante, Panchucunquibirán diffused the situation, providing to “them an account so much in our favor of what he had observed and witnessed ever since he had become one of us, and about our purpose in coming” and reporting “at very great length how well we had treated him and how much we loved him.” In this way, his involvement facilitated the entry of the expedition into the distant homeland of an unfamiliar Ute band and ensured a positive reception.

At around the same time that Panchucunquibirán joined the expedition, a young man, “still a boy” to Vélez de Escalante, fell into participation as well. Possibly an orphan, the young man quickly adopted a strong esteem for the fathers and came to be a consummate member of the expedition. Initially

thrown on a saddle with Don Laín, Joaquín came to figure as one of the expedition’s ablest participants, in time calming Paiutes to extract critical navigational information and attempting to pilot a route across the Colorado River as the expedition feverishly struggled to exit the canyonlands along the Arizona-Utah border. In January 1777, Joaquín made his way to Santa Fe where he was presented to Governor Pedro Fermín de Mendinueta. What happened to him in subsequent years remains a mystery, though he may have returned to the Ute country. On campaign against the Comanche in the San Luis Valley in 1779, Spanish Governor Juan Bautista de Anza referenced the participation of men who accompanied the friars, but furnished no information to identify the men. Joaquín’s linguistic ability in Ute would have facilitated communication with the roughly 200 Ute and Jicarilla Apache who joined the campaign. In this regard, his service likewise would have been highly sought after by traders seeking to locate commercial outlets beyond Abiquiú.

That the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition took place amid a contest between European empires warrants little debate. Only very recently, scholars have begun to grapple with the reality that European imperial competition existed alongside confrontations with powerful Indigenous tribes. Historian Pekka Hämäläinen even has suggested that New Mexico functioned as a virtual satellite of Comanchería—a Spanish term for the Comanche homelands—in the late eighteenth century. Persistent raiding depleted the horse herd attached to New Mexico’s principal military garrison at Santa Fe, devastated settlements

along the territory’s periphery, and drove a state of panic into the hearts of colonial administrators and residents alike. Expansionist pressures were similarly felt by the Ute. As the expedition traversed a portion of northwestern Colorado, Panchucunquibirán reported the departure of some Utes “who had moved out for fear of the Comanches.” The same pressures of Comanche expansion experienced in New Mexico were present among the several Ute bands that inhabited western Colorado.

Amid this crisis, the expedition ventured only lightly armed into an area north of the Colorado River that figured as a site of persistent conflict between the Comanche and Ute. On more than one occasion, the Ute cautioned the party to avoid venturing beyond the great river. Their fears might have referenced the proximity of the Shoshone and not the Comanche, though the Yamparika band of Comanche were known to be present in the region. The risk posed to the expedition points to the still-unconquered and independent nature of western North America after three centuries of Spanish presence. Not only was the land distinctly not Spanish, its status as Comanche or Ute remained an uncertain question and one undergoing active revision. The journal suggests repeated and long-term successes on the part of the Comanche in pushing deeper into Ute country, and the expedition found itself crossing land that was distinctly foreign in a political sense, doing so without seeking authorization to be there. From a Comanche point of view, the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition would have appeared a provocation and possibly even a threat.

The boldness of the friars in venturing into this space was not lost on Panchucunquibirán who remarked on their determination in a Laguna camp on the shores of Lake Utah. The friars claimed to be guided by a divine purpose that also protected them from harm. Meanwhile, the members of the expedition were nervous that Panchucunquibirán was leading them to an ambush. In the journal, Vélez de Escalante wrote that members of the expedition who were “conversant with the Yuta language tried to convince us that Silvestre was leading us by that route either to keep us winding about so as not to proceed further or to hand us over to a Sabuagana ambushade that could be awaiting us.” On September 17, the site of tracks attributed to the Comanche sent a panic through the group. Boldness coexisted with an awareness that the expedition was far from home in a zone of

conflict into which they might quickly be drawn. Vastly outnumbered and incapable of offering a robust defense, the expedition moved only at the mercy of the Tribes.

