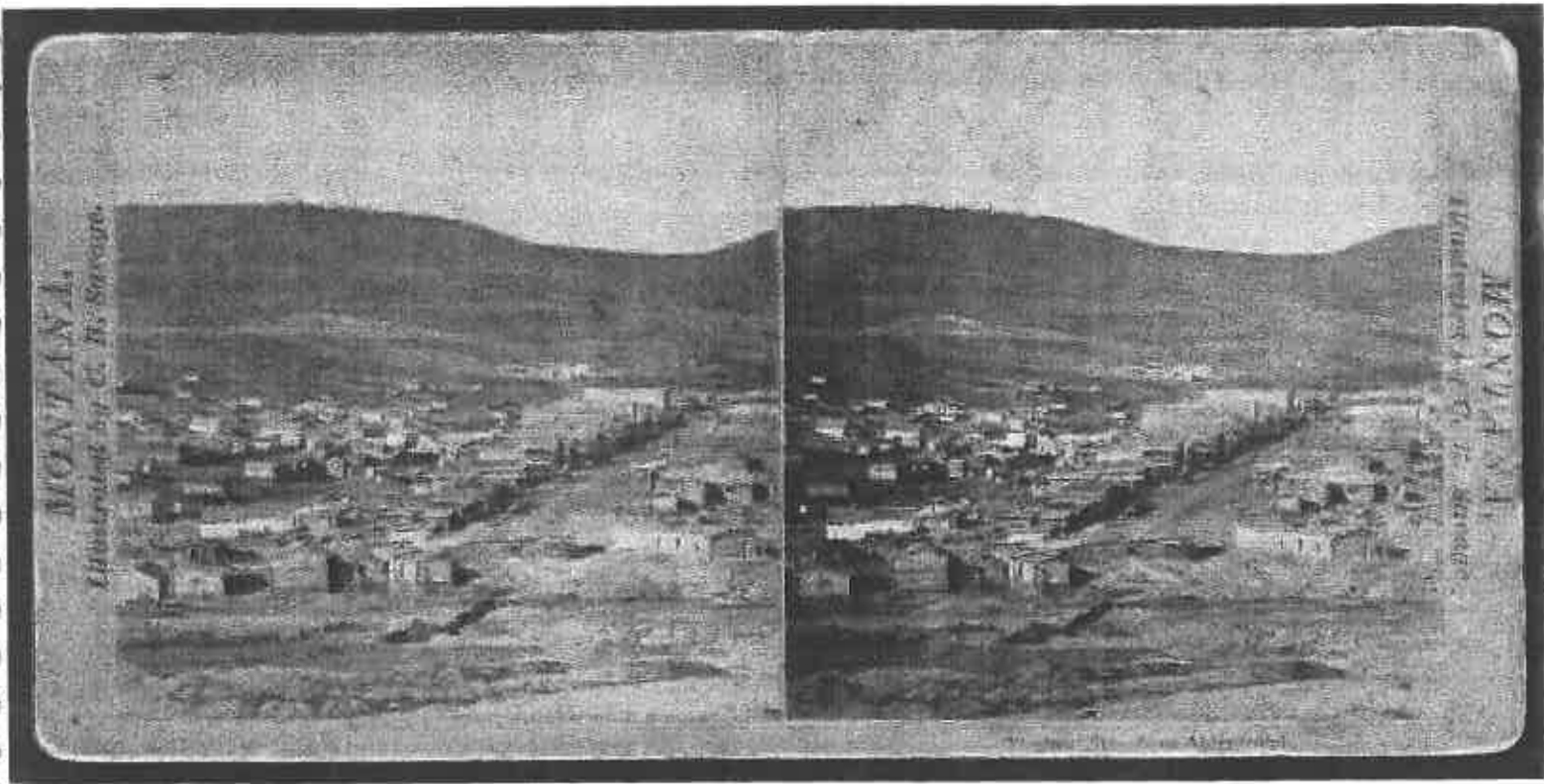


*Stereoscopic  
Race and Gender  
in Virginia City, Montana:*



*The Life of  
Sarah Blair Gammon Brown Bickford*

*By  
Merri Folley Ketterer  
Montana State University  
April 23, 2006*

Twenty-first century Montana. A black woman sits quietly in a small town bar, drinking with her white friends. An older white man begins making racist comments pointedly aimed at the black woman. Her annoyed girlfriends suggest that they will take the situation in hand by giving the older man a piece of their minds. But, the black woman bids the girls to “settle down,” until the man oversteps his bounds and flat out calls the black woman a “bitch.” Rising slowly, she physically restrains her friends: “Wait a minute. I have this under control.” She approaches the seated man, posing a question reminiscent of Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a woman?” speech; the black woman simply, calmly asks, “Would you call your mother or your sister a bitch?” Stunned, the old white man replies, “No.” Unwaveringly, she looks him straight in the eye, “Well, I am both a mother and a sister. I am not a bitch.” He remained silent the rest of the night.<sup>1</sup>

The black woman had read the old man’s threatening behavior as inexperience with another race. He wanted to send the message that her mere radicalized presence was violating the space in which he had dominion; she knew he expected her to cower but she was not willing to be silenced. Over time and with several more interactions the black woman and the old white man became friends.<sup>2</sup> In Montana, a predominantly white state, racial and gender prejudices continue to exist with their roots extending back to the earliest days of the territory. Stereoscopic views of both past and present views of race and gender assist in enhancing understanding that there is not a quick fix solution to these issues that still plague our society.

Double images provided on a stereograph may seem almost identical but are actually slightly dissimilar because the camera used to take those pictures had two lenses

set about two and a half inches apart. Popularized in the 1850s, the stereograph is inserted into the stereoscope card holder and slid back and forth until the viewer can see the three dimensional picture clearly. While the viewers' eyes focus on the same central image, each eye has a different peripheral view. Even as history has long been focused on the West as a white male dominated space, it is time to scrutinize the outside edges of the picture. Uncovering and interpreting multiple voices in Virginia City, Montana provides opportunities to preserve its complex and multi-layered history, while improving understanding of race and gender in Montana's early history.

