

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.*”



Hering Medical College in Chicago specialized in homeopathic medicine. Justina Ford graduated in 1899.



The Residence of Dr. Justina L. Ford, 2335 Arapahoe St. Colorado is a woman's state where women have brought things to pass and are ever on the job. Dr. Ford has her lower floor for office rooms with an accompanying operation room. She has done well and Denver feels justly proud of her female doctor.

The Denver Star, July 1, 1918



Dr. Ford and Rev. Dr. John Ford married in 1892. They moved to Denver in 1902 and in 1911 they purchased the Arapahoe St. house for \$5,900.

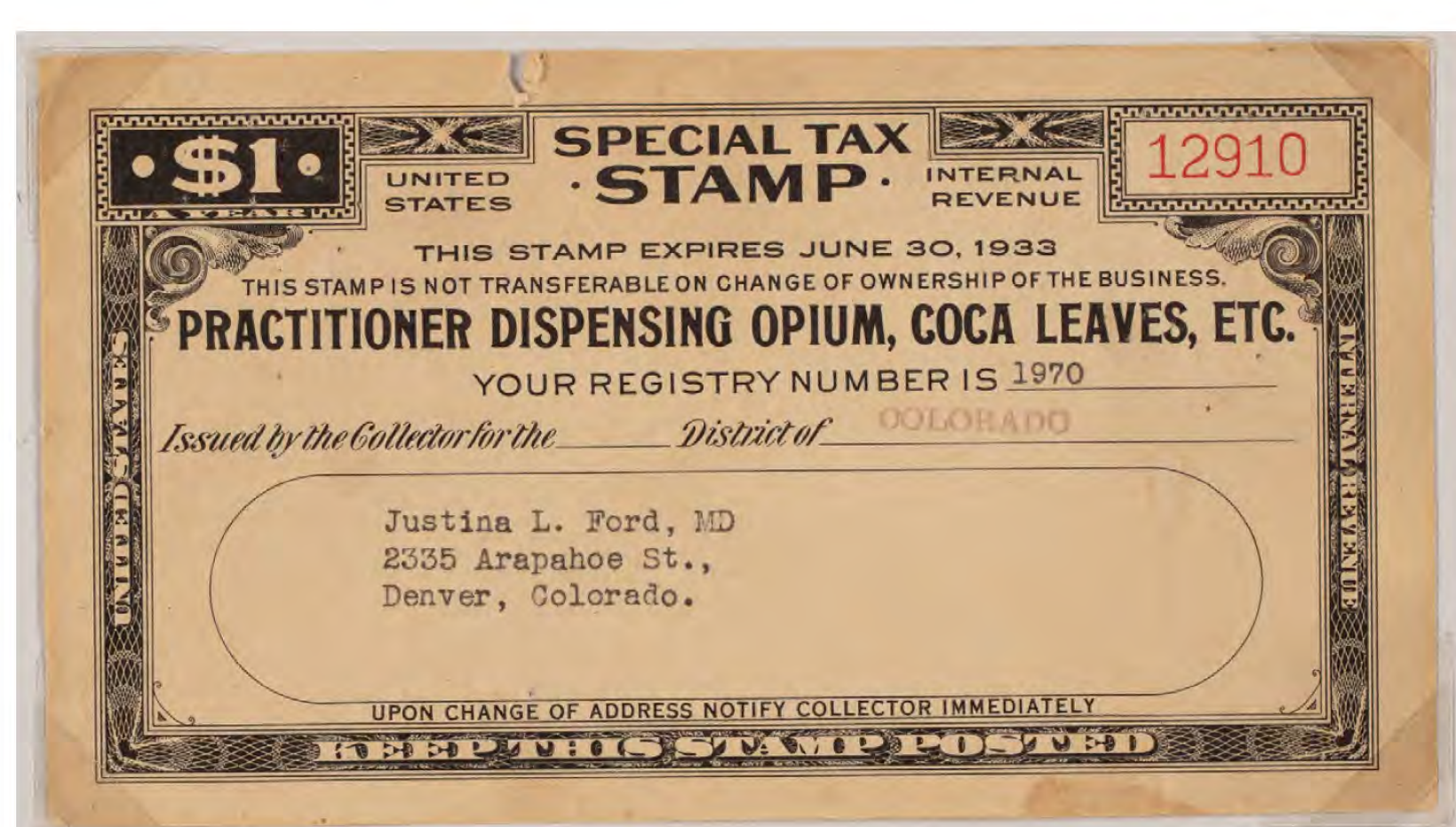


Doctor Ford slept on a cot by the phone so she could answer calls quickly. “I get around the problem of hours fairly well. I just get along without sleep when I must. I can go two days without sleep. I’ve done it often. The trick is to not slow down. Once I slow my pace, I’ve got to turn in.”

