

Justina Ford: Just Another Physician?

Kylee Wilson

Monte Vista High School
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Kylee Wilson attends Monte Vista High School in Monte Vista, CO. As a Colorado native, she admires strong, impactful Colorado women who worked towards bettering communities and the state. She came across Justina Ford's bio and was intrigued because Ford was someone who had such a big impact on medicine in Colorado but was not very well known.

Dr. Justina Ford, who was not granted a medical license to practice medicine in Colorado until fifty years after receiving her medical degree in 1899 in Chicago, not only broke barriers in history by becoming the first licensed black female physician in Colorado, but by taking a compassionate and progressive approach to medical care. She treated her patients regardless of their race or ability to pay. She spoke at least eight languages, enabling her to communicate with diverse populations in Denver, Colorado. Although she only worked in Denver General Hospital for two years, she dedicated over fifty years of her life to caring for patients, serving them no matter their race or language.

Justina Ford was born to the daughter of former slaves six years after the end of the Civil War in 1871. She grew up in Knoxville, Illinois, alongside three step siblings, but moved to Galesburg, Illinois, as a child.¹ Ford was introduced to nursing by her mother, Melissa Warren, who worked as a nurse around their neighborhood in Galesburg, caring for former slaves.² Not only did Ford enjoy helping her mother on her rounds, but learning about medicine and anatomy on her own. She dissected frogs and helped dress chickens for dinner so she could see what the inside looked like; she even refused to play with her siblings: "I wouldn't play with other kids unless we played hospital, and I wouldn't play unless they let me be the doctor."³ While living in Galesburg, Ford also had the opportunity to attend integrated public school. She enrolled in advanced classes and earned top grades, graduating from Galesburg High School in 1890.⁴ Soon after graduating, Ford met her first husband, Reverend John Ford, and married him in December of 1892



Dr. Justina Ford, circa 1910.

at the Second Baptist Church in Galesburg.⁵ Ford and her husband then moved to Chicago where she was accepted into Chicago Hering Medical School. Her family assisted her in paying tuition into the school and on June 30, 1899,

Justina Ford earned a degree in medicine and received her Illinois medical license.⁶

After 1900, John and Justina relocated to Normal, Alabama, where Ford worked at the local hospital as director for two years.⁷ Then, in 1902, John Ford was called to serve as head pastor for the Zion Baptist Church in Denver, Colorado.⁸ There, Justina Ford became the first lady of the church, where she was widely recognized by parishioners for her kindness and compassion. Windell T. Liggins, a retired pastor of the church, recalls Ford was "never too late to services" and "one of Five Point's most beloved residents." Ruth Bradford, a friend of Ford's, recalled that "Dr. Ford was always very professional and very kind." Bradford also described Ford's gentleness and compassion for young children: "Lots of babies were left on her doorstep [in the Five Points neighborhood]. Dr. Ford took them to hospitals for care and adoption."⁹

By 1912 the Fords settled into a two-story brick house in the same neighborhood, a segregated but modern community. The neighborhood consisted of hotels such as the

Rossonian Hotel, a popular music venue, and the Capri, a popular social club.¹⁰ Ford believed that moving to Denver meant she would have more opportunities to practice medicine, like her own mother did in their neighborhood growing up. However, the license examiner denied Ford her medical license: "I feel dishonest taking a fee from you. You've got two strikes against you to begin with. First of all, you're a lady and second you're colored," he explained when he denied the license. Racial discrimination and legal restrictions that denied her access into the Colorado Medical Association and practice in hospitals, inhibited her career.¹¹

Although Ford was denied her medical license, she set up her own medical practice in her home within Five Points, pursuing her medical dreams and pushing through gender and race barriers. In her home Ford reserved the bottom floor for her patients and began treating African American, Chinese, German, Greek, Russian, and Irish patients, as well as anyone else who had been turned away by a hospital because of their race.¹² Ford described her patients as "plain white" and "plain colored." Neither race nor gender played a role in Justina Ford's work and care: "Folks make an appointment with me and I wait for them to come or go to see them and whatever color they turn up that's the color I take them." Many of Ford's patients preferred to be treated at home, so she also walked, rode bikes or buggies, and caught taxis, as necessary.¹³ Ford never received her driver's license, but bought a car so her nephews Jack Bradley and Gene Carter could drive her to patients' homes.

Many of Ford's foreign clients also preferred having female physicians at child births rather than male physicians, so, needless to say, Justina Ford performed many of these deliveries. She delivered children of many different races who subsequently became members of the "Justina Baby Club"; over the course of her career she delivered 7,000 babies. Ford never had any children of her own, wanting to stay focused on her work and patients, instead treating each patient as if they were a member of her own family.¹⁴ "I can remember several trauma events with my family and she was always able to take care of it," remembers Carl Pigford, a member of the Justina Baby Club. "She was a wonderful lady," Pigford recalled. Roseanne Taht, a librarian at Denver Public Library, lived across the street from Ford as a child and remembers, "Dr. Ford

took care of the neighborhood. I fell off my bicycle and cut my head. It bled a lot, and mother took me across the street. Dr. Ford sewed it up."¹⁵