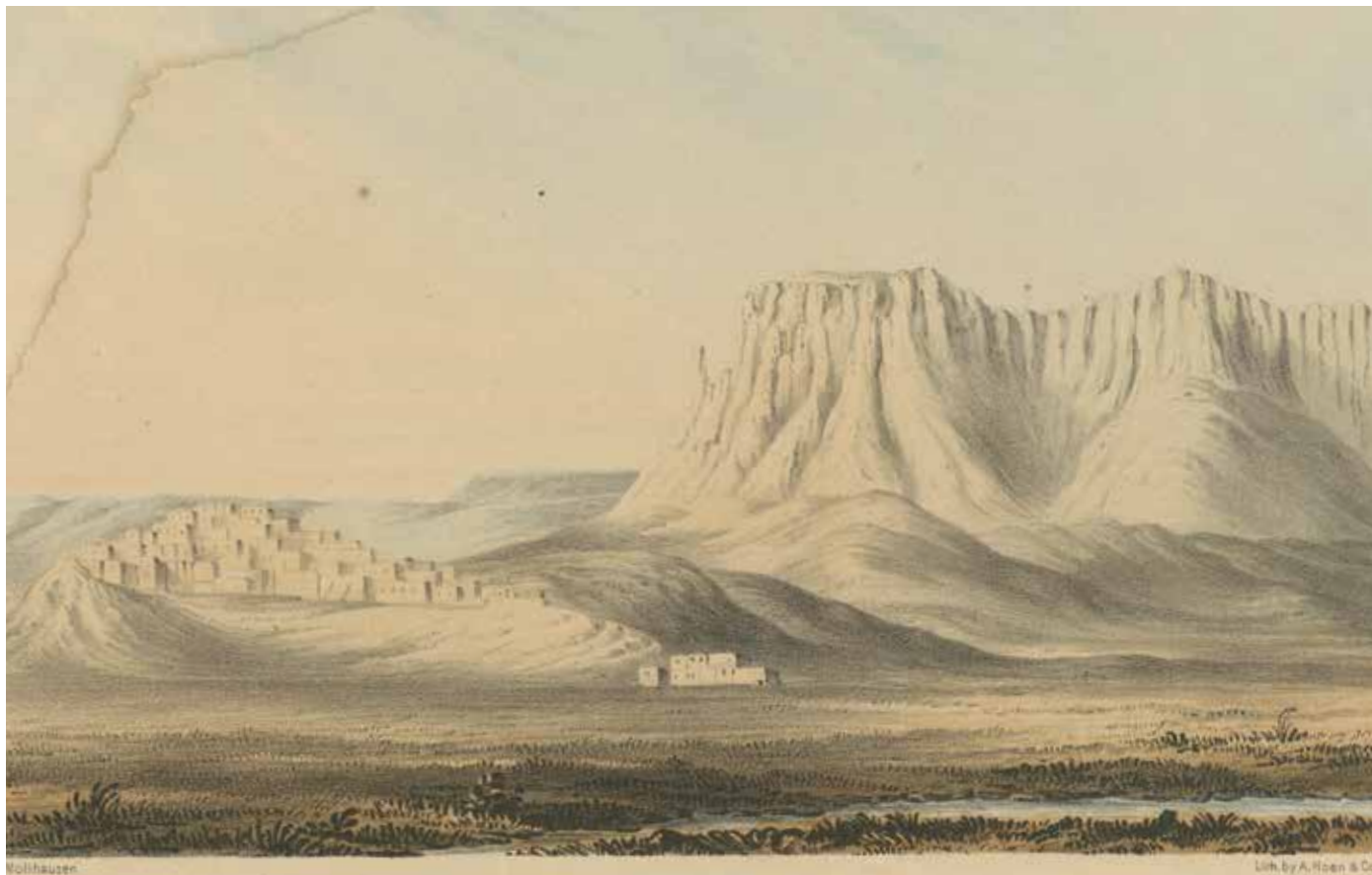
MAPPING NATIVE SPACE

Modern textbooks often replicate a problematic imaginary in their portrayal of North America in the later half of the eighteenth century. Enormous blocks of primary colors often demarcate the wishful thinking of European bureaucrats and do little to convey the real character of political boundaries in the continental interior. The practice of dividing North America among European powers overlooks the tenuous hold of distant bureaucracies in places such as London and Madrid. The maps produced by Miera y Pacheco shatter this convention by presenting a West divided by Native homelands, all situated

within an elaborate patchwork of neatly organized homelands. In fact, western North America was not so neatly organized and the expedition traveled through areas where control was contested. Vélez de Escalante’s reporting makes evident that even northwestern Colorado, areas around modern day Meeker and Rangely, was a site of conflict between the Ute and the expansionist Comanche. South of Lake Utah, the variety of peoples encountered by the expedition became more evident and their permanence less evident.

The neatly ordered maps we’re familiar with today reflect conventions of geographic organization familiar to Western mappers and the

An image of the Zuni Pueblo, which the expedition visited in 1776. This image was created by German-born artist and illustrator H.B. Mëllhausen in the late 1800s as American expeditions began encountering Puebloan peoples and their homes. History Colorado, 83.129.52



imagined extent of political states. Rarely do they reflect the lived reality of actual people until long after 1776. Although traversing western North America necessarily encompassed the crossing of Native borders, these boundaries were less fixed by comparison to European ones and often took shape as cultural expressions marked by the appearance of dress and language. In the course of the expedition, Vélez de Escalante remarked on the existence of Indigenous borders several times. For instance, near the border between the modern US states of Colorado and Utah he described the Green River as a border between Comanchería and the Ute country. In the Great Basin, he remarked on other borders suggesting for example on October 10 that “The full-bearded Yutas extended his far south, and here their territory ends apparently.” Referencing these same full-bearded Utes, or Borbones as he labeled them, on October 13, he called attention to their border with the Huascari. Of the Huascari, he stated, “They border... along the northwest and north and employ their language, although with some variation.” That Vélez de Escalante chose to remark on these borders suggests that they were palpable frontiers experienced by the members of the expedition or perhaps features remarked upon by their Native guides. Alternatively, they may suggest a desire to impose order on a space that appeared fundamentally disordered from the perspective of the friars.

The maps likewise include geographic features derived from conversation with Native peoples. Communication in this regard was not always perfect. In one glaring

error, Miera y Pacheco confused the pathways of the Green River and the Sevier River, suggesting a westerly flow toward the Pacific Ocean. The error, which appeared on his later maps, established the existence of a water course that did not exist and which would survive among cartographers for the next several generations. The error nonetheless speaks to Miera y Pacheco’s reliance upon Native Americansources. It was precisely the knowledge of political boundaries furnished to him by Native people that framed early western conceptions of western North America. Baron Alexander von Humboldt viewed one version of the Miera y Pacheco maps in Mexico and later shared his memory of the document with none other than US President Thomas Jefferson. So it was that a prominent American expansionist came to understand the West.

MAKING COLORADO

As Colorado prepares to celebrate its sesquicentennial, the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition provides a window into a distant time and offers context for reflecting upon the difference a century can make. Two hundred fifty years ago, Colorado remained as it had been for thousands of years, a Native space still largely unknown to Westerners. In these years, Indigenous knowledge and wayfinding served as a vital component of attempts by Spaniards and New Mexicans to enter Colorado and find their way home. The relative success of an ostensibly European expedition depended upon Indigenous support. Within one hundred years, on the eve of Colorado statehood, the context had changed dramatically with Hispano settlements extending

northward from New Mexico into portions of southern Colorado, Anglo communities rapidly taking shape along the South Platte River, miners steaming into Ute redoubts in the San Juan Range, and railroads crossing remote mountain pathways while ferrying still more newcomers into the region. The world experienced by the friars and their fellow voyagers had largely been undone.

Reflecting on the significance of the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition 250 years later, ample evidence exists to rank it first among several key episodes that explain the evolution of relations between Indigenous peoples and recent arrivals who have come to call Colorado their own. The friars and the men who accompanied them explored western North America with intent to recreate it in their image, making converts to Catholicism and establishing military outposts that would support the imposition of a new political order. In the end, their perceptions of this space were framed by interactions with Native peoples who likewise conveyed a sense of shared experiences—the Comanche threat foremost among them. With time, this comparatively more hospitable form of cultural interaction gave way to outright conquest. Two hundred fifty years later, we live in the afterworld that conquest created. 🇲🇪

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AGAINST GREAT ODDS

Elizabeth “Baby Doe” Tabor’s wedding gown grew into a symbol of her controversial marriage to Colorado’s Silver King. Its rediscovery and display after her death echoes her own survival story.

BY TARA KAUFMAN

Elizabeth “Baby Doe” Tabor first became known to me in the form of a warning, during one of my first few days as a curator at History Colorado. I was walking through the galleries with one of my new colleagues, getting to know what they knew about Colorado history. Among the many facts they sprung on me was the story of Elizabeth Tabor and her infamous wedding dress, long considered to be the jewel of the museum’s collection of historical clothing. “You should know Baby Doe,” they said, before launching into the now-familiar synopsis of her remarkable story.

My first glimpse of the dress was just a few months later when we pulled it out to examine it in advance of its conservation treatment that would smooth and stabilize the wrinkles and tears it had accumulated over time. The dress laid there in its box—the biggest allotted to any one garment in our storage facilities—in a pile of carefully arranged folds. Once on the table, it unraveled to twice its folded size, requiring two additional tables to support its seven-foot train. It appeared as a sea of cream brocade, lacking any shape, as elusive to me then as Elizabeth Tabor herself.