For example, the historic Hangman's building, located within a block's distance from the Madison County courthouse, evokes memories of white men "taming" the frontier through both legal and extralegal means. Many businessmen and miners traveled the economically essential road between Montana's two earliest gold rush towns, Bannack and Virginia City. To the dismay of many citizens, it did not take long before bandits began to prey upon travelers. In response to the robbing and killing of innocent victims the citizens formed the vigilantes; between December 1863 and March 1864 the vigilantes hanged twenty-four men, including Sheriff Henry Plummer, whom they believed was the head of the bandits.<sup>3</sup> In January 1864 vigilantes hanged bandits from the rafters of an uncompleted building in Virginia City, the event giving the structure its nickname. Tourists today visit the Hangman's Building as the main site for interpretation of a masculine space where decent men established order in the rugged wilderness through extralegal means.

Shifting the lens of the story, this building can also be interpreted as an inclusive site of race and gender, where a black woman conducted business for many decades, long

after the 1863 vigilante hanging. Sarah Blair Gammon Brown Bickford, an ex-slave from Tennessee, once owned and operated a public utilities company at this very site. As an ex-slave, she was probably familiar with the racial lynching used to maintain control over black males and white women in the South. The structure represents two unequally represented versions of history. Dozens of books and articles enshrine the history of the vigilantes. Yet virtually no one has heard of Sarah Bickford. Does the memory of one historical event obscure the memory of another event that occurred in the same place? Who decides which memory should be preserved? This essay addresses these issues.

### **Aggregating Black Women's History on the Montana Frontier**

In the absence of diaries or journals, the lives of black women must be examined through the bits and pieces of evidence left behind in public records, in order to gain a clearer insight as to how a community was affected by the roles black women played. Their behavior was always compared and contrasted to the standards of white women. To be taken seriously as a businesswoman, a black woman had to exceed all men's expectations of how businesses were to be managed. Powerful white businessmen rarely recognized successful black businesswomen, who were often ridiculed and seldom acknowledged for their abilities to cross gender boundaries.<sup>4</sup> In short, white men's history has failed to represent the contributions made by black women to the development of the West.<sup>5</sup>

There is little written of pioneering, western businesswomen, especially women of color. In the nineteenth century Euro-American women crossed the plains, full of hope or desperation, with their husbands and their families to establish new homes in

uncharted territories. In gold rush towns, white women attempted to reestablish domestic lives similar to those they had left behind. Occasionally, when a husband died, his wife was left with a slim chance of securing socially acceptable employment as a means to support her family. With hungry mouths depending on them, women were sometimes able to secure the necessary funds by selling eggs, butter and baked goods to hungry miners, or they worked as laundresses and seamstresses, or operated boarding houses.

White women were not the only women to cross the plains; after the Civil War black women exercised their new found freedom and mobility by heading westward. Only a few former slave women's lives have been documented in Montana. For example, Clarissa Jane Crump, formerly of Virginia, learned of the Emancipation Proclamation while on board a Missouri River steamer bound for Fort Benton.<sup>6</sup> Helena resident, Mrs. Laura Sidney, a former Missouri slave, recalled for a newspaper reporter that at the time of emancipation "freedom held few attractions for her, if any. Unable to read or write, unacquainted with persons other than her former owners and the other newly emancipated slaves, she considered it wiser to remain in her owner's care."<sup>7</sup> She did embrace freedom and both Crump and Sidney chose to settle in Helena in the close knit African-American community that grew there, where they remained until their deaths. Laura Sidney died at the home of Clarissa Crump's daughter, Mrs. M. A. Lowry in 1940.

Black and white families remained intertwined as they trekked across the plains to the gold rush territory of Montana in the 1860s. One child, Laura Ferguson, traveled with her mother, Frances Ferguson, an ex-slave from Missouri, who served as a nursemaid for the Athey family in exchange for the cost of their westward journey. It is unknown how the ties to the Athey family were severed, but upon their arrival in Maiden, Montana,

Frances Ferguson became the sole supporter of herself and her daughter. She accomplished this feat through business ventures. She ran her own ice cream shop, famous for the fresh berries she used in making her ice cream, and a miners' laundry.<sup>8</sup>

Free black women found it difficult to earn their own living. Some were able to survive working in domestic service, but that did not offer long-term stability or the opportunity to improve their economic circumstances. Mary Adams, an ex-slave from Kentucky, came west to find employment as General George A. Custer's cook. Missing her family, Mary summoned her sister, Maria, to join her as the Custer's housemaid in 1875.<sup>9</sup> After her sister's death, Maria married John Lambert Duke Dutriueille, a black barber in Fort Benton before he moved on to Belt and eventually Helena. Some women exercised the rights of their new-found freedom by choosing their own spouse, being able to marry because they were in love with the special someone of their own choice.

Another woman, Mattie Bell, born a North Carolina slave in 1855, labored as a domestic servant and hotel maid prior to her 1876 arrival in Fort Benton, Montana.<sup>10</sup> Owner of a laundry business in 1879, she married a white man, John K. Castner. Containing far less women than men, Montana offered black women the opportunity to improve their economic circumstances by marrying white men. Later, she managed the hotel and restaurant which she owned with her husband, at the site of the Belt stagecoach stop.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps sharing the notion that wide-open spaces yielded deliverance from prejudice and opportunities to secure financial independence, a former Tennessee slave, Sarah Blair Gammon, traveled to Virginia City, Montana in 1871 and remained there until her death in 1931.

Sarah Blair Gammon Brown Bickford arrived in the territorial capital, Virginia

City, with hopes for a better life. An analysis of her life offers the opportunity to examine how one black woman carved out a successful life in an overwhelmingly white town for sixty years. Most of her life she existed as an anomaly. It was not until her death, in 1931, that Virginia City laid claim to Sarah Blair Gammon Brown Bickford as “one of its most loyal pioneer citizens and devoted mothers.”<sup>12</sup> Her obituary also acknowledges another role she played in the community: the role of a businesswoman. Bickford was the owner and manager of the Virginia City Water Company, which she inherited upon her husband’s death in 1900. Sarah Bickford’s obituary noted that she “carried on the company’s business in a faithful and efficient manner.”<sup>13</sup> This paper recounts the complex story of one woman’s life; she was left with no other choice than to make the business viable as a means to support herself and her children during turbulent times of educational segregation, opposition to miscegenation and other racial conflicts in Montana.

