

Architect Mary Jane Colter and Grand Canyon

Duration

Two 50 minute sessions

Location

Classroom

Key Vocabulary

rustic architecture, structure, primitive, terrace, accommodations, philosophy, legacy

Trunk Materials

Mary Jane Colter: Builder Upon the Red Earth, “Mary Colter: Who Was She?” sheet, “Getting to Know M.J. Colter” worksheet

Additional Materials and Equipment Not Supplied

Lined paper
Writing instruments

Enduring Understanding (Big Idea)

Mary Colter, working on behalf of the Fred Harvey Company, designed buildings with distinctive styles that express a varied human presence at Grand Canyon. Ms. Colter herself, as a female professional, represents progressive women in America during the early twentieth century.

Essential Questions

1. How did Mary Colter and the Fred Harvey Company establish a variety of structures to serve the need of a growing number of tourists?
2. In what ways did Ms. Colter represent progressive women during the early twentieth century?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Describe Mary Colter in a detailed paragraph.
2. Describe Colter’s influence at Grand Canyon by listing the structures she designed and how they set her work apart from the work of others.

Instructor Background

Mary Colter left her legacy at Grand Canyon as an architect with a style and philosophy that became a model for all national park structures. The style became known as “National Park Rustic”. Many of the structures Mary Colter designed and built for the Santa Fe Railroad and Fred Harvey Company have been torn down. The largest number of her buildings still standing can be found at Grand Canyon.

Mary Colter might not be so well known had she not gone to work for Fred Harvey. In the early 1900s travel by rail provided a more comfortable means for people to tour the southwest. Fred Harvey saw the need for providing more services to his already successful restaurants and hotels, known as “Harvey Houses”. In 1905, Harvey opened El Tovar, the premier hotel and restaurant at the canyon’s rim. Mr. Harvey had Ms. Colter, an employee since 1902, decorate the interior.

Mary Colter was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1869. At age 11 her family moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1886, at age 17, Colter moved to San Francisco to attend the California School of Design. After graduating in 1890, Colter returned to St. Paul to teach mechanical drawing. Ms. Colter worked with the Fred Harvey Company from 1902 until her retirement in 1949 at the age of 80. Mary Colter died on January 8, 1958 at the age of 88.

Ms. Colter’s second project for Harvey at Grand Canyon was designing and building Hopi House, which sits directly across from El Tovar. Colter wanted to create a building that both represented the history of the area and fit in with the scenery and landscape of Grand Canyon. Since the Hopis had lived in the area for centuries, Colter designed a structure that resembled the stone buildings found in Oraibi, a village on one of the Hopi mesas. Hopi House featured stonework, rough tree limbs, terraces and ladders. Two rare fixtures within the structure include a sand painting and a Hopi ceremonial altar. Indian items decorate the interior, inviting tourists to come in, browse and purchase a memory of the canyon.

Colter’s next Grand Canyon projects were Lookout Studio, a structure on the rim near the head of Bright Angel Trail, and a rest stop eight miles west of El Tovar, known as Hermit’s Rest. Both buildings opened in 1914. Intended to look like an old mountain-man’s dwelling, Colter constructed Hermit’s Rest of haphazardly placed boulders and timbers. The interior of the building includes a large stone fireplace. Hand-hewn posts support a porch that extends to the edge of the canyon. When some railroad men suggested the building appeared too rustic, Colter retorted, “You can’t imagine what it cost to make it look this old.” Near Kolb Studio and overlooking the canyon, Lookout Studio provides a spot from which tourists can view and photograph the canyon.

Colter's next project at the canyon included designing cabins of natural stone, and a dining/recreation hall at the bottom of the canyon. Known as Phantom Ranch, these facilities provide accommodations for tourists hiking or riding mules to the canyon floor.

In 1932, Colter, designed a seventy-foot high tower called the Watchtower. Located approximately twenty-five miles east of Grand Canyon village on the highest point on the South Rim, the structure is thirty feet in diameter at the base. Resembling ruins of nearby ancient watchtowers, the structure's steel frame is concealed by its native stone exterior. Winding stairs lead visitors to the top of the tower for spectacular views. Fred Kabotie, a Hopi artist, painted images representing Hopi legends on the interior of the tower.