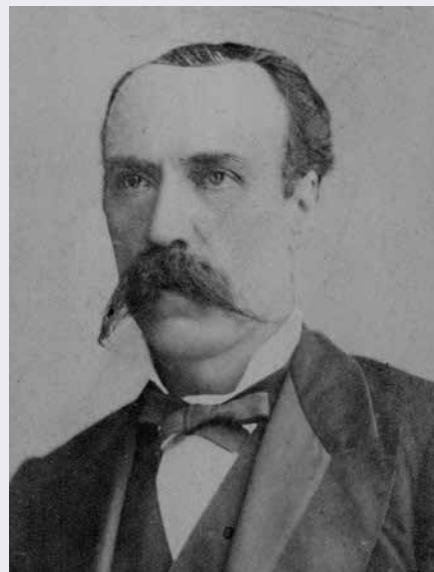
To many Coloradans, the Tabor story is as familiar as a folk tale, passed down through the generations with evolving lessons about



I have had to do much against great odds, with only good health and high hopes to support me.

love, morality, and womanhood. But for anyone who might need an introduction, the crux of the story begins 142 years ago, on March 1, 1883, when the woman who had become known as “Baby Doe” stepped into her then-new wedding gown and walked down the aisle in a Washington, DC ceremony that made headlines nationwide and wrecked her reputation.

Elizabeth was a divorcée nearly half the age of her magnificently



LEFT A cabinet card portrait of Elizabeth “Baby Doe” Tabor taken around 1886 by Wells & King, Denver. History Colorado, 89.451.4634

ABOVE A portrait of Horace Tabor taken around 1882. History Colorado, 2000.129927

rich fiancé, the mining magnate and so-called “Silver King” Horace Tabor, and his own recent divorce from his faithful wife, Augusta, only made the matter more contentious. When rumors broke that neither Elizabeth nor Horace had yet been legally divorced from their previous spouses, Victorian society erupted in a gossip storm the Tabors would never live down. When Horace died from appendicitis sixteen years later, the Tabor reputation remained in tatters and their fortune was exhausted. His death left Elizabeth to care for their two daughters and endure thirty-six years of poverty and public ridicule.

Shunned by Denver society, Elizabeth would be spotted around town in the decades that followed but was mostly ignored until she was famously found frozen in the Leadville cabin where she lived near the source of her husband’s brief but extraordinary wealth, the Matchless Mine.

This story, dramatically simplified here for the sake of an introduction, has been sensationalized time and again in the press and in popular magazines. It’s been turned into an opera and into films, fictionalized in novels and re-examined by scholars. When I first began overseeing the Tabor wedding gown’s conservation, I quickly realized the scale of the project would require me to know the dress and its wearer from the inside out. I was eager to dive into the wealth of publications about Tabor, but wound up troubled by what I found.

One after the next, beginning even before her death, each author and biographer spun a tale of a gold-digging homewrecker whose impropriety and scheming came back to bite her in the end. She was a real-life beauty turned hag, her riches reduced to rags, and in this way her identity seemed to always be cheapened, then torn in two: the before and the after. It wasn’t until my readings entered the twenty-first century that I found the nuanced, feminist arguments that I was looking for in publications like Judy Nolte Temple’s book *Baby Doe Tabor: The Madwoman in a Cabin*, in which she skillfully dismantles the legend of Baby Doe and returns complexity and agency to the woman who preferred to be called Lizzie.

As I continued researching the history of Lizzie’s wedding dress, I began to realize just how inter-

twined it was with the public’s fascination with the Tabors. Since the day of the notorious wedding, the dress has been nearly as famous as the bride, becoming a symbol of the scrutiny she and her story have received over time. Throughout its existence, the dress has come in and out of public view, and each time it resurfaces, the public discourse about it reflects evolving attitudes towards women’s dress and autonomy.

A SOCIAL SENSATION

The dress first made its debut at the Tabors’ Washington wedding in 1883. Since no photographs of the ceremony survive, and no reporters were allowed inside, we can only rely on secondhand newspaper accounts and the dress itself to interpret how it first appeared

when Elizabeth wore it. According to articles from the time, the private parlor in Washington’s Willard Hotel was transformed into a “perfect fairyland” for the Tabor wedding ceremony. Masses of flowers and plants were positioned before mirrors, twined around pillars, hung from chandeliers, and arranged into sculptural decorations, including a floral arch hung with a white wedding bell that served as the dining table’s centerpiece. It was a small but showy ceremony designed to advertise Horace’s unstoppable ascent into high society.

The wedding gown of Elizabeth “Baby Doe” Tabor on display at the Center for Colorado Women’s History, 2025. Photo by TrevG Studios Photography. History Colorado





For the past month, he had been serving temporarily as Colorado's US Senator, and he took the opportunity to wed his bride before an assembly of politicians and President Chester Arthur himself. Reports generally agree that Elizabeth wore a 7,000-dollar white silk gown, matching slippers, and a veil. Many mention elbow-length gloves and a bouquet of white roses, and several others write that the neckline of the dress was trimmed with either feathers or tulle. The style of the dress is alluded to with phrases like "low neck" and "short sleeves," indicating what reporters considered notable style choices.

In comparison with more conservative styles of wedding gowns at the time, Elizabeth Tabor's dress would have struck even the fashion-forward as a bold pick. Made with a shimmering floral silk brocade and a dramatic seven-foot

train, the dress reflects the trending silhouette of the time, with a boned bodice that slims and accentuates the waistline and a sloping bustle protruding from the back.

Despite looking through existing research and the Tabor scrapbooks, letters, and a pile of miscellaneous receipts, I was unable to find any references to who made the dress. However, I presume that Elizabeth likely would have commissioned it from a respected dressmaker or asked the favor of her father, who was a clothier back home in Wisconsin and whom she visited on the way to the wedding. Elizabeth may have chosen white for the color of the dress simply because it was in style, or to emphasize her newfound wealth, as white was a difficult color to clean or rewear. She may also have chosen it directly in reference to Queen Victoria of England, who had popularized the color decades

Elizabeth "Baby Doe" Tabor walking down the streets of Denver, 1929. Fred M. Mazzulla Collection. History Colorado, 2022.579092

before during her own wedding to Prince Albert in 1840. Tabor, whose scrapbooks are filled with clippings of foreign royalty and fashion, was well-known for her love of nobility and high society and may have viewed her marriage to Colorado's Silver King and US Senator as an event on par with a royal wedding. While brides of the time most often selected gowns with wrist-length sleeves and high collars, Elizabeth opted for an open neckline and short sleeves—features aligning with the era's style of evening gowns but less common in bridal wear.