### **Tennessee Roots and Puzzle Pieces of Slavery**

Although no documents exist that specifically state who owned Sarah, the slave child, several jigsaw puzzle pieces have been brought into play and connected to form a plausible history. A letter written in the 1970s by Sarah’s youngest daughter, Mabel Bickford Jenkins, presents several pieces of the puzzle: the Blair family, the Gammon family, Judge Murphy and Knoxville, Tennessee.<sup>14</sup>

According to her daughter’s letter, Sarah was born a slave in 1855; her parents were owned by the Blair family. The Blair family of Jonesborough was prominent in Eastern Tennessee history. In the 1830s, John A. Blair and some of his brothers partnered

with Elijah and Elihu Embree, as well as three others, to form the Washington Iron Manufacturing Company.<sup>15</sup> John Blair, a Congressman, and Nathan Gammon, of a politically well connected family, were highly respected businessmen who moved in the same social circles. Both men, along with John's brother, William Kelsey Blair, served on the Martin Academy construction board. In Washington County, Nathan Gammon also served on the Board of Trustees for the Jonesborough Female Academy.<sup>16</sup>

Democratic Presidents Andrew Jackson and James Polk were friends, as well as President Andrew Johnson, whom Gammon had known nearly all his life. In 1848, the first board of commissioners of the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad Company included both Nathan Gammon and John Blair, with their brothers, W. R. Blair and William G. Gammon. Transporting goods both into and out of Tennessee crucial to the state's economic survival and growth.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the war, the largest export was wheat (934,000 pounds in 1859), while lumber, hardware, plaster and salt were chief imports.<sup>18</sup>

Congressman John Blair's son, William Patterson Blair, was a stage line operator, who resided in Warm Springs, North Carolina.<sup>19</sup> William P. Blair married Nathan Gammon's daughter, Elizabeth Hamilton Looney Gammon, in 1846, thus intertwining the families. Research has not revealed absolute proof that Sarah Blair Gammon was owned by William Patterson Blair or Nathan Gammon. However, it is likely because of Blair's marriage into the Gammon family, that if William Patterson Blair did not own Sarah directly, a member of his family did. William P. Blair's uncle, William Kelsey Blair of Washington County, Tennessee, owned seventeen slaves, according to the 1850 United States Census. His slaves ranged in age from seven to fifty-five years old. There were nine black males, two black females, four mulatto males and two mulatto females. The



1860 Census showed William P. Blair owned two slave children, ages thirteen and ten, and Nathan Gammon owned two slave children.<sup>20</sup> Nathan Gammon could have purchased the two slave children to give to his daughter, Elizabeth, as house slaves. It is also conceivable that Nathan Gammon's slave children, ages seven and five, may have been fictive kin or biological siblings of the Blair slave children but no records exist to document this further.

In the early 1850s, Nathan Gammon, his family and three black male slaves, moved to Tennessee's former territorial capital, Knoxville, where they lived across from the courthouse in a white frame dwelling.<sup>21</sup> There, Nathan clerked for the United States District Court and operated a freighting business. By 1860, only one of Nathan and Mary Hamilton Gammon's six children remained at home; Jane Letitia (Jennie) Gammon, a spinster schoolteacher, assisted her father in court transcription.<sup>22</sup> Assisting her father gave Miss Jennie knowledge in the law and politics, as well as access to many of the town's lawyers. Miss Jennie Gammon reportedly loved children, having served as a schoolteacher and superintendent for more than thirty years.<sup>23</sup> Presumably Nathan bought the two young slave children to please his spinster daughter, thereby possibly treating Miss Jennie the same as her married sister Elizabeth. In addition to three black men, Nathan Gammon owned a boy five years old (later known as Samuel Hamilton Gammon) and a girl seven years old.<sup>24</sup> Age was a fluid concept in the world of nineteenth century slavery and could be manipulated either through negligence or deception. The common practice of "enlightened" slave holders was to inflate the reported ages of slave children; it was considered socially inappropriate to take a child from his mother before the age of five years old and implied that slave fathers were not active participants in raising their

children.

At this time slaves comprised 24.8% of the Tennessee's total population.<sup>25</sup> There were fewer slaves in Eastern Tennessee because it lacked the rich agricultural lands necessary to cultivate tobacco and cotton that were found in middle and western Tennessee. Slaves were brought into Tennessee soon after Euro-Americans began settling the new frontier in 1769; "only fifteen men owned more than three" slaves, according to the 1787 tax rolls of Washington County.<sup>26</sup> Male slaves labored as gardeners and handymen, while female slaves served in the domestic sphere as cooks, seamstresses and maids.<sup>27</sup> Merely seventy-three slave holders were listed in the 1860 Census of Knox County, with only two of them owning thirty or more slaves. Fifty-five percent of the slave holders owned up to fourteen slaves; Nathan Gammon was a member of this group of forty men. Forty-two percent of the slave holders owned between fifteen and twenty-nine slaves. By comparison, Shelby County, where Memphis is located, had two hundred and five slave holders who owned up to fourteen slaves each, while Davidson County in upper Middle Tennessee had sixteen slave holders who owned between fifty and sixty-nine slaves each.<sup>28</sup>

Just how and when the slave girl passed from the Blair family to Nathan Gammon remains unknown, although it is plausible that Miss Jennie Gammon's young house slave was Sarah Blair Gammon. Living in the same house as Miss Jennie and Nathan Gammon, Sarah and Samuel had unique opportunities to overhear political conversations of various white men, as well as to learn Miss Jennie's opinions concerning the education of the city's inhabitants. Sarah Blair Gammon grew up in an unusually well educated and politically influential household which affected and influenced decisions she would later

make. It is highly probable that Miss Jennie, a schoolteacher and devout Presbyterian, tutored Sarah and Samuel in the basics of reading and writing, even though Knoxville had schools for black children as early as 1862.<sup>29</sup> The first Knoxville school for blacks was opened by a black woman, Mrs. Laura A. Cansler. In 1868, 16% of Knox county schools were opened for black children. In 1871, a total of 405 black children were enrolled in Knox County Schools. In addition, the three black males owned by Nathan Gammon were somewhat literate, as witnessed by Isaac's signature on his 1866 marriage certificate. Purported to be brothers were William D. (thirty-nine years old), Issac (thirty-five years old), and Frank Gammon (twenty-one years old), who worked at Nathan Gammon's waterfront freight business.<sup>30</sup> William D. Gammon, also known as "Uncle Billy," supposedly ran a small newspaper for the black community of Jonesborough before the family moved to Knoxville.<sup>31</sup>

These two parallel Gammon families, black and white, coexisted in Knoxville. The less well documented black family also appeared in the 1860 Census. Issac Gammon, also known as Ike, became a railroad worker and Knoxville's first black alderman, serving the fourth ward. Issac Gammon's wife was listed as a free black woman, Nancy Jones Gammon. Additionally, their children were also free: Mary Gammon (eighteen years old), Emaline Gammon (fifteen years old) and James Gammon (eleven years old). Also living with Nancy Jones were Elizabeth Gammon (black, twenty-four years old), Mary Jones (black, twenty years old) and Mary Gammon's husband, Albert (mulatto, twenty-four years old).

