



August 2021

*Following Sarah Bickford
From Jonesborough to Montana Territory
License Plate to Virginia City*



This battlefield preservation supporter stopped by the “Hangman’s Building” in downtown Virginia City, Montana. The building was once the water company headquarters owned by Sarah Bickford, a formerly enslaved woman from Jonesborough, TN. Following her move to Montana around 1870 Bickford established herself as a very successful business leader in the community. Bickford acquired the “Hangman’s Building” in 1902. She reportedly installed a trap door which she would open for a small fee – revealing the beams from which vigilantes hanged five alleged criminals in 1864.

*From the aftermath of the Civil War in Tennessee
to the Territorial West*



Sarah Gammon Bickford was born, enslaved, in 1852 near Jonesborough. In the 1860 census, Sarah is listed as an 8-year-old female slave, owned by John Blair a prominent local citizen. During the Civil War her parents were sold, and she never saw them again – their separation likely connected to the settlement of Blair’s vast estate after he died in 1863.



Early 1830's Blair House



1832 John Blair Inn

*During the Civil War, many Jonesboro families, including the Blair family were pro Union. John Blair was a Tennessee Senator, a US Congressman and part owner of a large iron company. They lived in a brick mansion built by slave labor. Sarah is believed to have been born in the slave quarters adjacent to the Blair home. She likely worked alongside her mother at the **Blair home** and the **“John Blair Inn”** in Jonesborough where John listed his occupation as “keeping hotel” in the 1860 census. Today both the original home, known today as the “February Hill Quilting Retreat” and the Inn, a B&B, are restored and located in historic downtown Jonesborough.*

Following the war Bickford moved to Nancy and Isaac Gammon’s home in Knoxville. Within a few years Bickford met Maj. John Luttrell Murphy who had commanded companies A,B,C, and D of the 60th US Regiment of Colored Infantry stationed in Arkansas. In 1870 when Murphy received an appointment as a territorial judge in Virginia City in Montana territory, Sarah agreed to accompany him as a nanny to his adopted children. Once in Virginia City Sarah began as a domestic servant, later started a Bakery and restaurant, and married Stephen Bickford who owned much real estate, mining claims, and a small farm where they lived. After his death Bickford took over the Virginia City Water Company – purchasing the “Hangman’s Building” as its headquarters. She became a well-known business leader and the first African American woman in the United States to own a utility in Montana. In 2012 the State of Montana recognized her as a member of the “Gallery of Outstanding Montanans.”

(From Peterson and Svengen’s “Finding Sarah Gammon Bickford” - per a National Trust for Historic Preservation Partnership in Scholarship grant. Their work models research about formerly enslaved men and women in the American West.)

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