

**April 8, 2022**

**Grand Canyon History Tidbit by Kim Besom**

**Mary Jane Colter**

April 4 marked the 153<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the birth of **Mary Jane Colter**, the designer of several of the iconic buildings at Grand Canyon, including Hermits Rest, the Desert View Watchtower, the Lookout Studio, and Phantom Ranch. Working for the Santa Fe Railroad and Fred Harvey Company, Colter preferred to incorporate Native American and Spanish influences in her building designs, rather than mimic the European styles that were popular at the time. Colter was well-known to many who lived at Grand Canyon, as she spent considerable time here when overseeing the construction of those buildings. Oral interviews with some of the earlier Village inhabitants confirmed that she was brilliant, meticulous, and a perfectionist who was strict about ensuring that her vision was replicated during the construction of the structures she designed.



#16942: SUPERINTENDENT TILLOTSON, MRS ICKES, & MARY COLTER LOOKING AT CONSTRUCTION PLANS, CIRCA 1932.

From a 1994 interview with **Ruth Stephens Baker**, who grew up at Grand Canyon, in the 1920's-30's:

**Interviewer:** What was Mary Jane Colter like?

**Baker:** Oh, she was something else. She was a delightful person. Of course, she was a very autocratic person, she knew exactly what she wanted and how she wanted it. That's why everything turned out the way it did. She was a wonderful person.



#16682: MARY COLTER DRAWING OF PROPOSED INDIAN GARDEN STONE COTTAGE ACCOMODATION.

From a 1979 interview with **Roy Nelson**, who grew up at Grand Canyon in the 1920's-30's, son of Santa Fe engineer Elmer Nelson:

**Nelson:** [My father] worked very closely with an architect. Her name was Mary Jane Colter. And Mary Jane contributed a tremendous amount of charm and architecture to the construction that the railroads were, particularly the Santa Fe Railroad, doing in the west. Many of the Harvey Houses along the line, where they would stop the trains and feed the people and so forth, she had her touch on that. One of the things they needed there at the Canyon, soon after the [El Tovar] hotel was constructed, was a sort of a rest stop out on one of the Rim drives- they called it Hermits Rest. Mary Jane had designed a structure for that purpose because the people

climbed in these charming old carriages and took the Rim Drive in that fashion in those days, and in the wintertime, by the time they reached eight miles out to Hermits Rest, they were quite chilled to the bone and they wanted a place where they could warm up and have some hot bouillon and get all fixed for their return trip.

**Interviewer:** That's why the fireplace area is so...

**Nelson:** Well, as it turned out, that's why that's there. But that is not what she had designed for the place. Unbeknownst to her and because somebody didn't check what her plans were, she had what is now the Lookout building... was the design for Hermits Rest place. And somebody usurped that and put it where it is today... So, she had to redo her thinking about Hermits Rest and come up with the structure that's there now that has the large fireplace.

It was my privilege to work with her quite closely, both as a driver and as a companion in moving her around the whole western part of the country on many missions she was pursuing, such as going out to the Hovenweep ruins, and many out of the way places where she was picking up information for what turned out to be the Indian Watchtower at Desert View...

Mary Jane spent a lot of her time traveling- there's old lanterns and things hanging in the Bright Angel. One is an original that she picked up... And she had some excellent craftsmen, blacksmiths and so forth, that could take an original piece and duplicate it exactly. A good example of that, I think, there's two lanterns hanging in the lobby of the Bright Angel Lodge. One is an antique original and the other is a copy. Many of the lanterns and lamps and things are also that way. There'll be one original and two or three copies.

One time we stopped in a little place near St. John, Arizona and there was a fabulous collection of antiques with a character there that had a great flowing white beard, etc., and we came upon this place. It was a log cabin type place right after one of the huge thunderstorms went through that area and his roof had blown off. Mary Jane began her famous blow when she saw that he was in trouble and she was probably going to get some things that she'd been trying to get out of him for years. He had such items as Billy the Kid's guns, this and that and the other thing. But what she was very much interested in was some of his jewelry. She bought, when she found him in distress that day, the wedding present, Indian jewelry wedding present that Kit Carson gave his bride. Exquisite stuff. I'm sure it's in one of the museums today. Most of her collection, I think went into the Santa Fe Museum.

I remember well another item that she bought that day was a rocking horse that was carved out of cottonwood root and it was for the first white baby in the territory of Arizona. That hung on the wall of the Bright Angel Lodge for many years. I don't know if it's still there or not.

She had a tremendous collection of mainly Indian jewelry that she'd pick up from people that would wonder how on Earth she knew where they were, like this white-bearded man that was out near St. John that had that fabulous collection of things.