Worn by a different woman in another setting, Elizabeth's dress and its neckline may not have caused a stir. But amid her controversial ceremony to the much older man she'd perceivably snatched

from his respected wife, her stylistic choices were interpreted by some as indicative of her lack of taste and morality. Three days after the wedding, Washington's *Sunday Herald* published an article in its gossip column commenting on the "astonishing" ceremony that seemed like a "joke." Describing Elizabeth's wedding dress, the author noted its "extremely low corsage." This drastic shift in tone, compared to initial reporting on the dress, was almost certainly tied to the scandal that broke shortly after the wedding when the priest who performed the ceremony was informed, apparently for the first time, that both Elizabeth and Horace had previously been divorced. Further yet, it was rumored that neither of their divorces had been legal, at least not according to the Catholic church, and that the two had already discreetly eloped in a secret ceremony in St. Louis just months before their extravagant display in Washington.

The entire affair was maligned in the press nationwide, and people close to the Tabors wrote in to provide their firsthand accounts. This list of contributors includes the priest who presided over Elizabeth's first marriage to Harvey Doe, the man she followed to Colorado, and whose name likely inspired her own nickname. In the priest's statement, he declared Elizabeth's second marriage to Horace illicit. Similarly, Missouri's *Neosho Times* went so far as to write, "Old Horace Tabor, the coarse and vulgar old scamp... has put away the plain old wife of the days of his poverty; his money has bought a divorce, and two or three weeks ago he married an Oshkosh (Wisconsin) 'grass widder' aged twenty-four." ("Grass widder" is a

slang misspelling of "grass widow," itself a derogatory slang term for a woman who is divorced or separated from her husband.)

Had Elizabeth worn a more understated gown during the ceremony, it may have gone unnoticed amid the furor surrounding the wedding. Instead, the press's description of the open neckline as "an extremely low corsage" likely convinced the public that it was lower than it was, and no photographs of the dress were distributed to prove otherwise. The purportedly low neckline therefore became fodder for the morally superior public, who used it as evidence of Elizabeth's indecency in marrying Horace Tabor.

Newspaper clippings pasted in the Tabor scrapbooks reveal clues about Elizabeth's own opinions of the public outrage. In one article, the writers of Central City's paper, the *Register-Call*, wrote a statement in support of Tabor, in which they said, "she was recognized while here as a woman of many strong and worthy qualities. She knew the right and dared to do it... She pursued the even tenor of her way, turning neither to the right or left, and is at last rewarded by becoming the bride of the richest man in the silver state." Another unlabeled clipping makes an impassioned defense of the Tabors, and contains many phrases which have been underlined in pencil presumably by Elizabeth herself:

The Tabors may have been indiscreet and foolish to have hurried matters, and in forcing themselves to be the front in Washington society, but those who insult Tabor because he married quick, would be the first to get

down and fawn at his feet if they could obtain some of his money, and those who try to make it unpleasant for the pretty little woman who married Tabor, and whose life had known little of peace and comfort before she met him, are people who would like mighty well to step into her little shoes.

Elizabeth's clippings and annotations give us a glimpse into her state of mind, revealing her frustration with the hostility and controversy surrounding her ascent into high society—one she considered perfectly justified and deserved.

till Cheyenne freezes over. The Tabors may have been indiscreet and foolish to have hurried matters, and in forcing themselves to the front in Washington society, but those who insult Tabor because he married quick, would be the first to get down and fawn at his feet if they could obtain some of his money, and those who try to make it unpleasant for the pretty little woman who married Tabor, and whose life had known little of peace and comfort before she met him, are people who would like mighty well to step into her little shoes. Give the Tabors a rest, and let them enjoy their money and religion just about as they choose. Those who hate a man because he is rich, or a woman because she is pretty, are mighty small potatoes.

Unlabeled newspaper clipping pasted into the Tabor scrapbooks, with portions underlined possibly by Elizabeth Tabor. Horace Austin Warner Tabor Collection. History Colorado, Scrapbook 3, 133

IN HER SHOES

If we consider her perspective as a woman raised to use her beauty as a tool to secure her future, Elizabeth's anger at the criticism she received for succeeding in this endeavor should come as no surprise. Economic and professional opportunities for women were expanding in Victorian-era America, but were still very limited in comparison to the opportunities available for men. Women were largely expected

to fill domestic roles, and were raised to pursue marriage as their best bet for securing financial and social stability. Marriages were often akin to business deals, with the woman bringing a suitable dowry to her new husband as a means of providing future financial security for both of them. The husband's own financial security was always a factor in the marriage, and it was not uncommon for a particularly beautiful bride to marry upward in social class.

Elizabeth Tabor, who had been born Elizabeth McCourt in 1854, and whose beauty earned her the nickname of the “Belle of Oshkosh” in her Wisconsin hometown, recognized the opportunity her beauty gave her to advance. This consideration factored into her first marriage to Harvey Doe in 1877, whose attention she allegedly caught by flashing her ankles during an ice skating competition in Wisconsin, and again with Horace Tabor in 1883. By the time Elizabeth met Horace, she'd already earned the nickname and reputation as the Colorado mining community's youthful and beautiful “Baby Doe.” When Horace publicly began to make moves to divorce Augusta and wed Elizabeth, Elizabeth's reputation as the local belle became the foil to Augusta's mature and modest character and further villainized her as an already-divorced homewrecker who broke up Tabor's marriage to the well-respected Augusta. Despite the fact that Horace and Augusta were already privately heading toward a potential separation, Elizabeth seems to have been the impetus for the divorce, and this, in combination with the astronomical wealth she would receive access to in mar-

riage, insulted those who held on to traditional beliefs about the sanctity of marriage. Further, after the Tabors' fortune eventually took a turn for the worse, the public and the press interpreted Elizabeth's aging and unkempt appearance as another punishment imposed upon her for utilizing her beauty to secure a future that was not hers to claim.

I have to assume that the Tabors put the wedding dress into storage upon their return to Colorado, where they received a chilly welcome. What little rapport Elizabeth had with local women in Denver seems to have vanished, and Horace's political career took an unexpected hit. His reputation as a generous businessman and respectable politician faltered when he refused demands for increased wages and threatened striking workers. Between the exploitation of his employees and his disputed divorce and marriage, Horace lost the support of both the working and upper classes, and his chance to be a full-term senator fell through.

Nevertheless, the Tabors relished their wealth and spent it extravagantly, which only seemed to increase their status as a polarizing public spectacle. They were seen regularly traveling through town in their carriages and attending shows at the Tabor Grand, which Horace had funded in 1881, dressed exquisitely and often toting their young daughter, Lily, who was born in July of 1884. That same year, the Tabors moved into their new Denver mansion, where they kept over 100 peacocks on their three-acre grounds. Their second daughter, Silver Dollar, was born in 1889. Elizabeth resented her social exile but in at least one instance faced

it with humor. Judy Nolte Temple writes in her book that when Elizabeth received criticism for the marble statues of nude Roman goddesses she had imported from Paris and arranged in her lawn, she instructed her dressmaker to cover them in chiffon in a sardonic display of modesty.