Nathan Gammon was named as the clerk pro tem of the court after Tennessee seceded in June 1861. The United States District Court judge merely switched allegiance

to the Confederacy; few other changes were made. The Confederacy, however did, order that all records dating back to 1800 be removed from the courthouse immediately. When the Union troops captured Knoxville, the Union Commander charged Nathan with treason, questioning him as to the whereabouts of the court records. Nathan did not know the location of the records and they were never returned.<sup>32</sup> Nathan, himself a Confederate with three sons in the Confederate Army, found it necessary, after being questioned for treason, to leave Knoxville for Memphis.<sup>33</sup> Sarah Blair Gammon may have traveled to Memphis with Miss Jennie, as she was a child under the age of ten. They did, however, later return to Knoxville between 1866 and 1869.

After the slaves were freed at the end of the Civil War, money was scarce and it was difficult to make a living. There had not been any advance notice given for a period of conversion; white slave owners had not prepared slaves to be economically independent. Other slaves used their freedom to locate family members and form new communities. If ex-slaves lacked the means to move to another state, they often became share-croppers, or tried to find wage work by remaining in the employ of their former owners.<sup>34</sup> In order to re-establish small crops and livestock in eastern Tennessee, cooperation, often times in the form of bartering, needed to be fostered between the races. Still, many recently freed slaves migrated to the urban areas seeking gainful employment. It was necessary in some Tennessee counties for the United States War Department to appoint local residents to the position of Assistant Superintendent of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands. In August 1865, Samuel E. Griffith of Jonesborough was appointed Assistant Superintendent for Washington County. He supervised the Bureau's administration for the welfare of the recently freed slaves by

establishing punishments for anyone who did not pay a price for the labor of a freedman in their employ.<sup>35</sup>

Nathan Gammon, as a clerk of the Knoxville court, undoubtedly knew John Luttrell Murphy, a Union Major in the Civil War who studied law afterwards in Washington D. C. After becoming a lawyer, he then returned to Knoxville, where he married Viola Slemmons, started a family and employed two black servants, J.C. Hawes (twenty-one years old) and Clara Jones (eighteen years old).<sup>36</sup> John Luttrell Murphy was appointed by President Grant to be a judge in the Montana Territory.<sup>37</sup> Accompanying the Murphys on their westward wagon train journey was Sarah Blair Gammon, working as a nanny to the judge's two small children.<sup>38</sup> The wagon train arrived in Virginia City, Montana early in 1871.

### **Gender in Montana's Territorial Capital**

Gold had been discovered in Alder Gulch in June 1863, prompting a stampede of mostly white men seeking their fortunes and creating a boom town. Almost overnight log cabins and tents sprang up, generating a rambunctious mining town where men worked and drank; it was no place for a lady. The early mining camp of Virginia City lacked the domestic comforts that respectable white women, the bearers of civilization, were expected to bring with them.

Eventually though, women and children began to trickle into a town that would rise and fall with the cyclic economic booms and busts caused by mining. Virginia City represented a stark contrast to what one woman pioneer had left behind in the east. After moving to Virginia City in February 1864, Harriet Sanders, wife of Wilbur Fisk

Sanders, wrote to her sister in Cleveland expressing her regret that she lacked a rocking chair in which she could soothe her babies; her sister obliged her and sent her one. She later recalled,

I shall never forget the laugh we had when a friend called one day and said that they had heard the neighbors say that Mrs. Sanders was very aristocratic, living as she did in a house of three rooms and possessing a chair and cast-iron stove and a carpet.<sup>39</sup>

In a frontier mining town, people came to appreciate and envy the simple luxuries, like apples, cats and carpets, that had been easily attained in their former eastern residences.<sup>40</sup> However uncivilized this town appeared, society already had well conceived ideas of how people should behave. Harriet Sanders declined to attend the theater with her husband, "thinking it was hardly a safe place for a lady."<sup>41</sup> When women left the security of their homes, they were exposed to a public, mostly male environment, where men drank and entertained themselves by shooting off their guns.

Sarah Raymond, a twenty-four year old white schoolteacher from Missouri, described Virginia City upon her arrival there, September 5, 1865:

We were not favorably impressed with Virginia City. It is the shabbiest town I ever saw, not really a good house in it...after hunting up and down the two most respectable looking streets, found a log cabin with two rooms that we rented for eight dollars per month...The cabin is on the corner of Wallace and Hamilton Streets, next door to the city butcher. The cabin has a dirt roof. There is a floor in it, and that is better than some have. It is neat and clean, which is a comfort. Men have not batched in it.<sup>42</sup>

In this rough and tumble mining town, it was difficult for adult women to earn a respectable living. As a woman and a schoolteacher, Sarah Raymond was expected to make order out of the chaos she found in Virginia City. These expectations were sometimes difficult to meet when families faced obstacles of harsh weather, arid land,

isolation, primitive living conditions and high prices. The task of creating some kind of society in the transient community seemed especially burdensome when Sarah Raymond learned she would not be able to support her mother and her younger brothers on her salary alone. Raymond only taught for one year before she married a miner, James Herndon, in May 1867.

