



BREADTH

THE PARALLEL LIVES OF FLORENCE SABIN AND JUSTINA WARREN FORD: WOMEN CRUSADERS IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY IN COLORADO

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Seventy-three years had passed since the Declaration of Independence, when the first woman physician graduated from a US Medical School in 1849—Elizabeth Blackwell. It only took one year following the Emancipation Proclamation for the first African-American woman to become a physician in 1864—Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler.

Being a physician and a woman in the late 19th and early 20th century was a rarity. Despite Elizabeth Blackwell's pioneering women's presence in Medicine, by 1880 only 2.8 % of US physicians were women. Not surprisingly, the percentage of female physicians doubled by 1900 reaching 5.6%. In Colorado, the first licensed woman doctor was Edith A. Root in 1881, soon joined by Mary H. Bates and Aida Avery. All three were admitted to the Denver Medical Association in 1881.

"It's too bad you are not a boy. You would have made a good doctor".

—Grandmother Sabin to Dr. Sabin.¹

In 1881, Florence Sabin (1871-1953) was 10 years old and lived outside Chicago, Illinois. Born in Central City, Colorado, in November 1871, she served a very successful medical career and was a role model and advocate for patients and communities. She completed medical school in 1900 at John Hopkins University. After graduation, she held an internship under Sir William Osler's supervision and a research fellowship under Dr. (first name) Mall's mentorship. In 1917, Florence was the first woman to hold a full professor appointment at John Hopkins University.² Dr. Sabin was the first woman to be a department head at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research; in 1924, she was the first woman to be elected president of the American Association of Anatomists; and became the first lifetime female member of the National

Academy of Sciences. She retired at the age of 67 (1938) and moved home to Colorado to spend time with her older sister, Mary. After enjoying a short retirement in 1944, at the age of 72, she was recruited to chair the Colorado Governor's Health Committee. Her work resulted in the "Sabin Health Laws," ground-breaking health laws contributing to a modernization of the public health system in Colorado and other states.

Through the Sabin Health Reform, Florence proposed eight different pieces of legislature. Five of them focused on establishing and funding health services and the remaining three focused on the control of specific diseases. Seven of those passed (the "cow health bill," aimed at controlling Brucellosis was defeated) and led to in the Sabin Health Laws.

As a result of the Sabin Health Reform, Colorado experienced a significant increase (from 4 to 18) in the number of counties receiving services from the local and state health departments. Laboratory services were accessible to physicians, dentists and health officials at no charge; the State Health department emphasized immunization against diphtheria and small pox and worked to reduce death from measles and whooping cough; new regulations for production of milk and dairy products were set in place; and milk pasteurization became mandatory in 1949. Other accomplishments of the reform included the beginning of research efforts focused on studying "stream pollution" resulting in the setting of standards for sewage treatment; development of new codes for water supply to assure quality of drinking water; novel laboratory testing for 22 pre-natal and pre-marital screenings in 1948; and subsequently, the mandate for restaurant inspections by health officials for food safety.³

Between 1947 and 1951, she served as chair of the Board of Health and Hospitals of Denver and later as

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the manager of Denver Department of Health and Welfare. Dr. Sabin died at the age of 82, in October 1953 in her home in Denver, while listening to the Baseball World Series (Dodgers vs. Yankees). Dr. Sabin's legacy is very much alive.

"I feel dishonest taking a fee from you. You've got 2 strikes against you to begin with. First of all, you are a lady; and second, you're colored."

—Colorado Medical License Examiner to Dr. Ford⁴

Justina Warren (1871-1952) was 10 years old in 1881 and she lived in Knoxville, Illinois. Born in the same city on January 22, 1871, to freed slaves, Justina's mother was a practicing nurse exposing her daughter to the importance of caring for the sick at a young age. Her compassion and enthusiasm for health sciences led her to attend Herring School in Chicago, obtaining her medical diploma in 1899. Justina married John Ford, a Baptist reverend, in 1892. After finishing medical school in 1899, she opened her own practice in Chicago and shortly thereafter moved to Alabama in 1900 to be the director at the State Normal and Agricultural College in Normal-Huntsville, Alabama. Two years later, Dr. Warren-Ford moved to Denver to join her husband who opened the Zion Baptists Church, after completing her two-year contract in Alabama. After living in diverse places like Chicago and the South, arriving in Denver was a cultural shock, she imagined

Denver would be a more open-minded place to call home.

By 1902, Denver's African-American population was barely at 2%. Dr. Warren-Ford became the first black woman physician in Colorado and the only female African-American practicing physician until 1952. She started a private practice in her own house, where she cared mostly for underserved communities.

The *Lady Doctor*, as her patients called her, practiced Gynecology, Obstetrics, and Pediatrics for over 50 years. She exchanged goods for services and consultations, brought groceries bags to patients and learned to speak five languages. After 49 years of applying, in 1950, she was allowed to join the Colorado and Denver Medical Associations. Dr. Warren-Ford died in October 1952, and she is remembered as a Medical Pioneer of Colorado. Her house, which was relocated, was converted into the Black American West Museum and Heritage Center in the historic Five Points neighborhood.⁵

During her professional practice, she was honored with the Human Relations Award by Cosmopolitan Club of Denver, 1951. Although, most of her recognition occurred after she passed. In 1973, the League of Women voters named one of their units, Justina Ford Unit. She was inducted to the Colorado Women's Hall of Fame in 1975; and recognized as Colorado Medical Pioneer by Colorado Medical Society in 1989. In 1998, sculptor Jess E. Dubois created a statue celebrating Dr. Warren-

Ford that is currently located in the Five Points Neighborhood. Denver Public Library honored Justina by naming *Ford-Warren* to one of the branches in 1973. The University of Colorado, School of Medicine offers the Justina Ford Scholarship for her Commitment to the Underserved.

Despite the significant differences in available opportunities, both Florence Sabin and Justina Warren Ford were pioneers and crusaders. They advocated for patients and communities and shaped generations to come. This summary is designed to honor those who were not demeaned by the challenges but instead became role models for later generations.

References

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