She must have maintained some relationships, however, and especially in Leadville where the community was more tolerant and supportive of her, as her archives contain many party invitations, event tickets, and letters of correspondence. In 1893, the last year the Tabors had wealth, she also demonstrated political interest when she temporarily lent a room in the Tabor building to the National Women's Suffrage Association, of which she was a member, an action that likely further cemented the local conservative community's low opinion of her progressive character.

Two major factors played into the Tabors' economic decline. First, Horace Tabor made a series of bad investments, which is sometimes credited to his inability to properly manage his money and other times to his generosity, as he was constantly funding new building projects throughout Denver and Leadville. The second factor was the devaluation of silver. While the Coinage Act of 1873 demonetized silver, the US government continued to purchase it in large quantities for the next several years until the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893, causing a near-complete collapse of silver prices. Almost the entirety of the Tabor fortune was created by Horace's success in silver mining, so the one-two-punch of devaluation and withdrawal of government silver purchases turned out to be disastrous for what little

money he had left after his poor investments. Nonetheless, for the next six years, the Tabors tried to keep up appearances, living in their mansion for as long as possible despite losing their other properties and possessions. Horace worked for a while as a day laborer and then was appointed Denver's city postmaster in 1898, an opportunity that could have served as a new beginning had he not become sick and died of appendicitis the very next year on April 10, 1899.

MAINTAINING THE TABOR NAME

This juncture in the Tabor story is typically when the legend skips a few years and has Elizabeth immediately falling into a state of despair and running to the hills of Leadville to live out the rest of her days in an abandoned shack. But Elizabeth persisted in Denver for years after her husband's death, during which time she fought to financially support her daughters by leasing the Matchless Mine to people willing to work it, with the hopes of extracting more valuable ore. When one of those lessees accused her of fraud, the *Denver Post* reported on the court proceedings. Elizabeth, fed up with the accusations and public scrutiny, wrote a rare response to the *Post* that was published in the November 29, 1903 Sunday paper:

It is not easy to tell how much I was astounded to read in this morning's papers, under large and glaring headlines, the statement that I had been sued because of 'fraud and deceit.' Since I have had to battle alone with the world and provide for two young children and sustain the sacred name bequeathed them by their honored father,

I have had to do much against great odds, with only good health and high hopes to support me. I have not carried my grievances into the newspapers, and would not now were it not solely in the interest of my children. For their sake the public should not be left in a moment's suspense as to the stain so heartlessly and untruthfully put upon their mother.

It is clear from this statement and from records in the Tabor papers that Elizabeth fought to support her daughters and to redeem their family name, not only managing the Matchless but putting on boots and working the mine herself. Yet despite her efforts, the Matchless proved a futile pursuit.

Elizabeth's social exile worsened as she fell deeper into poverty and removed herself to the cabin near the Matchless, where she turned to her Catholicism for solace. Her daughters both left Leadville, Lily to live with her mother's family in Wisconsin and Silver to pursue an acting career in Chicago. Though the three maintained contact and sometimes traveled to visit each other, notes in the Tabor papers reveal Elizabeth's distress at living away from her daughters and the extent to which she suffered from poverty and starvation. The words “I am alone” constantly pepper the papers, and she took notes on the remainder of her food supply, which often consisted of only coffee and bread. She relied primarily on loans and frugality to survive, but was known to vehemently reject any help she considered charity. I suspect that accepting help from the very people who had long scorned her may not have appealed to Elizabeth, who maintained pride in the Tabor name and legacy.

By this time, Elizabeth's role as a local spectacle had made a 180-degree turn from the elaborately dressed hyper-feminine enchantress to a disheveled, cross-dressing loner. She stopped wearing expensive dresses, though was sometimes seen wearing her old capes, and had taken to wearing men's pants and shirts. When another well-known wife of a mining magnate, Margaret Brown, helped Elizabeth find the money to retain the Matchless Mine in 1928, she was quoted in the *Post* in defense of Elizabeth and her “manly attire,” saying “She is a miner at heart, a miner in manner, and so why not a miner in dress?” Brown also marvels at meeting Elizabeth for the first time and hearing her story firsthand. The article concludes with a question about Elizabeth's continually changing luck, asking, “Is it possible for the last member of the Tabor family, ‘Baby Doe,’ to bring the name back to the place in Colorado that it occupied a half a century ago?”

Elizabeth's luck, as it turned out, would not take a turn for the better. In her last years, she stayed in solitude in her cabin in Leadville, occasionally meeting curious citizens. Oral histories with Leadville residents describe her daily walks on feet wrapped in cloth down the hill from Matchless to the local church, where she would pray. They also describe how children would pelt her with stones as she walked, seeing her only as the old crone who lived alone up on the hill. Her mental health deteriorated into what some have called madness, but also could have been undiagnosed dementia or lead poisoning caused by the nearby mine, as researchers like Judy Nolte Temple have theorized.

In 1932, a film based on the Tabor story titled *Silver Dollar* debuted in Denver to a packed theater. When a group of lawyers offered to sue the producers of the film for Elizabeth at no cost to her, she wanted no involvement. It seems that she had had enough of the public's invasive attention, and simply wanted to be left in peace. Three years later, after a winter snowstorm, a neighbor noticed that the chimney in Elizabeth's cabin had stopped emitting smoke and found her deceased. Her death quickly became front-page news, with a particularly grisly headline reading, "Woman Once Sought for Beauty, Power, and Wealth Lies Alone Two Weeks on Bleak Leadville Hilltop, a Frozen Corpse." Soon after, the cabin where she had been living was ransacked and destroyed. Even in death, her privacy and dignity were cast aside for the sake of curiosity.

THE DRESS'S LEGACY

The next time Elizabeth Tabor's wedding gown emerged into public view was when it was rediscovered weeks after her death. Elizabeth's brothers obtained the appointment of officials at the State Historical Society of Colorado (now History Colorado) to administer her estate, which she had left behind without a beneficiary. Only two weeks after her death, and with the press on site, museum staff open several trunks containing the Tabors' belongings in the warehouse where they had been stored, and among the many items they pulled out was the famous wedding dress. *The Denver Post* dedicated three separate articles to the event on their front page, with one headline reading "Finery of Tabor Women Crumbles Like Their Lives." The

wedding gown was deemed to be "the most valuable treasure, from a historic standpoint" though it was noted to have been "discolored with age and perhaps ruined from water and mildew." More belongings were later found in a hospital in Leadville, where nuns Elizabeth had befriended stored them. When the Tabor estate was eventually put up for public sale, a group of local citizens purchased what they considered to be the most important items and transferred them to the Historical Society's collection.