By the late 1860s, Virginia City had already established standards by which white men expected to keep white women silently in their places, in the domestic sphere. Women were without choice or public power in deciding how their new city was to be defined and regulated.<sup>43</sup> Thomas Dimsdale, Virginia City's first schoolteacher, expressed the prevailing sentiments about women in public places. His 1864 remarks were prompted by women's emotional responses to the sight of two murderers, Buck Stinson and Hayes Lyons, being moved through town for their execution:

We cannot blame the gentle-hearted creatures; but we deprecate the practice of admitting the ladies to such places. They are out of their path. Such sights are unfit for them to behold, and in rough and masculine business of every kind women should bear no part. It unsexes them, and destroys the most lovely part of their character. A woman is queen in her own home; but we neither want her as a blacksmith, a plough-woman, a soldier, a lawyer, a doctor, nor in any such professions or handicraft. As sisters, mothers, nurses, friends, sweethearts and wives, they are the salt of the earth, the sheet anchor of society, and the humanizing and purifying element in humanity. As such they cannot be too much respected, loved and protected. But from Blue Stockings, Bloomers and strong-minded she-males generally, "Good Lord, deliver us."<sup>44</sup>

Clearly white women were expected to be seen and not heard as they brought manners and morals to this rugged country. White women were not allowed to be independent or enterprising and should not participate in the public business world of men. Mollie Sheehan, a venturesome, twelve-year-old resident of Virginia City related this story about her short-lived business career:

Boardinghouses and hotel keepers began to offer us little girls twenty-five cents in gold dust for a big bouquet of wildflowers with which to deck their tables, most of them laid out red-checked cloths, half-inch thick earthenware or tin cups and plates, and cheap assorted knives, forks and spoons. Among the thousands of people who thronged Virginia City were some who would pay for the pretty little touches that give a semblance of gracious living. Naturally no fresh vegetables were to be had during the first spring. We girls knew that lamb's-quarters, what we called "goosefoots," were edible when young and tender; they were an even tastier pot-herb than spinach. Lamb's quarters were riotously in the ground turned by miners the previous summer and fall. From gathering these for the table at home we extended our activity to selling them at \$1.50 in gold dust for a bucket crammed full. My career as a marketer of fresh flowers and "greens" lasted until my father learned what I was doing. Indignantly and right off quick he put a stop to it, saying he would not have a daughter of his running about the streets and into hotels and public places."<sup>45</sup>

As the town ended its reign as Montana's territorial capital in 1875, white men may have considered it to be a more refined place, but the white women of the community realized that they were still at risk. In 1876, eighteen-year-old Sister Irene McGrath arrived in Virginia City accompanied by Sisters Mary Leo Dempsey and Louise Carney.<sup>46</sup> The Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas were sent to assist Father Francis J. Kelleher at Saint Mary's hospital, located in the old courthouse. Sister Irene was soon additionally assigned to teach the children their catechism and visit the needy, which frequently required her to traverse many of the rougher areas of town.<sup>47</sup> Unbeknownst to her, until the secret was revealed by a former patient, the white women of the community, fearing for her safety, made a pact to follow the young sister whenever she left the hospital.<sup>48</sup>

Sarah Blair Gammon arrived in Virginia City at a time when the white men of the community were not threatened by the presence of black people because there were fewer than twenty blacks living in the town. In fact, blacks comprised less than .1% of Montana's total 1870 population. However, at this time there were more than two



hundred and fifty Chinese men living there; this set up a racial hierarchy where blacks were not the bottom rung of the ladder. This also meant that there were fewer people with whom Sarah Gammon might share common cultural interests to develop images of community.<sup>49</sup> The 1870 Montana census reflected a total population of 20,595; of these, 18,306 were white, 1,949 were Chinese, 183 were black and 157 were Indian.<sup>50</sup> Women made up 18.6% of Montana's total population. Over the next few decades the black population in Montana rose and fell, but never reached more than 1.0 % of the state's total population.

However, in Madison County, women as a whole represented 26.4% of the total population of 2,684 people. The 1870 census listed 345 dwellings in Virginia City with 245 families. Census figures reflect that Madison County had a total of seven Chinese females and five black females, of whom three were black children between the ages of three and eleven years old.<sup>51</sup> The two adult black females were Margaret Hall and M. Bruce, who were listed as Keeping House. Virginia City's black and mixed race men were employed in various trades. George Cane and Thomas White were barbers. Edward Bryant, John Butler, Augustus Titus and Louis Westerbrook were cooks. Peter Broadhead, Leven Hall, Harrison Mondell and Jack Taylor were laborers, while James Hawley was a teamster. This was the demography of the town when Sarah Blair Gammon arrived in Virginia City, in 1871 with Judge John Luttrell Murphy, his wife Viola Slemmons Murphy and their two small children.

The Madison county population fell drastically in the years after the initial gold rush; people moved on to pursue their dreams of wealth when the gold in Alder Gulch played out.<sup>52</sup> Judge Murphy only stayed in Virginia City for a year and a half years before

he moved his family to Bozeman, in September 1872, where he worked as a lawyer for a couple of years before moving to San Francisco where he continued to practice law.<sup>53</sup>

A storm brewed between the rival cities of Virginia City and Helena, when Virginia City's *Montanian* reported on August 31, 1871 that the Honorable Judge John L. Murphy had dismissed all five cases he had heard in district court on August 29. Apparently this was enough to start rumors of his incompetence. The *Helena Herald* claimed that on September 23, 1872 the *Montanian* reported that according to a Washington special in the *Chicago Tribune*, the Montana Attorney General was to begin the removal process of the unfit judge. Further, the *Helena Herald* on September 26, 1872, refuted the incompetence claim as an "infamous outrage" and charged that the "clique at Virginia" had frequently made malicious attacks on the Judge's character. The paper claimed nine-tenths of the people of Montana saw the *Montanian's* article as persecution. "In answer to which," the *Montanian* printed October 3, 1872, "we will say, we believe ninety-nine one hundredths of the people of this, the First Judicial District, are rejoiced at his removal...and wishing the Judge may succeed better at the plow than he did on the bench, we will say, God speed." In 1875 Virginia City lost its rivalry to Helena, when Helena became the new capital of Montana. The Union judge was clearly not wanted by the community of Virginia City.

### **Married Life**

Perhaps viewing Judge Murphy's harassment influenced Sarah Blair Gammon to chose to stay in Virginia City and take a job as a hotel chambermaid and cabin cleaner for

miners. However, within two years of her arrival, she married a black man, John Brown.<sup>54</sup> Married life brought Sarah Brown three children; only her daughter Eva survived until the age of nine.<sup>55</sup> By 1880, Sarah's husband and her two sons, William and Leonard, had died.<sup>56</sup> The mining town suffered the loss of many of its youths (ages two to ten years old) due to an epidemic of diphtheria in 1878.<sup>57</sup> Children were not kept isolated inside the home but were allowed free play in the bacteria laden dirt and dust that comprised the frontier streets. The 1880 Census reflects that the only black women remaining in Virginia City were Sarah Brown and the sisters, Minerva Cogswell and Parthenia Sweed, employed as washwomen. They had a boarder who lived with them, John Taylor, a black man who tended stables. At the tender age of twenty-five years old, Sarah had lost her parents, her husband and two of her children.