#16996: HARVEY CAR DRIVER HELPS MARY COLTER EXAMINE TOWER RUIN AT HOVENWEEP, CIRCA 1931.

From a 1995 oral interview with former Ranger Naturalist **Polly Patraw**, who worked at Grand Canyon in the early 1930's:

**Interviewer:** Did you meet Mary Colter when you were working?

**Patraw:** Oh, my goodness, at Grand Canyon, yes.

**Interviewer:** What was she like?

**Patraw:** Oh, she was a fascinating person. Mary Colter made little figures of the buildings [she was designing]... She was planning Bright Angel Lodge, and she said, "I want it to look as if a prospector came in and stayed for a while, and then a cattleman came, and it gradually grew. I want Bright Angel to look like that." And she had these little models, all laid out, just the way

she wanted Bright Angel to be. She was a marvelous person, so brilliant. All the parties, we always had Mary Colter... We were all devoted to her. She had a peppery disposition, and we all loved her.

I remember when she was planning the Watchtower... She was very particular about how the rocks should be placed around the base of it, very particular. But she had everybody working for her, everybody was behind her, there her workmen were all devoted... Oh, she was very meticulous.



#16978: MEN USING WINCH TO PUT ROCKS IN PLACE DURING WATCHTOWER CONSTRUCTION, CIRCA 1932.

Not everyone was thrilled with some of her designs.

From a 1995 oral interview with **Barbara McKee**, wife of Park Naturalist Eddie McKee, who lived at Grand Canyon in the 1920's:

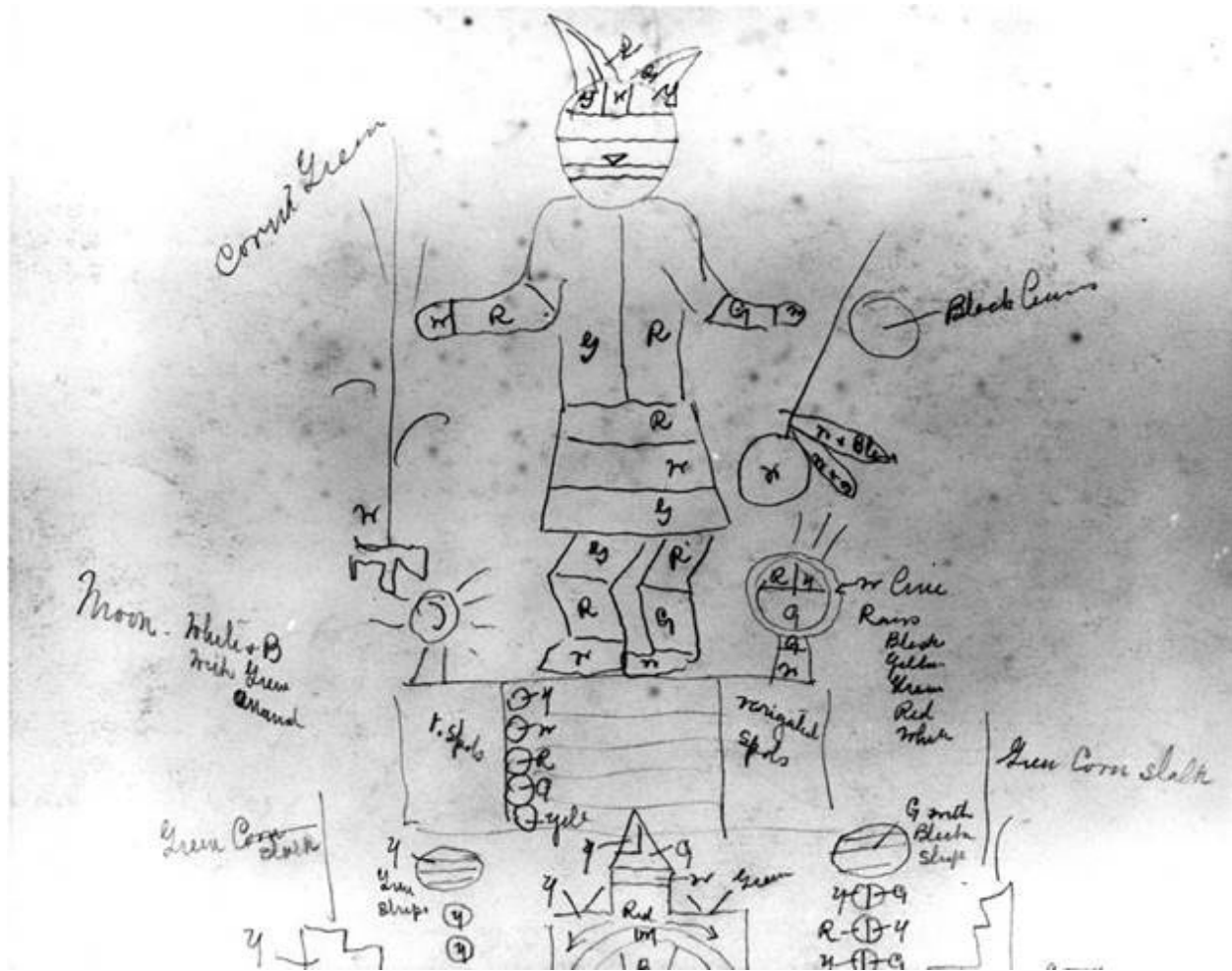
**Interviewer:** Did you ever meet Mary Jane Colter?