Just a few months later, the museum's very first Tabor display opened to the public. A photo in the January 1936 edition of *The Colorado Magazine* shows the wedding dress displayed in a case dedicated to the ceremony, and it would rarely be taken off view for the next seventy-five years. In the absence of the spectacle Elizabeth herself provided in the last decades of her life, her wedding gown was quickly subbed in as the next best thing—an extravagant relic from the biggest and most notorious night of her life, now stained and time-worn. Historical Society curator and administrator of the Tabor estate Edgar McMechen wrote in *The Colorado Magazine* that in the new exhibition, "it is as though a faint incense—the essence of Baby Doe's vital spirit—hovers over the cases." Tabor was shunned and ignored while alive, but after her death, she and her wedding gown were perceived with a sense of nostalgia and romanticism, as if her passing automatically granted her status as one of Colorado's beloved historical figures.

Tabor's death and the unveiling of her estate reinvigorated

public fascination with her story. *The Denver Post* continued running daily front-page stories about the Tabors, reporting on new findings within their estate and the museum's efforts to display the items. Simultaneously, the *Rocky Mountain News* published a lengthy twenty-part series that rehashed the Tabor legend with dramatic flair. While the series indulged in sensationalism, the tone toward Elizabeth Tabor became more sympathetic after her death, noting that despite her few years of unapologetic extravagance, she had not left her husband when his wealth disappeared, as the public had predicted. Two years later, another series published in *True Story* magazine demonstrated a similarly sympathetic yet sensationalistic tone that would cement certain aspects of the legend for decades to come.

"Silver Queen: Baby Doe's Life Story as Told to Sue Bonnie" was a five-part series purportedly written by Sue Bonnie, a woman who had befriended Elizabeth in her last years. Having heard her recount her life story, Bonnie apparently wished to free the truth about Elizabeth. The article reads in Elizabeth's first person voice and is written like fiction, with plenty of dialogue among its cast of characters. In truth, the article was actually written by popular Colorado historian Caroline Bancroft, who had purchased the rights to use Bonnie's name for the article in order to meet the publishing requirements of the ironically-titled *True Story* magazine. At the time, the Tabor papers, found with the rest of Elizabeth's belongings after her death, were kept under lock and key by McMechen and so Bancroft, who had openly admitted to embellishing her



biographies for the sake of good storytelling, relied primarily on secondary sources for her article. The resulting piece is riddled with hyperbole and is responsible for popularizing many of the most recognizable facets of the Tabor legend, including rumors about Tabor's wedding ensemble.

The open neckline of Tabor's dress is mentioned in the *True Story* series once again, but this time it is framed as a design choice meant to accentuate the expensive diamond necklace Horace Tabor gifted his bride. Like the dress itself, the necklace is mentioned in nearly every newspaper report published after the 1883 ceremony, though most describe the necklace as a forthcoming gift that was yet to be complete, and a few reports specify further that the bride wore no jewelry at all. Sources disagree on exactly how much the gift cost, but estimates range from 75,000 to a colossal 500,000 dollars. Such inconsistent reporting was noted by the press even at the time, and by Elizabeth herself, who pasted an unlabeled newspaper clipping into her scrapbook reading, "The Tabor necklace grows in diamonds. The *Green Bay Advocate* made a handsome contribution, placing the value at half a million dollars." Over time, the necklace earned a reputation for having been sourced from a collection of jewels that Queen Isabella of Spain had pawned to finance Christopher Columbus on his colonialist quest, and as a

TOP A large crowd gathered outside a Denver theater for the premiere of the motion picture "Silver Dollar," 1932. Fred M. Mazzulla Collection. History Colorado, 2022.579152

LEFT The wedding gown of Elizabeth "Baby Doe" Tabor on display at the May Company's 75th anniversary celebration in Denver, 1952. Fred M. Mazzulla Collection. History Colorado, 2022.579091



Unlabeled newspaper clipping depicting the rediscovery of Elizabeth Tabor's wedding gown after her death. Horace Austin Warner Tabor Collection, Clara Layton Ellis scrapbook. History Colorado

result it became known as the Isabella diamond. This background is included in Bancroft's *True Story* magazine, after which she writes, in Elizabeth's voice, "My dress was made very décolleté so as to show off the necklace to the best advantage." Bancroft's interpretation of Tabor's open neckline departs from earlier nineteenth-century critics, who perceived the neckline as indicative of Tabor's youthful daring and lack of decorum, and instead claims that it was a method to showcase the high-priced necklace from her husband.

While we might never know whether Elizabeth wore the neck-

lace with her wedding ensemble, Bancroft's interpretation indicates that, in the ever-evolving discourse about Elizabeth's dress, 1930s audiences cared less about how low the neckline was and more about how wealthy the Tabors once were. This riches-to-rags storyline likely appealed more to people grappling with the economic devastation of the Great Depression, to whom extravagant clothing and jewelry were a luxury that had long been a foreign concept. To this audience, the Tabor legend as told in *True Story* magazine became a fictive escape from daily hardship and a lesson in the dangers of managing money recklessly.

The dress remained on exhibit at the Historical Society but moved around a little in the 1950s, when it experienced another shift in its display and reception. In 1950, McMechen purchased white marabou feathers from a local department store and used them to trim the dress's neckline and waistline, since some newspapers had mentioned this design detail in their 1883 reporting, but the feathers were assumed to have disintegrated while the dress was in storage. This styling can be seen in photographs from the dress's subsequent display in 1952 in the Denver May Company's exhibition celebrating the store's 75th anniversary, for which they showcased a selection of historical fashion. The dress, styled with the feathers, a veil, and a specially made wig, was photographed and advertised in the September 25 edition of the *Post*. In this round of public attention, the dress was interpreted not as scandalous but as simply "costly" and "fashionable," indicating again a more modern and favorable attitude toward its silhouette and wearer.

The Tabor wedding dress moved in and out of public view for the next several decades, and concerns for its preservation intensified. It is unclear when the feathers were removed from the dress, but notes in the museum's files mention that it underwent conservation treatment in the early 1960s. In 1977, the dress was removed from display at the Historical Society in preparation for the organization's move to its new building, the Colorado Heritage Center. At this time, staff noted that the dress was in a state of extreme disrepair, and in 1981 it received its most extensive treatment yet, when it was taken apart piece by piece, cleaned, and reassembled for permanent display. It remained on view until 2010, when it was finally allowed to rest in storage as the museum prepared to move once again to its current building, the History Colorado Center on Broadway in Denver.