Life had not dealt Sarah an easy row to hoe, and she was once again forced to earn a living for herself and Eva by working for the caterer Mrs. Adeline Laurin.<sup>58</sup> Adeline LaGris Booth Laurin was a French Canadian who immigrated first to Illinois, then to Montana. Dormien Booth had been a widower with three small children when he married Adeline LaGris in 1855. Adeline's sister, Mrs. George Gravelle, died in 1861 while her husband was fighting in the Civil War, thus Adeline inherited her sister's five children. Her husband was accidentally shot and died outside Virginia City by the time she reached Nevada City, Montana, she was the destitute sole supporter of eight children. Although the exact date of her arrival in Nevada City is unknown, it is recorded that she married a local merchant, John Laurin on June 9, 1865. John Laurin, also a French Canadian, arrived in Cicero (the present day town of Laurin in the Ruby Valley) in July 1863. He was a merchant, stockman, postmaster, and hotel owner. John and Adeline built the

Laurin Catholic church and the town's first cemetery. When Laurin died on January 3, 1896, he left his wife a wealthy woman. According to Lew Callaway, a former Montana Supreme Court judge, Adeline Laurin, "could read with difficulty, could write a little....Mrs. Laurin was an intelligent woman, but after figures reached a certain limit, she was lost. Like a man who doesn't know the difference between a million and a billion dollars!"<sup>59</sup> Sarah worked for Mrs. Laurin for a couple of years. Just before the mid 1880s, things began to look up for Sarah when she married a white miner, twenty years her senior, Stephen Bickford.

Stephen Bickford had been on the first 1863 stampede, when gold was discovered in Alder Gulch. Bickford had traveled west from his native state of Maine, avoiding Civil War enlistment. He was a speculator, dabbling in gold mining and ranching before buying shares in the Virginia City Water Company in 1888. For a city of thousands of miners, water purity became an issue early on. "Typhoid fever was common," writes Paul Phillips, "and many recognized that it came from contaminated water. An epidemic of this disease swept through Virginia City in the winter of 1863-64, and all the doctors in Alder Gulch were called to help."<sup>60</sup> Cholera, as well as typhoid were plaguing eastern cities during this period too, which raised concerns across the nation for methods of establishing clean drinking water standards. In fact, it was Anton Holter's own bout of mountain fever, which is similar to typhoid, that thoroughly convinced him it was necessary and urgent to bring the town fresh water. The first territorial act of 1865 provided for the establishment of a water system. There was no money to transport metal piping from the east. The men merely used the resource that was available to them at that time, timber. Holter and his friends ingeniously devised a tool to hollow out logs, so

they could be linked together like pipes.<sup>61</sup> Later, as owner and operator of the water company, Bickford skillfully maintained the pipe system over the years, while also teaching the skills to his son, Elmer.

Stephen Bickford married Sarah Blair Gammon Brown about 1883, before the white population in Montana began to feel threatened by the growing number of black people who arrived in the early twentieth century, in search of freedom and employment as miners, railroad workers and farmers. According to local folklore, Stephen Bickford was a product of his Victorian upbringing, as he did not tolerate any disrespectful comments made towards Sarah; Stephen once pulled a man from a bar and gave him a beating for making slurs about his wife. In Virginia City, where women were so few, Bickford maintained that his wife was to be treated with the same respect as any other white wife in their community; race was supposedly irrelevant in this mixed race marriage. Southern black women were not unconditionally welcomed into white frontier towns. Montana's anti-miscegenation law was not enacted until long after Bickford's death in 1900, although incidents of racial intolerance directed at a white man who married a black woman were described in *The Glendive Independent* in 1893.<sup>62</sup> The 1909 law prohibited marriage between whites and persons of Negro, Chinese and Japanese blood. Any person who solemnized such a marriage in Montana would be guilty of a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of five hundred dollars or a month in jail.<sup>63</sup> The reaction of *The Montana Plaindealer*, a black newspaper, to the passage of the miscegenation bill was, "Montana has joined the Jim Crow Colony alongside of Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas and Arkansas. God help us!"<sup>64</sup> To which *The Treasure State*, Helena's white newspaper, replied, "... the black man is not

the equal of his white contemporary... and Jim Crow laws won't hold him down if he deserves to rise."<sup>65</sup>

### **Segregation in Virginia City**

The Bickfords had four children, Elmer (born 1884), Harriet Virginia (born 1887), Hellena (born 1890) and Mabel (born in 1892).<sup>66</sup> The Bickford children attended the Virginia City school alongside the white children, just as Eva Brown had, as evidenced by the 1880 School Census, where she was listed as "colored," as was seven year old Nora Dowell. Eva Brown and Nora Dowell were not the only African-American children to attend the school; in 1876 and 1877 school census reports reveal a thirteen-year-old Sidney Bill and four members of the Johnson family above the age of one years old. But, 1892 was the last year that the Virginia City School Census listed the four Bickford children as Negro; after 1892 there is no mention of race. Montana's 1872 law mandating racial segregation of school systems was repealed in 1895. Racial segregation seems never to have been enforced in Virginia City; however, in 1875, a black school in Helena was established with fewer than twenty pupils. But cost trumped racism, and the city found that it was not feasible to operate both white and black schools; Helena's black school closed in 1882.<sup>67</sup>

Another type of segregation was enforced in Virginia City. As a speculator, Stephen Bickford likely recognized a good deal when he saw it, and in 1893 he managed to buy the old Romey farm for his expanding family. Lucius Romey had been an old associate of Bickford's. Perhaps it was a stroke of luck that the Romey place on the

eastern edge of town came onto the market just as the Bickfords were establishing their family. Or, perhaps it was a strategic move on Bickford's part to purchase land to sustain his family and diversify his assets. Romey had been an ice harvester and truck farmer who raised fruits and vegetables, which he sold as far away as Butte. Additionally, the Bickfords had cows, chickens and ducks, the essentials to help their children grow strong and survive. The ducks provided additional income for the family as they were sold to the Chinese miners, who lived at the other end of the town. An early city ordinance relegated the Chinese laborers, who comprised one third of the town's 1870 population, to the west end of town, which was closer to the pond used for hydraulic mining.<sup>68</sup> This established a core / periphery dynamic with Chinese and blacks living at the extreme opposite ends of town, with the white population in the middle.