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.”



‘The Baby Doctor’



Black American West Museum

Denver Public Schools students are compiling oral histories for a play about Justina Ford's life.

Legendary Five Points obstetrician brought 7,000 youngsters into the world

By Victoria Cooper
Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

In 1902, when Colorado's first black woman doctor came to town, Denver General Hospital wasn't taking blacks — not as patients or physicians.

So Justina Ford took her practice door-to-door, delivering 7,000 babies in her 50 years in Denver.

To communicate with her patients, who included Spanish, American Indians, Chinese, Greek, Japanese, white and black, she spoke eight dialects.

“Whatever color they show up, that's the way I take them,” she was quoted at the time.

If they couldn't get to her house on Arapahoe Street, Ford took the streetcar or a taxi to theirs.

“She just placed a call and the taxi cab would show up, without charge,” recalled Ottawa Harris, 55, one of 18 “elders” interviewed as part of “The Justina Project” by Denver Public Schools students.

They are taking oral histories, which will be included in a play about her life.

Taxiing around was one of Ford's many “modern” ways. She also chose not to follow her first husband, a preacher, to Florida when he changed parishes, and

she left the homemaking to her second husband, Alfred Allen.

She had her own routine for home deliveries, and it gained a mystique in the neighborhood. “In later years she had a private car, and when we saw that long black car pull up, we knew there was another baby on the way,” recalled several Five Points residents.

Nea Stoner, 77, described “the baby doctor” as a “a small, plump woman” who delivered five of her nieces. “When it

came time to deliver the baby, (she) took off her street clothes and delivered the baby in her slip or a gown” to protect the baby from germs from her street clothes.

Stoner also recalled: “If it took eight hours to deliver a baby, Dr. Ford would stay and drink tea and wait for the baby to be born. Her husband would wait in the car outside, and she would send him off to eat from time to time, but she wouldn't go. We would feed her.”

Carrie Scott remembers Ford as a proper woman who “always had on a whole lot of clothes, and she'd sit in our rocking chair (during my mother's labor) and give my father orders. And that was funny, watching my father, because he was such a macho man, and for this tiny little lady to come in like that and just sit there and quietly give him instructions ...”

A grand nephew who stayed with her, Jack Bradley, remembers how she took barter when her patients had no cash. Prenatal care and delivery costs were \$15 or \$20 in those days, compared to today's \$4,400 figure, but Ford was often paid in apples, or chickens, or household goods or

“When all the fears, hate and even some death is over, we will really be brothers as God intended us to be in this land. This I believe. For this I have worked all my life.”

Justina Ford
Summer 1952

See FORD on 69



In 1984 Dr. Ford's house was relocated one mile away to California Street and restored as the Black American West Museum and Heritage Center.

“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.