A STAND-IN FOR LIZZIE

In both design and display, Elizabeth Tabor's wedding gown stands in as a symbol for Elizabeth herself. As with Elizabeth, relentless observation of it both fueled and satiated public fascination but caused its slow deterioration.

During the decades it had stood beneath bright exhibit lights, the silk weakened, then fell apart. While the conservation treatment of 1981 has continued to hold the threads in place, the dress will only ever be preserved, not restored. The damage to Elizabeth Tabor's story and the dress has been done. As I continued my own work on its most recent conservation efforts in 2024, I began to grapple with this thought, and the sense of responsibility that seemed to linger over the

latest effort to bring the dress back into public view. The goal of the project was to both stabilize any damage that had occurred since the dress's last treatment and to create a custom three-dimensional mount that could support it wherever it went, including on exhibit and in storage. In other words, our task was to recreate the shape of Elizabeth Tabor in a manner that was both safe for the dress preservation-wise and historically accurate. A conservator studied the dress and sculpted a form that imitated Elizabeth's curves, a difficult task that required multiple fittings and adjustments. After months of collaboration between museum staff and conservators, the dress that first appeared to me as an endless, intimidating sea of fabric suddenly came to life on a three-dimensional

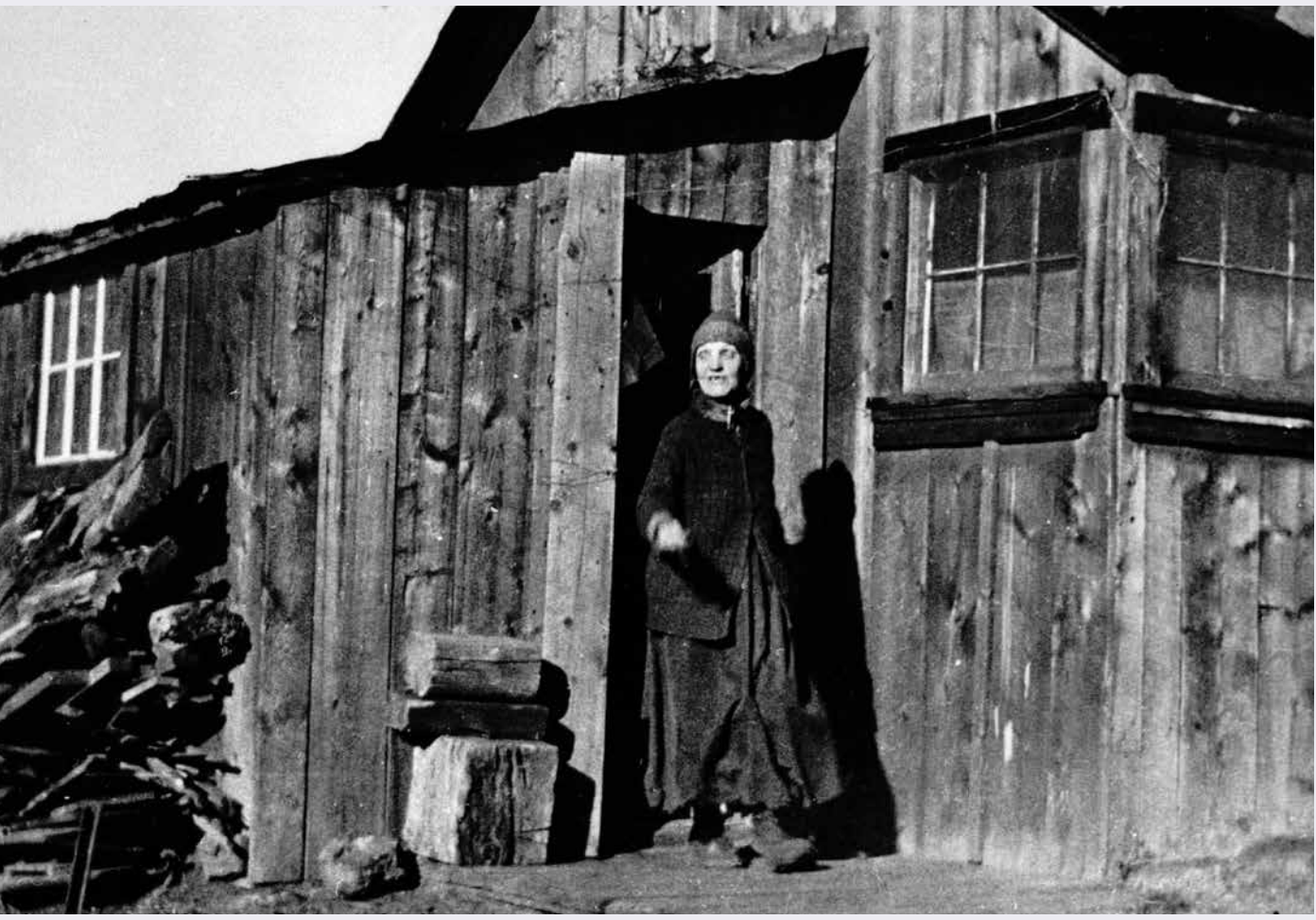
form, and the resulting figure of the famous Baby Doe Tabor appeared surprisingly small.