After Harriet Virginia and Hellena graduated from high school in the first decade of the twentieth century, they attended Western University, a black school in Quindaro, Kansas. How the Bickfords would have known about Western University is uncertain, but the fact remains that Sarah Bickford could afford to send her daughters to college.<sup>69</sup> Located near the Missouri River, Quindaro became a stop in the underground railway for many escaped slaves. The Freedmen's School began in the 1860s, but was dormant from 1877 to 1881, when the African Methodist Episcopal Church assumed sponsorship of the school. The name was changed to Western University in 1891; it closed in 1948 for financial reasons. Both Harriet Virginia and Hellena married professors.<sup>70</sup> Harriet Virginia married William Davidson (black) in 1912.<sup>71</sup> According to the 1920 census they lived in Seminole, Oklahoma where she was a stenographer in a law office. Hellena Eva Bickford became Mrs. George Washington Hines when she and her husband were



*Virginia City School. Mabel Bickford, front row, second girl from the left.*

*Photo enlargement reveals that Mabel, unlike any of the other girls, may have been wearing a belt with an ornate buckle. There also appears to be a shiny object on her right hand, possibly a ring. These two items along with the style of her clothing point to a personal statement of class and respectability.*



*Ward Hall and Stanley Hall circa 1910. Western University, Kansas City, Kansas. Ward Hall built in 1881 was destroyed by fire in 1912. The University was closed in 1948 and Stanley Hall is no longer standing.*



married in Virginia City's St. Paul's Episcopal Church, in 1913. George Washington Hines (mulatto) was born July 1881, in Shelbyville, Indiana to John Henry Hines and Alice Matilda Hughes Hines. He had been the head of the Department of Commercial Instruction before transferring in 1912 back to the college he graduated from in 1909, Howard University.<sup>72</sup> This might suggest that Sarah Bickford could have received additional business advice from her son-in-law, but no evidence of this has come to light.

Not to be outdone by her siblings, Sarah's youngest daughter, Mabel, continued her education at Columbia, Chicago and Howard Universities.<sup>73</sup> In 1928, she married a black general practitioner, Samuel Jenkins from New York. Although Mabel E. Bickford had already received her 1922 Chicago doctorate, she chose to expand her horizons in other areas. Her 1929 masters thesis in psychology, written at the age of thirty-seven, was entitled, "Study of the Problems of Negro Girls, Harriet Beecher Stowe Junior High School, New York City." From 1935 to 1962 Mabel Bickford Jenkins was employed by the Bureau of Child Guidance under the New York City Board of Education.<sup>74</sup>

There is no evidence to indicate that Elmer Bickford pursued a higher education. He had assisted his father in line maintenance for the Water Company; upon his father's death Elmer shouldered the responsibility. As a married man, Elmer and his white wife, Vera lived in Bremerton, Washington, according to the 1920 Census.<sup>75</sup> But most of his life was spent in Madison county, Montana, where he worked as a plumber in his own shop.

## Racism in Montana

It is not hard to imagine that the sixteen-year-old Sarah Blair Gammon would have found gainful employment as a hotel chambermaid or as a caterer's assistant; these occupations aligned with social expectations. It is also easy to imagine that Virginia City was shocked when Stephen Bickford died in 1900, leaving his children and his ownership of the Virginia City Water Company to his wife Sarah Blair Gammon Brown Bickford, thereby making a black woman owner and manager of a public utilities company. As a dabbler, Stephen Bickford had managed to leave his family assets which needed to be carefully managed for their survival. In addition to leaving Sarah Bickford the water company (valued at \$7000), he left Romey's Garden (value \$1500), several partial interests in various mines (value \$750), a share in Southern Montana Telegraph and Electric Company (value \$25), and two acres in Baker's field (value \$200). The will took almost two years to probate so Sarah was given \$75 a month allowance to support the children.<sup>76</sup>

Initially she did not deem herself to be an equal business partner to the white men in the community. She had been a part of the Virginia City community for nearly thirty years, but the times were changing as race discrimination became more of an issue across the state of Montana. The black population of Virginia City remained miniscule in comparison to Helena's, for example, but that does not mean that Virginia City experienced an absence of the overt racism that was growing in other parts of the state.

Between 1906 and 1911, Joseph B. Bass, editor of Helena's newspaper for and about the black community, the *Montana Plaindealer*, protested the rise of racism in the

state's capital city. The paper, whose motto was, "Peace, Prosperity and Unity," sought to "uplift" the black people and expose racism.<sup>77</sup> Montana racism did not take the violent form of lynching. As historian William L. Lang argues, racism "consisted of what W. E. B. Du Bois called "those petty little meannesses."<sup>78</sup> Lang's article, "Helena, Montana's Black Community, 1900-1912," mentions that Bass often wrote in response to articles in the *Helena Independent*. One particular 1906 *Independent* article meant to demean the black community's improvements stated, "the average negro likes pork chops better than work."<sup>79</sup> It was psychological warfare; the black community needed a newspaper that defended its interests. Bass thought by uplifting the black people their moral senses would be sharpened and they would police their own community members. This would break down the stereotype of viewing all blacks as derelicts based on the behavior of one derelict black person; he knew that "criminal behavior strengthened white prejudice."<sup>80</sup> At this time black people were not corralled into a specific area in town as the Chinese had been in Virginia City. Helena appeared to be more racially tolerant than Glendive, Montana.

A more physically threatening form of racism was documented on February 9, 1915, in the story "The Color Line is Drawn in Glendive: Case Tried Before Judge Goulding and Causes Merriment for Many Spectators."<sup>81</sup> The newspaper, tongue-in-cheek, reported on the trial of Harvey Mitchell, who pushed Robert Tobin off the public sidewalk and called him a "nigger." Tobin, a one-armed, nomadic "gentleman of color" was "pursuing the art of begging," according to the newspaper, when he was stopped by Mitchell. News travels fast in a small town and the courtroom was full of spectators the day of the trial. Ultimately, the judge dismissed the case, giving both men

a good lecture. But the newspaper article continued,

This case brings up the fact that for many years there has been a saying that "the sun is never allowed to set on any niggers in Glendive." Whether or not there was actual truth in the saying may be judged from the fact that at present our colored population is a decidedly minus quantity....Regarding the black residents of Uncle Sam, the majority of whom reside south of the Mason and Dixon line, and of which Glendive is so free at the present time that the sight of one is a real curiosity.