**McKee:** Oh yes. She would stay at El Tovar. Eddie was quite upset that she would build this horrible thing at Desert View. (laughter) It doesn't belong there, there are no towers. At

Hovenweep might be okay, but not... Anyway, they needed something out there for the tourists. She was the one that instigated that.

**Interviewer:** But you didn't like that one.

**McKee:** I didn't care, but Eddie surely did.



#16958: SKETCH BY MARY COLTER OF MURAL FIGURES LATER PAINTED IN DESERT VIEW WATCHTOWER HOPI ROOM, CIRCA 1932.

From a 1996 interview with **Olive Monogve**, a Hopi woman who worked for Fred Harvey at La Posada and Grand Canyon, starting in the 1950's:

**Monogve:** [At La Posada Mary Jane Colter] would come around once in a while and give us a party, you know, and then she would ask someone to make a cake, and then she would put little forks and knives in the cake, and quarters, and when you slice it up you could find all those things in that cake.

**Interviewer:** Like little surprises?

**Monogve:** Yeah, surprises. Really nice.

**Interviewer:** She would have these parties just to say thanks to everybody?

**Monogve:** Yeah, uh-huh. She was a nice lady.

**Interviewer:** So, she'd do parties here [at Grand Canyon] as well?

**Monogve:** Yeah, here too...

**Interviewer:** Mary Jane Colter- how often did you see her? Just now and then?

**Monogve:** Maybe now and then. Then when she got real old, she don't come around. She would just write on Christmas. She sent Christmas cards to people, like that.



#16944: MARY COLTER, AGE 80, AT THE LA FONDA HOTEL, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO.

From a 1978 interview with **Jean Tillotson Anderson**, daughter of former Superintendent Minor Tillotson:

**Interviewer:** Did you happen to know Mary Jane Colter?

**Anderson:** Mary Jane Colter was a good friend of ours... She was a funny little old lady. I just loved her with all my heart and soul. She retired to Santa Fe and lived just across the street from Mother and Dad. When I'd go to Santa Fe, of course, I always went to see Mary Jane. One time Pat and Polly Patraw were having a party in the afternoon and I was to pick up Mary Jane because she didn't drive then, she was too old... So, I picked her up and it was raining and a thunderstorm, and I got her out in the car, and she says, "I forgot my teeth, will you go back and get them?" So, I said, "Where are they?" and she says, "They're in a cup." And she smoked a lot. I went back and got the cup and here was a cupful of her teeth and also these ashes from the cigarettes. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to pick the teeth up you know. So, I took cup and all out and just then a big bolt of thunder came, lightning, and then thunder right after, so I knew it was close... my hand was shaking because of the noise and those teeth were rattling. I never was so glad to get them to her. But she just put them right on in her mouth and we went on. Just dear little thing, just dear.

**Interviewer:** Did she ever talk about her experiences at the canyon?

**Anderson:** Well, her experiences at the canyon were work, work. When she came there, it was to design or redesign a room in the El Tovar, or a room at the Bright Angel. Or she would stop on her way from one Fred Harvey house to another.

But anyhow she was quite a character. She would smoke cigarettes... they were the menthol kind of cigarettes and she would menthalize them more... [she put the cigarettes in a jar with more menthol]. My Dad was driving one time and... he asked her if he could have a cigarette and he came home and he said, "We nearly had a wreck today, a real bad wreck." We said, "What happened?" "I took one of Mary Jane Colter's cigarettes and it was so strong." I guess it was just something, nearly rolled the car or something.

But she was very strict in her work. You know, if something wasn't right, boy, she really let you know about it, whoever worked for her, and they said they had to work hard and correct for her.