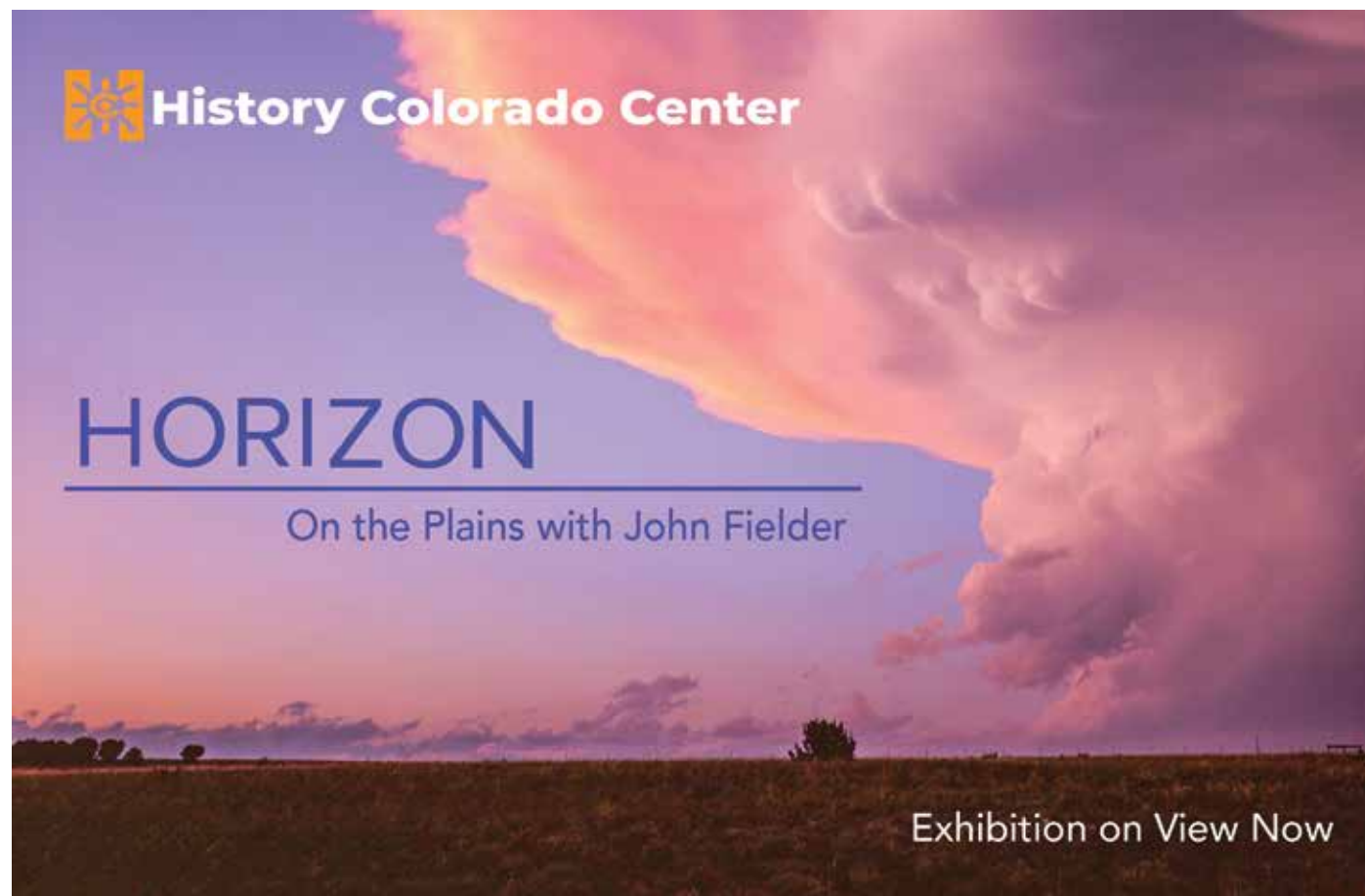
The dress is currently on display at the Center for Colorado Women's History, where Coloradans can see it and consider Elizabeth's story for themselves. Over time the neckline has weakened and stretched wider than it ever was, but the dress otherwise maintains the elegant and modern design that Elizabeth chose for herself for her wedding day. In the spring of 2026 it will be returned to storage where, like the Tabor papers, it will remain available for research by future generations. I say it's time for new scholarship to echo the most recent publications and consider Elizabeth Tabor, not according to the legend, but for all her complexities as a woman

who refused to adhere to society's expectations and who survived, against great odds, on persistence and high hopes. 

Tara Kaufman is History Colorado's Associate Curator of Clothing and Textile Arts. She received her master of arts in art history from the Tyler School of Art and Architecture in Philadelphia. Previously, she served as the William H. Truettner Graduate Fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Assistant Curator at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, where she curated the exhibit *Ethel Wallace: Modern Rebel* and co-wrote the accompanying catalogue.

One of the last known photographs of Elizabeth Tabor, taken outside the cabin where she lived near the Matchless Mine. History Colorado, 89.451.3924





SUPPORTING SCHOLARS



We caught up with Ben Ralston of the Sachs Foundation, one of the oldest private foundations in the state. He told us a bit about the history of the Foundation, its founder, and the work they do to this day.



Ben Ralston, Sachs Foundation CEO

Q What can you tell us about yourself? How did you come to work for the Sachs Foundation?

I grew up in Colorado Springs. My father was involved in the Foundation—he was on the board. Growing up, I didn't think all that much about racial equity in Colorado because it's not always taught in schools. My high school, Cheyenne Mountain High, was ninety-three percent white. After that, I went to North Carolina and started working in higher education. I worked overseas, which made me realize how the US looks at access to higher education and the opportunities presented there. Afterwards I came back to Colorado to lead the Sachs Foundation.

Q What is the Sachs Foundation?

The Sachs Foundation is the oldest private foundation in the state, dedicated to equity in education access for Black Coloradans. It was founded in

1931 by Henry Sachs, and its history is very relevant to this political moment when we see funding for disadvantaged communities being cut from state and federal budgets.

Henry Sachs grew up in Boston. Through his business connections, he was connected to King Gillette and his idea for a disposable shaving razor. Sachs became one of the first investors in the Gillette company.

Later he contracted tuberculosis, and like many people with the disease at that time, he moved to Colorado Springs. As a Jewish businessman he was not welcomed into the community by the prominent local leaders and philanthropists.

When Clarence Morley was governor of Colorado, he was trying to rid Colorado of Black and Jewish residents. There were a lot of ties between Black and Jewish people here. Sachs recognized that he had a lot of money but no children, and they were close with the Stroud family. They sent Effie Stroud, the top student at Colorado Springs High School (now Palmer High) to go to Colorado College. That's really where it started.

Q How did the Sachs Foundation get its start?

They worked together and performed studies in the mid-1930s of Black families around Colorado, to learn what they were facing Sachs started founding scholarships, and K.D. Stroud—Effy's father—pointed out that there was a ton of need for that kind of work in the Black community.

So, over the next ten years this alliance was forming all over the country, and Sachs was friends with the CEO of Sears and Roebuck, who was named Rosenwald. And Rosenwald was friends

with W.E.B. Dubois, who headed the NAACP. Rosenwald connected Sachs to Black leadership nationally. Sachs wanted to understand the Black community, what could be done, what their needs were. Getting to know them and understand what they needed. And from that, Sachs built his foundation to address education and health equity.

Q What does the Sachs Foundation do today?

Well, over the course of the last ninety-four years, education has become the primary focus. The Foundation has given over 3,500 scholarships, funding a total of about forty-five million dollars in the organization's history. Some of our notable alumni include Robert F. Smith, Purnell Steen, Norm Rice, June Carryl, George Moose, Trudi Morrison, Paul Hamilton, Kurtis Lee, Ron Miles, Penfield Tate III, and more. We just announced the newest class of scholars, who will each get between forty and fifty thousand dollars to go to college anywhere in the country.

These days, we have other programs as well. Mentoring programs for eighth through twelfth graders, cohort mentoring for students and their families. We also do emergency assistance for families, healthcare, transportation, and food.

Our newest program is designed to recruit and retain Black educators in Colorado. We recruit Black undergrads who are considering becoming educators, and help them stay in Colorado. The number of those individuals who remain in-state is high. We just launched an alumni board—we wanted to put the grantmaking power in the hands of Black Coloradans. 



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