

**Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter: A Brief Biography**

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When Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter began designing buildings associated with the National Park Service (NPS) in the early 1900s, neither architecture nor the parks were well-known for having robust female workforces. Only thirty-nine women had graduated from four-year architecture programs in American by the turn of the century (Stratigakos, 2104), and it would be another 20 years before the NPS hired any women as rangers. (Galper, 2016)

But Colter was determined to lead the way and not simply by being a woman in a man's world. Her perfectionism, research, and aesthetics inspired a type of architecture dubbed "National Park Service Rustic" (also known as "parkitecture"). ("Parkitecture," n.d.) Colter's vision was one that took inspiration from the landscape and blended seamlessly into it, reflecting and celebrating the people and places the NPS aims to preserve.

#### **Finding Her Footing**

After Colter graduated from the California School of Design (now the San Francisco Art Institute) in 1891, she moved back home to St. Paul, Minnesota, and taught at the progressive Mechanic Arts High School. She found her true calling in 1901, however, when the Fred Harvey Company hired her to decorate the Alvarado Hotel in Albuquerque. The company was clearly happy with her work, as she spent the next 50 years as its primary architect. (Gaglio, n.d.)

Colter proved a perfect match for the company, which was founded by a man known for his love of the American southwest. Additionally, the company went on not just to sell Native American art but to make indigenous artists central to its marketing strategies. Colter's creations, however, benefitted so much from her studies of indigenous building techniques and use of

natural materials, they “transcended the kitsch of a burgeoning tourism industry to capture the mystery and romance of the American Southwest.” (Gaglio, n.d.)

### **Desert View Watchtower**

While much of Colter’s work is gone, Hopi House, Hermit's Rest, Lookout Studio and Desert View Watchtower, all National Historic Landmarks, still remain on the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park. They are emblematic of Colter’s stated desire “to design a building that would become part of its surroundings; one that would create no discordant note against the time-eroded walls of this promontory.” (“Mary Colter's Desert View Watchtower,” n.d.)

The Desert View Watchtower, for example, was built in 1932 over a steel frame and concrete base yet its “weathered stone exterior and an adjacent artificial ruin lend it the appearance of being ancient.” (Pulaski, 2022) Inside, the Watchtower features petroglyphs and paintings by and about the ancestors of those who used to occupy the same canyon, further stressing Colter’s goal to pay homage to the cultures from which she drew inspiration.

### **Leaving a Legacy**

Colter retired to Santa Fe, New Mexico; she died in 1958 at age 88. But her designs inspired other work near the National Parks, most notably Gilbert Stanley Underwood’s Grand Canyon Lodge on the North Rim, which mirrored the shapes and colors of the Canyon. (Owens, 2016) But not everyone loved Colter’s work. Contemporaries referred to her as a decorator and over the years “the NPS came up with many different proposals for what to do with the Watchtower, from tearing it down to converting it into an NPS visitor center.” (“Desert View Watchtower,” n.d.) The Watchtower remains standing today, however, a vivid example of

Colter's philosophy "that a building must grow out of its setting and embrace the history of the location. It must belong to its place." (Owens, 2016)

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