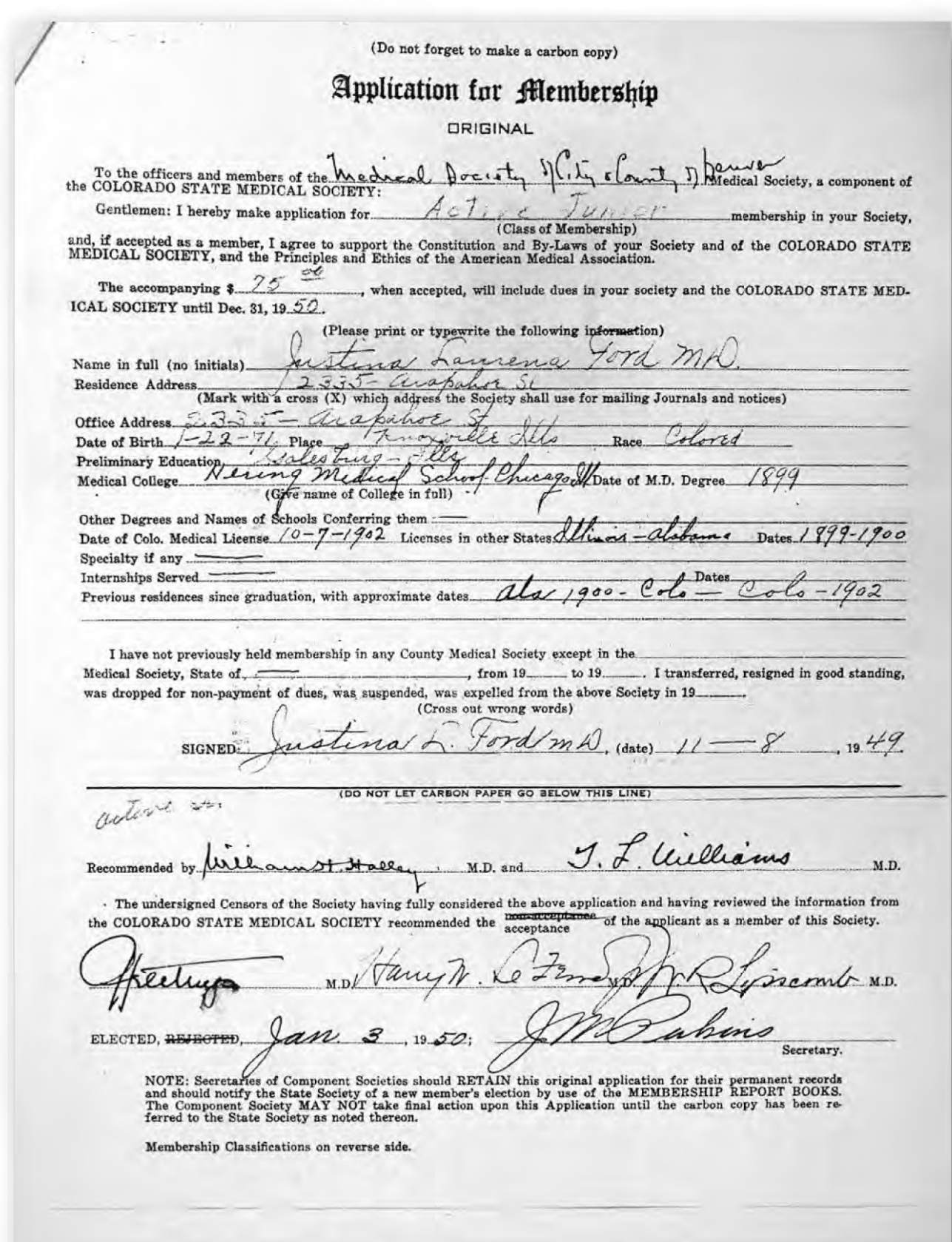
Doctors and Nurses – Arapahoe County Hospital, Denver, 1896. At that time, the medical profession was dominated by white men. Women (mostly white women) were generally limited to nursing roles.



