In 1902, Dr. Justina Ford (1871-1952) became the first Black female physician licensed to practice medicine in Colorado. Throughout her career, she confronted and challenged discrimination at the intersection of gender and race. Denied membership in the Colorado State Medical Society and privileges at Denver General Hospital, Dr. Ford treated patients out of her Five Points home and made house calls, delivering over 7,000 babies during her fifty year-long practice.

Dr. Ford’s parents, Melissa (a nurse midwife) and Pryor Warren, were enslaved Africans who sought freedom in Illinois, where they met, married, and gave birth to Justina Lauren on January 22, 1871.

“For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a doctor, a healer of the sick...I watched my mother use her hands...in the ways of our African ancestors using roots and natural herbs to take care of her patients and I wanted to do the same...”

“I had only one ambition: medicine. I wouldn’t play with other children unless we played hospital and wouldn’t play unless I got to be the doctor. I didn’t know the name of many diseases, so I invented them, and didn’t know medications either, so my standby prescription was tobacco pills.”

“My family made great sacrifices to put me through Hering Medical College in Chicago.”

“My first husband, Rev. Dr. John Ford was a very successful pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Denver, which became the most influential Negro church west of the Mississippi. He would playfully tell folk, “Justina and I have all the bases covered in our life’s work. She handles the bodies and I handle the souls.”
On August 1, 1902, Dr. Ford became Colorado’s first licensed African-American female doctor. “When I applied for a license to practice medicine in Denver the licensing examiner told me, ‘Ma’am, I feel dishonest taking this fee from you. You got two strikes against you to begin with. First, you’re a lady, and second, you’re colored.’ I knew right then I was going to have to fight like a tiger against these things.”

Doctor Ford slept on a cot by the phone so she could answer calls quickly. “I get around the problem of hours fairly well. I just get along without sleep when I must. I can go two days without sleep. I’ve done it often. The trick is to not slow down. Once I slow my pace, I’ve got to turn in.”

“Sometimes they pay me in goods rather than cash—groceries, poultry, and so forth. Folks pay, but not always right away. There was one lady who couldn’t pay for her baby until the baby was 13 years old. I’d forgotten about that bill, but she hadn’t.”
Dr. Justina Ford fought for long-overdue recognition from the medical establishment.

For 47 years, Dr. Ford was refused membership in the Colorado State Medical Society because she was a woman of color.

Many hospitals also refused to treat immigrants and people of color. Dr. Ford didn’t discriminate and even became fluent in multiple languages to better communicate with her patients. “Good medical care is hard for poor people to get, very hard for poor people... The way they showed up is the way I took them.”

Dr. Ford was finally admitted to the Colorado State Medical Society in 1950. She received the Human Rights Award from Denver’s Cosmopolitan Club in 1951.
“Book! Now when would I find time to write a book? I’m getting busier every day.”

“Let me tell you about my hobby: I like to ride ninety miles an hour in an ambulance. This to me is good fun.”

Dr. Ford continued to treat patients until two weeks before her death on October 14, 1952.

Forty years ago, Dr. Ford’s house was relocated to 3081 California Ave. and was renovated into the Black American Museum of the West.

Medicines, microscope, instruments, and more.

Bronze statue by Joes O. Dubois at the Light Rail Station at E 30th Ave. & N. Downing St.

Dr. Ford received the Award For Community Understanding from the Cosmopolitan Club of Denver, on February 14, 1952.

Mural by Max Searing at 27th and Welton Streets in Five Points.


Four years ago, Dr. Ford’s house was relocated to 3081 California Ave. and was renovated into the Black American Museum of the West.

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Justina Ford, MD
Endowed Diversity Scholarship

In 2023, thanks to a generous donation by The Colorado Trust, the University of Colorado Child Health Associate/Physician Assistant Program (CHA/PA) will provide graduate scholarship awards for underrepresented students pursuing a Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS) within the School of Medicine.

Established in 1968 by Dr. Henry K. Silver, the CHA/PA Program has trained over 1,300 practitioners. Alumni can be found throughout Colorado and across the United States, practicing in a wide variety of primary and specialty care settings.

The first Justina Ford, MD, Scholarship was awarded in Fall 2023 to Samantha Lettenberger. As a student at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Samantha developed a keen interest in global public health. Through service projects in Ghana and Thailand, she immersed herself in the study of social determinants of health, public policy, and health systems.

Samantha built on this foundation while advocating for Black maternal and child health equity with the Foundation for Black Women’s Wellness. In this organization, she learned that it is critical to empower those most impacted by inequities to become change agents.

“My goal in joining the PA profession is to bring primary care to the underserved, specifically immigrant and refugee populations,” says Samantha. “In learning more about Dr. Ford’s accomplishments, with so many forces against her... I really want to live up to that.”

“I want to be able to serve the communities that need it the most, and primary care is the place for me to be able to do that.”

The core mission of the CHA/PA Program is to train professionals to care for urban and rural underserved populations. Workforce research informs us that a high debt burden influences where our graduates decide to practice. By lowering the burden of debt with awards like the Justina Ford Scholarship, students like Samantha will be able to practice in settings that align with their passion for service to others.

Jonathan Bowser, MS, PA-C
Director, Child Health Associate Physician Assistant Program

Make a gift to the Justina Ford, MD Endowed Diversity Scholarship
Resources

**COLORADO EXPERIENCE: Justina Ford, MD** (28m video)  
This film traces the life and legacy of one of the state’s most inspiring medical pioneers. Produced by Rocky Mountain PBS and History Colorado.

**I AM DENVER: Justina Ford, the ‘Mother Teresa of Five Points’** (5m video)  
Featuring interviews with Dr. Ford’s former patients. Produced by the City & County of Denver.

**Happy Birthday, Dr. Justina Ford** (52m video)  
Premiered January 22, 2021 - the 150th anniversary of Dr. Ford’s birth. This video features stories from her remaining patients, musical performances from artists such as Hazel Miller, and notable figures such as Senator Bennet, Denver Broncos & Nugget players and Mayor Hancock, all celebrating Ford’s commitment to providing care to the underserved in the Five Points community. Produced by Sylvia Lambe.

**Black American West Museum & Heritage Center**  
The Museum is housed in the former home of Dr. Justina Ford, which is now located at 3091 California St.

**Denver Public Library Archives**

**Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame**  
Dr. Ford was inducted in 1985, 33 years after her death.

**Photo Sources**

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**Strauss Health Sciences Library**  
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**Center for Bioethics and Humanities**  
Thanks to Kathryn Rhine, PhD, Director of the Arts and Humanities in Healthcare Program and David Weil, Manager of Operations and Educational Technology, for the development of the exhibit.