

Trailblazing Women of Asbury Park, 1870s–1970s**By the Asbury Park Museum at the Asbury Park Library****Curators: multiple****Duration: rotating****Museum Website: <https://ap-museum.org/>****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i2.344>**

Editor's note: This review was published online as a stand-alone review during Women's History Month 2023, when the exhibit was still installed at the Asbury Park Library. It came down in May 2023. New Jersey Studies occasionally publishes reviews, even after exhibits have come down, to help create a lasting record of them.

From Helen Packard Bradley, who named the streets of Asbury Park after prominent Methodist clergy, to Margaret Romeo Potter, founder of the after-hours club The Upstage, the Asbury Park Museum's pop-up exhibition *Trailblazing Women of Asbury Park, 1870s–1970s* tells

a history of Asbury Park through the biographies of 24 women.

Packed into, and spilling out of, a compact single display case in the beautiful 1901 Asbury Park Public Library—itsself a product of Helen Packard Bradley’s leadership—the exhibition is ambitious in scope, if light on space. The women’s biographies are grouped into six categories: Social Justice and Heritage Preservation, Law, Literature and Publishing, Medicine, Performing Arts and Entertainment, and Nightclub and Bar Business Owners.

The exhibition can be forgiven if the font is a bit small or the text panels are a bit cluttered. What comes through is a dedication to telling many stories in as much detail as possible. The exhibition presents an impressive and diverse group of women whose individual stories start to shape a picture of Asbury Park itself, from its Methodist roots to its 1960s musical heyday. For this reviewer it was the women of that last category—Nightclub and Bar Business Owners—who were the most intriguing. Here we meet Mabel Fenton Ross, a vaudevillian who managed her 1898 resort through prohibition (“gambling tables packed and drinks flowing” reads the text), and Minnie Quatrano Lopez who, with her husband, owned Cuba’s Spanish Tavern and Night Club—the Springwood Avenue venue that hosted Billie Holiday and Tina Turner.

The stories are told through an eclectic group of photographs, ephemera, archival materials, and artifacts. We see the faces of almost every woman in the show (one imagines the curator’s frustration with the few that couldn’t be found). Newspaper articles give a glimpse of how these women were viewed in their own time. “Tributes Are Paid to Dead ‘Queen Rosa’” reads one (about entrepreneur Rosa Musto Benvenga). “Woman Is Fined \$50 for Telling a Fortune” reads another (about fortune teller Marie Castello). The artifacts add texture and dimension to some of the women’s stories. These include books written by Lenora Walker McKay, who told the stories of the area’s Black citizens, and Margaret Widdemer, whose fiction was often set in local shore

towns. Photographs provide tantalizing glimpses of Asbury Park's past—such as motorcycles lined up in front of Mrs. Jay's Beer Garden (founded by Ida Jacobs and Jeanette Jacobs Weiner), a packed show at The Upstage, and the interior of Alice Bunce's Springwood Avenue pharmacy.

Taken together, the disparate biographies start to assemble a portrait of a place that is greater than the sum of its parts. The exhibition would have benefited from introductory text panels to synthesize this larger history, putting each woman's biography into a more comprehensive context. Surely many towns can boast of woman civic leaders, doctors, or lawyers, but what is special about Asbury Park? What made it an incubator for women musicians (many of them Black). Why were so many women nightclub and bar owners?

Around the edges of this boosterish exhibition, one senses complicated and painful histories of segregation, civil rights, immigration, urban renewal, and gentrification. These difficult subjects come through occasionally in stories such as that of Carrie Williams Turpin who organized the Colored Women's Patriotic Business League (and whose business is described in a newspaper clipping on view as "the Colored Folks Clef Ice Cream Parlor"), Rosa Musto Benvenga "Queen of Asbury's Little Italy" (who the exhibition calls "a female 'padrone'"), and Alice Bunce, whose West Side pharmacy was destroyed in the 1970 racial unrest. How much more compelling would the exhibition be if these subjects were addressed head-on?

The Asbury Park Museum is a young organization. It was founded in 2018 and is in the process of acquiring a permanent home in downtown Asbury Park. In the meantime, it has been presenting pop-up exhibitions including *Trailblazing Women* at the library and *One Voice is Not Enough: Asbury Park's Musical Diversity Since 1871*, currently on view at the Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel and soon to rotate to the Monmouth University Guggenheim Memorial Library. *One Voice*, which tackles more than 100 years of Asbury Park's music scene (from gospel to jazz

to Springsteen to today's festivals and venues) has a similar feel—an almost overwhelming accumulation of images and text packed into a compact space—just begging for more room to tell a more detailed and nuanced story.

Pop-up exhibitions are an important way to bring history out into the community (or in the case of the Berkeley's lobby, passing tourists or wedding parties). They also make it possible to test out exhibition ideas, storylines, and techniques. They can show museum curators what works and what doesn't and inform interpretive planning for a future permanent space. The stories presented in both pop-up exhibitions would benefit not just from more space, but also from the tools many contemporary museums employ such as custom casework, immersive storytelling, and interactives, as well as sustained community input. All of which would be possible if the museum transitions to a permanent home. Yet, both pop-up exhibitions signal a promising first step in an ambitious project: to tell the compelling story of Asbury Park. All places have their own history, but some places have histories that speak to larger truths. Arguably Asbury Park is one of those places. It will be interesting to see how the Asbury Park Museum makes good on these promising first steps. After you read this, be sure to check the museum's website and see where their latest pop-up exhibits might be!

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