Colter also designed Bright Angel Lodge, a moderately priced lodging facility on the South Rim. Consisting of a main building surrounded by individual cabins, the Bright Angel buildings resemble other South Rim historic structures. The focal point in the lobby of the main lodge is a large fireplace designed to show the geological strata in the canyon. Two thousand people attended a barbeque celebrating the opening of Bright Angel Lodge on June 22, 1935.

Working in a time before women were permitted to vote and male employees rarely accepted direction from women, Mary Colter's career as an architect for the Fred Harvey Company proved remarkable. Her strong personality and architectural skill enabled her to leave an incredible legacy of unique structures – many of which can still be enjoyed at Grand Canyon.

Suggested Procedures

1. Depending upon technological resources available in your classroom, either hold up pictures of Mary Colter and the buildings she worked on at Grand Canyon or share the PowerPoint "Mary Colter and Grand Canyon".
2. If unable to share the PowerPoint, paraphrase and share some of the background information regarding Ms. Colter with students. If desired, select passages from *Mary Jane Colter: Builder Upon the Red Earth* and share with students. After reading, ask students to share any words they think might describe Mary Colter. (There might not be many.)
3. Pass out the "Mary Colter: Who Was She?" worksheet. This worksheet includes a list of adjectives and other words that have been used over the years to describe Mary Colter. Reinforce the idea that Ms. Colter was a senior employee with a company at a time when women weren't allowed to vote and men didn't often work with, or for, women. Ms. Colter learned to work in this "man's world" by asserting herself. As a result, she was sometimes described in unflattering terms. Ask students to look up the meaning of any unknown words on the worksheet. Then have students fold a sheet of lined paper in half. At the top of one side write, "FLATTERING." At the top of the other side of the sheet write, "UNFLATTERING."

Then have the class discuss and decide on which side to place each word on the worksheet. (This will most likely conclude the first lesson.)

4. Using the "Getting to Know M.J. Colter" handout, have students work independently to locate as many answers as they can in a twenty to thirty minute time frame. Resources may include *Mary Jane Colter: Builder Upon the Red Earth*, the paraphrase handout, encyclopedias, internet searches and the website <http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/architecture/0011.colter.html>. Other websites are listed in the section "Tech Notes." Please note that several of the questions on the worksheet relate to Ms. Colter's life beyond her work at Grand Canyon. These questions encourage students to go beyond the material presented.

5. After time is called on step 4, give students roughly twenty minutes to circulate around the room, comparing answers and helping one another complete the worksheet. Have students place their initials by the answers they provide another student. Encourage students by asking, "Who knows Mary Colter best?"

Evaluations (Assessments)

Ask students to pretend that they work with Mary Colter. Then ask them to write a letter to their family describing Ms. Colter, her work, and their relationship.

Extension Activities

1. Using visual images of the canyon, ask students to design or build a structure <http://www.nps.gov/archive/grca/photos/colter/index.htm> and how it would be used. What materials would they use to construct their building? How would it fit into the landscape?
2. Using pictures of other buildings at the canyon, compare and contrast Mary Colter's architectural style with that of other architects who constructed buildings at the canyon.

Tech Notes

The following websites concern Mary Colter and provide additional links:

<http://www.nps.gov/history/Nr/feature/wom/2001/colter.htm>

<http://www.nps.gov/archive/grca/photos/colter/index.htm>

http://myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=mj_colter

Standards

Arizona Social Studies Standards

S1:C1 Grade 4-- PO3; Grade 5-- PO4

S1:C1 Grade 6--PO1

Arizona Reading Standards

S3:C1 Grade 4--PO1; Grade 5--PO1; Grade 6--PO1

Arizona Writing Standards

S3:C3 Grade 4—PO2; Grade 5—PO2; Grade 6—PO2