In the 19th century, societal changes transformed life for some American women. Freed from many domestic tasks by industrialization, women’s engagement extended from home and family into the larger community. They organized as workers and in clubs, pursuing new roles as artists, educators, social reformers, and business owners.

Women believed in their power and duty to better their communities. They tackled a diverse array of issues, including public health and sanitation measures, industrial conditions of workers, and legal rights for women and children. Concerned about the quality of education, they worked to reform the schools. As entrepreneurs, they embarked on successful business ventures and petitioned for increased control of their interests. In the arts, they carved space for themselves in fields traditionally reserved for men, sometimes with little formal training. They also became conscious of their shared identity as women, convening women’s rights conventions and organizing mass movements, including the decades-long struggle for suffrage.

It is too easy, however, to assume the essential sisterhood of all women and to create a single historical narrative grounded in the experiences of middle-class women. Women are a large and diverse group, often divided by class and race. Women’s historical experiences vary, and they have differing attitudes and allegiance to their feminine identity. As their roles in society shifted, women experienced and responded to change in distinct ways. Drawing on the stories of women documented in the Filson’s collection, this exhibit explores the diversity of women’s experiences in the public sphere in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Upcoming Exhibit:

**Women at Work**

*Venturing Into the Public Sphere*

*Bingham Gallery*

**March 13–December 31, 2020**

Curated by Jennie Cole, Maureen Lane, Jana Meyer, and Emily Benken