

Sarah Gammon Bickford (1855–1931):

“Montana’s First Career Woman”

Sarah Bickford was born a slave on Christmas day 1855 on the Blair Plantation near Greensboro, North Carolina. Her parents were sold when she was very young, and she never saw them again. After the Civil War, she lived with an aunt in Knoxville, Tennessee. In 1870, Knoxville Judge John L. Murphy was appointed to a judicial post in Virginia City, Montana Territory, and Sarah, at the age of 15, was offered a job caring for Murphy’s children. The family arrived in Virginia City, Montana Territory in January 1871. The Murphys soon returned to the States, but Sarah stayed and worked as a chambermaid in a Virginia City hotel.

Sarah married John Brown in 1872, and they had three children: William, Leonard, and Eva. By 1879, both sons had died of diphtheria. The court granted her a divorce in November 1880 and awarded her sole custody of Eva.

In 1883, Sarah married Stephen E. Bickford, a white miner and farmer originally from Maine, who moved to Montana Territory during the gold rush of the 1860s. Sarah and Stephen had four children: Elmer, Harriet, Helena, and Mabel. During the early 1880s Sarah operated the New City Bakery on Wallace Street in Virginia City, which took in boarders and offered *“Meals and Lunches at all hours. Fresh bread, Cakes, Pies and Confectionery Constantly on hand.”*

In 1888, Stephen and Sarah Bickford purchased a two-thirds share of the water system that supplied drinking water to Virginia City. Sarah kept the books for the water company. In 1890, they purchased “Fisher’s Garden,” a vegetable and fruit farm east of Virginia City from which she sold produce and poultry to the surrounding community. After Stephen died in 1900, Sarah retained ownership of their interest in the Virginia City Water Company. She also inherited a small farm, several city lots, interests in nearby gold mining claims, and one share of stock in the Southern Montana Telegraph and Electric Company. She assumed control of the water company, managing all company matters, and acquired the remaining one-third share of the company. As sole owner of the Virginia City Water Company, Sarah became the only African American woman in Montana—and possibly in the United States—to own a utility company.

Sarah Bickford managed the Virginia City Water Company until she died of a heart attack in her home on July 19, 1931. Well loved by the community, her sudden death was reported in the local paper as having

“cast a distinct gloom over the community, which feels, in her passing the loss of one of its most loyal pioneer citizens and devoted mothers.”