Clearly, one did not stay where one was not wanted; blacks tended to gravitate towards other blacks and gave rise to black communities in Butte, Fort Benton and Helena, where in 1910, the black population of four hundred and twenty reached a peak, representing 3.4% of the capital's inhabitants.<sup>82</sup> This was a significant increase from the seventy-one black people, or 2.3% of the total population who resided in Helena at the time of the 1870 Census.<sup>83</sup>

### Twentieth-Century Employment

Businesswomen of color earned more than a wage; they earned status in societies where respectable women of color were not expected to make a profit. They also negotiated new identities for themselves in a white man's world, thus changing the social structure by giving new meaning to their active presence in the public sphere.<sup>84</sup> As a widow, a mother and a businesswoman, Sarah Bickford had to ensure the viability of her business; her children's lives depended on her competence. This is exactly what makes her an entrepreneur, managing a business was an endeavor with a considerable risk attached to it. She was forced to exercise her survival skills, probably learned from her slave days.

Sarah Bickford was at least functionally literate when she came to Montana. She may have inherited some community respect from the prominent place her husband held in the community, but upon entering the public sphere she had to prove her autonomy by overcoming the things that disadvantaged her. Therefore, she completed a 1902 business correspondence course which speaks to the fact that she was more than capable of getting along in daily transactions in the male dominated business world.<sup>85</sup> It also acted as a legitimizing fact that increased community acceptance of her as a businesswoman.

Sarah Bickford did have a partner, her husband's former associate, Philip Harry Gohn, who would intercede for Mrs. Bickford in certain matters. He had married into the banking business by marrying Henrietta M. Elling; later he moved his family to Pony, Montana and then to Kansas City, where his wife had relatives. P.H. Gohn remained one-third owner of the water company until 1917 when Sarah Bickford bought him out and he moved to Alameda, California. They shared a personal and professional relationship. Her financial capabilities were recognized in P. H. Gohn's correspondence. Extant business records indicate that in 1902 and 1906 Bickford's two-thirds share of water company profit came to an average of \$126 per month. When Gohn received his monthly dividends he would either praise her for "squeezing blood out of turnips" or comment on her financial responsibilities.<sup>86</sup> Bickford returned his regard; at least on one occasion, she sent the Gohn family a holiday turkey.<sup>87</sup> Correspondence dated August 12, 1912 suggested that P. H. Gohn and his wife hoped to meet Bickford in Kansas City. In fact, Bickford had been looking to purchase a house in the area, the purpose of which is unknown but perhaps it was meant to be given to her daughter.<sup>88</sup> Gohn had known that Bickford had traveled out to visit her ailing daughter, Harriet Virginia.<sup>89</sup> The water

company income afforded Bickford the ability to educate her daughters and travel to visit them. Mr. Gohn acted as the buffer between white men and the ex-slave by visiting with city council members when he was in Virginia City and by assisting Bickford in preparing financial statements for the Public Service Commission.

### **Business Correspondence**

In the absence of the typically used historical documents such as written memoirs, diaries and journals, historians must creatively improvise by looking in uncommon places to find the voices of black women. Sometimes these women were documented in folklore or as a footnote to someone else's biography. But other records exist in the form of Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Convention booklets and in the business correspondence of the Virginia City Water Company.

Early in the twentieth century, public utilities companies began to be regulated by the Montana Board of Railroad Commissioners, later the Public Service Commission, which sought to have all disputes handled through their office as opposed to handling complaints at the local level. Sarah Bickford viewed this as a hindrance and stated as much in a letter to the Railroad Commissioners, dated October 13, 1925,

...you wrote me regarding the McKeen Hotel which you quoted me water closets at 50 cts, therefore I charged Lowman 50 cts for a public toilet, now if I have overcharged him for a public place such as a Soft Drink parlor, please let me know and I will gladly remit.

Now in conclusion why would it not be better for all concerned any time you get a letter from the water users here to refer them to this office as I am only glad to show them the rates....<sup>90</sup>

She maintained that she was merely following their instructions by applying their rate rules equally to all business owners. In fact, the Board's Chief Engineer, Fred E. Buck,

responded to Mrs. Fritz Walker's complaint by supporting Sarah Bickford's decision,

In reply to your inquiry relative to the water tariff which would be applicable to your premises, beg to advise that the schedule of rates provides that a dwelling shall be charged at the rate of \$2.00 per month, which includes a hot and cold water faucet. If a bath is in the house this will add \$0.50 more, making the total charge \$2.50 per month. The rate of \$2.00 gives you the privilege of having one hot and one cold water faucet, without additional charges over and above the \$2.00. The fact that you did not have these two faucets does not alter the rate to be charged. Therefore, Mrs. Bickford is apparently correct in charging you \$2.50 per month for your residence containing a bath.<sup>91</sup>

She understood the directives she received, applied them equally and was able to explain them to all her customers. But occasionally, someone of some public stature would attempt to exercise his public clout over Sarah Bickford.

Bickford ardently disputed state Senator Monty Duncan's claim that he should not be required to pay for any repairs on a frozen water line. On May 9, 1930, she wrote the Commission citing its own Rule G-2. The rule stated, "All expenses of laying and maintaining service pipe from the mains to the consumer's premises must be borne by the consumer. The service pipe must be laid below street grade and on the consumer's premises, at a standard depth, designated by the company to prevent freezing."<sup>92</sup> Her letter to the Commission referenced Senator Duncan's attempt to intimidate her and accused him of being untruthful. She tried to handle his complaint on her own terms but he remained steadfastly "unreasonable and refused to listen."<sup>93</sup> She exercised her voice in her right to appeal the Senator's charges and asked the Commission to intervene in the dispute. At no point was Bickford intimidated by the prestige of an irate senator; rather she supported her logic for charging him for the repairs by quoting the state's very own Rule G-2. Her business correspondence reveals that she did not verbally assault men who