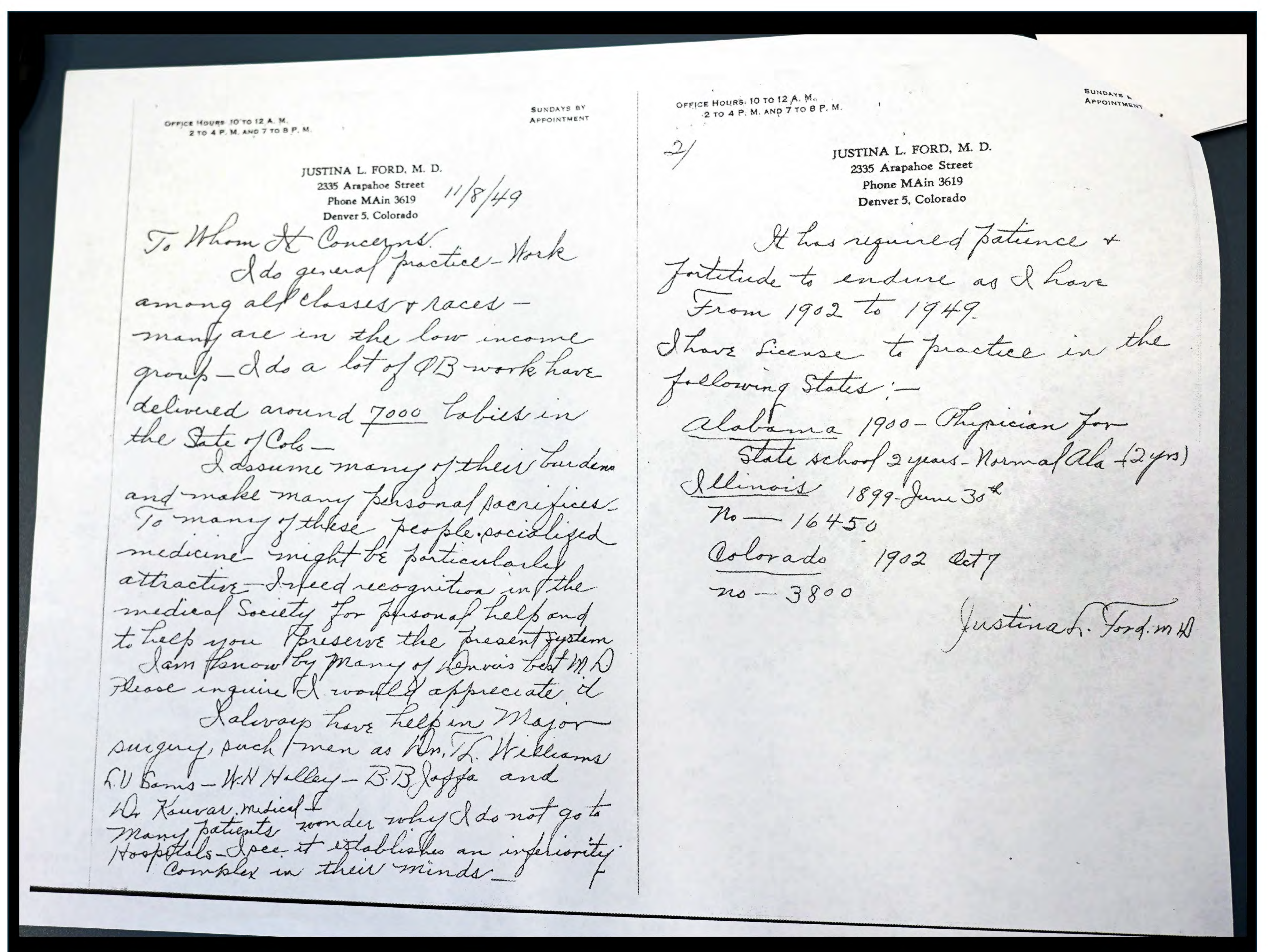
For 47 years, Dr. Ford was refused membership in the Colorado State Medical Society because she was a woman of color.

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.



Acceptance of Dr. Ford's membership application to the Colorado State Medical Society, 1950.



Justina Ford's 1949 cover letter requesting membership in the Colorado State Medical Society.



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

“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.