Ford's patients came to her for checkups, minor illnesses, and obstetrical care. Her care cost no more than twenty dollars per visit but she never pressed any of her patients for money and provided care for patients who had been turned away by hospitals because of their inability to pay. Patients who had no money to pay Ford often made beautiful tokens of thanks, such as oriental fabrics and rugs that she used as decorations for her home.¹⁶ "Folks pay me but not always the right way. Sometimes they pay me in goods rather than in cash, groceries, poultry, and so forth. And some of them give me [things that] are more lasting than cash...There was one lady who couldn't pay for her baby until the baby was 13 years old. I'd forgotten about the bill, but she hadn't...The girl moved to California and I never thought any more about the matter. But when she was pregnant again, you know what she did? She came clear back to me. She wouldn't let anyone handle her but me. That's the kind of thing that makes a doctor proud." Ford was generous and provided her poorest patients with blankets, coal, and bags of food.¹⁷ "She knew the grocer and they had a special signal for whenever she would come into the store. If she held up one finger to the grocer that meant she wanted one bag of groceries from her prepared list. If she held up two fingers, it meant she wanted two bags. She held up two fingers and told the grocer to have the bags delivered to the family she'd seen that had no food," explained her nephew, Gene Carter.¹⁸ She even slept on a cot next to the phone for late night inquiries, accepting calls at any time.¹⁹ She became known as the "Lady Doctor" or "Baby Doctor," and her commitment to patient care quickly spread throughout the city of Denver.²⁰

Her professional obligations took a toll on her marriage, however, and in 1915, John and Justina divorced. He relocated to Florida, transferring to a new church, while she stayed in their home in Five Points, caring for her patients. She went on to marry Alfred Allen in 1920; he supported her commitment to her patients, even driving her to house calls and taking care of the household responsibilities in her absence. Around that same time, Denver General Hospital found itself subject to a mandate that required the hospital to admit all patients, and physicians regardless of race, meaning Ford could practice

there, but only as an alternate adjunct. This meant she was allowed to work in Denver General Hospital, but not as a permanent faculty member. Margie Bell Cook, a member of the Black Nurses Association, explains “An alternate adjunct meant you [couldn’t] have the same equal privileges as a white counterpart and others [were] looking over your shoulder.”²¹ Ford continued to receive patients in her private residence and “fought like a tiger against those things.”²² For decades Ford applied for membership to the Colorado Medical Society but was never accepted. Then, in 1949, Ford sent in a handwritten letter along with her application, explaining, “...I do a lot of OB work, have delivered around 7,000 babies in the State of Colo. I assume many of their burdens and make many personal sacrifices... I need recognition in the medical society for personal help to help you preserve the present system... Many patients wonder why I do not go to hospitals. I see it establishes an inferiority complex in their minds. It has required patience and fortitude to endure as I have from 1902 to 1949.”²³ A year later, two years before her death, in 1950, Ford was granted entrance into the Colorado Medical Society and allowed to practice in hospitals.

In 1951 Justina Ford received the Human Rights award from Denver’s Cosmopolitan Club, by whom she was recognized as an “outstanding figure in the development and furtherance of health care in Colorado.”²⁴ Ford continued to care for patients until two weeks before her death in 1952.²⁵ Headlining *The Denver Star* newspaper soon after her death, Ford’s legacy was described thusly: “Pioneer woman doctor struggles and reaches the top... Good example for the first woman doctor of color.” Ford’s obituary described her as “a friend of all humanity. Being a doctor she was also intensely sincere in her desire to preserve all mankind.”²⁶ Other newspapers such as *The New York Age*, acknowledged Ford’s life by telling a short story of her life by labeling it as “Ought to inspire every young woman who reads it.”²⁷

According to the census, Justina Ford, for the duration of her life and career in Colorado, was the only African-American female doctor practicing in Colorado for the first three decades of the 20th century.²⁸ Over the course of the half century that her career spanned, Ford delivered a total of 7,000 babies and positively impacted the lives of countless thousands.

In 1985, she was also posthumously inducted into the Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame and named Medical Pioneer in Colorado in 1989.²⁹ Her house had been scheduled for demolition seven years prior, but has since been preserved, restored, and moved to 3091 California Street in Denver. It now stands as the Black American West Museum and houses 15,000 artifacts, including a



Justina Ford’s home, where she delivered over 7,000 babies, at its new location at 3091 California Street.

room dedicated to Justina Ford’s life’s work.³⁰ In 1998, a bronze statue of Ford holding a baby was erected across the street from the Black American West Museum. In honor of Justina Ford,

the Blair-Caldwell Public Library also hosts displays about her humanitarian efforts and work, and the Warren Library was renamed Ford-Warren Library in 1975, both located in Denver, Colorado. In addition, the University of Colorado created the Justina Ford Medical Society and a scholarship in her name given to students who exhibit commitment to the undeserved.³¹ Then, in 2010, the Justina Ford Institute was funded to provide extended learning in STEM education for elementary girls, especially those of color, within Colorado.³²

Dr. Justina Ford’s fifty-year career transcended gender and racial barriers within the state of Colorado and established a standard of care regardless of a patient’s ability to pay, or their race or nationality. She paved the way for those who came after her, both during the time she was alive and after. Her legacy lives on in Colorado’s commitment to providing medical care to the poor, children, and those living in rural areas. Despite the lack of historical representation of women and people of color in medicine because of white supremacist and sexist injustices, Justina Ford persisted in caring for people, carving her own space as a doctor in a profession that she was continuously excluded from. Her actions inspired those both in and out of the medical field to work and live a life just as Justina Ford did.

“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 Ford³³