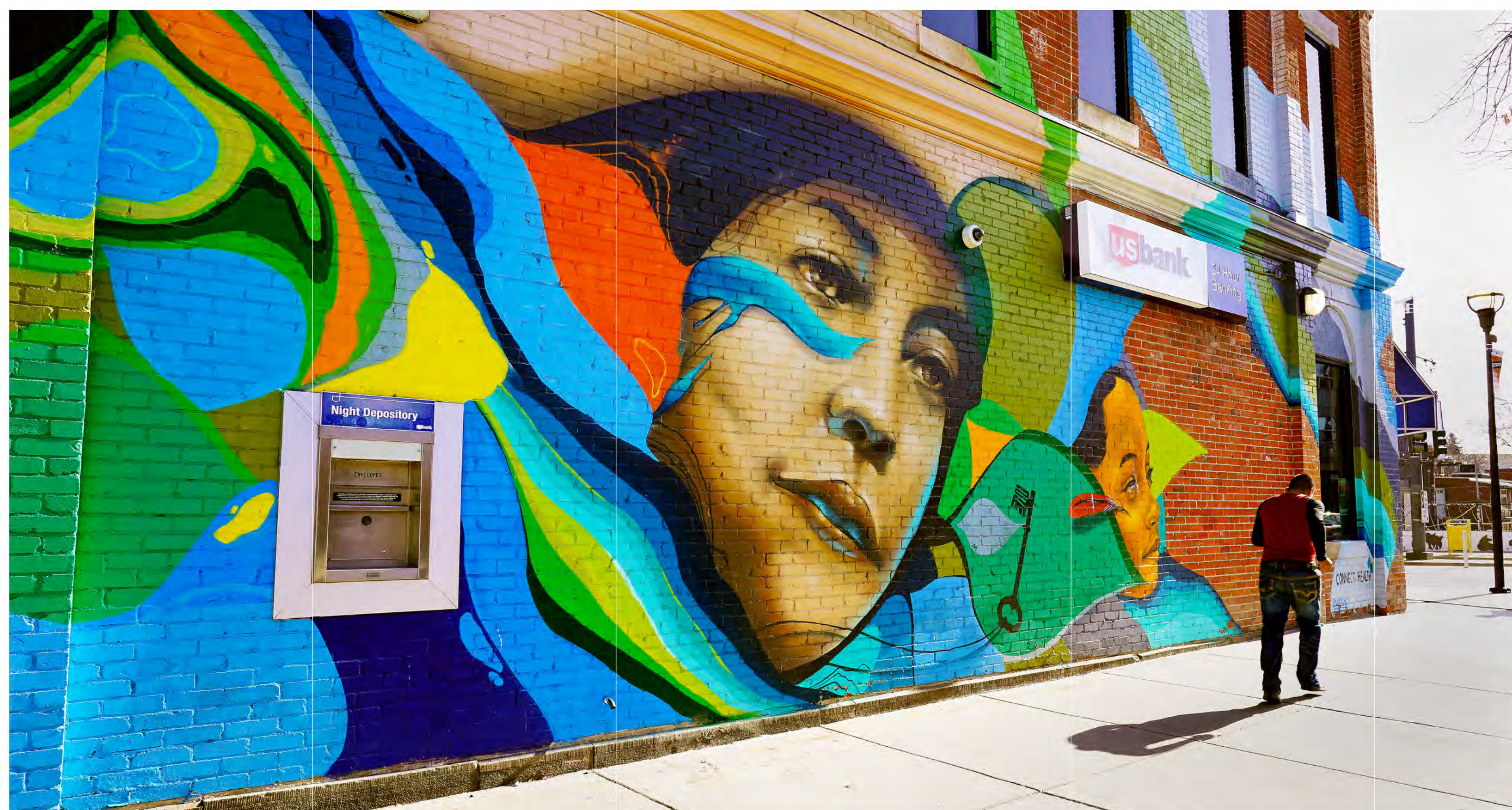
Bronze statue by Jess E. DuBois at the Light Rail Station at E 30th Ave. & N. Downing St.



Forty years ago, Dr. Ford’s house was relocated to 3091 California Ave. and was renovated into the Black American Museum of the West.



Medicines, microscope, instruments, and more.



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



WHEREAS, Justina Ford was born in Knoxville, IL in 1871 and in 1899 she graduated from Hering Medical College in Chicago. She worked for a short time in Alabama before moving to Denver, Colorado in 1902 where she practiced medicine until she died in 1952; and

WHEREAS, Justina Ford was a pioneer, a trailblazer, and a Black woman in America. Justina Ford overcame barriers of race and gender to become the first African American woman to practice medicine in Colorado; and

WHEREAS, Justina Ford was compassionate, fair, equitable, fearless and determined to help others. She was and continues to be an inspiration to others; and

WHEREAS, when she was denied access to hospitals so she set up practice in her home in the Five Points district of Denver where she specialized in gynecology, obstetrics, and pediatrics; and

WHEREAS, during her 50-year career, she delivered 7,000 babies and affectionately became known as the 'Baby Doctor' and the 'Lady Doctor'; and

WHEREAS, Justina Ford provided healthcare for the Denver’s financially challenged immigrant communities and learned 8-10 different languages and dialects to communicate with her patients during her time as a doctor; and

WHEREAS, for hundreds of families in Denver, Dr. Ford and her medical black bag represented support, in the face of invariably institutionally racist practices; and

WHEREAS, her enduring legacy can be seen across the city of Denver - from her house which is now home to the Black American West Museum, to her image emblazoned on many buildings;

THEREFORE, I Jared Polis, Governor of the State of Colorado, do hereby proclaim January 22, forevermore, as

DR. JUSTINA FORD DAY

in the State of Colorado.

GIVEN under my hand and the Executive Seal of the State of Colorado, this twenty-second day of January, 2021



Jared Polis
Jared Polis
Governor

Dr. Justina Ford Day, proclaimed on January 22, 2021.

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

 Child Health Associate /
Physician Assistant Program
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

**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

Acknowledgements

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.