



Smithsonian American Art Museum

PUBLIC
SCULPTURE

AMERICA'S
LEGACY

FROM THE SERIES
AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

PIONEER WOMEN: Madonna of the Trail

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FACT FILE

MADONNA OF THE TRAIL

Twelve identical statues with
unique inscriptions
Dedicated on different dates
in 1928 and 1929

ARTIST

August Leimbach
(1882–1965)

MEDIUM

Algonite stone
(a poured composite
with Missouri granite as
the main aggregate)

DIMENSIONS

Figure 304.8 cm
(10 feet) high
Base 182.9 cm
(6 feet) high,
106.7 cm (3½ feet) wide
Foundation 61 cm (2 feet)
above ground

COST

\$1,000 each statue

FUNDING SOURCE

National Society
Daughters of the American
Revolution (DAR)
with contributions from all
state DAR societies.
The National Old Trails
Road Association
shared expenses incurred
in making decisions
about where monuments
would be erected. Local
DAR chapters raised
money to pay shipping and
installation charges.

LOCATION

Twelve states
through which pioneers
passed on historic overland
trails and roads



The *Madonna of the Trail* monument at Wheeling, West Virginia, marks the National Highway (now U.S. 40).

Until recently, histories of Westward expansion came close to ignoring women entirely. Men forged across the mountains, men blazed new trails, and men braved hazards of the overland trek West. Yet as many as eight hundred thousand women took part in the Western migration.

Women witnessed and participated in all aspects of life in the West. Their contributions and hard work are documented in letters, diaries, and journals. They wrote about their daily lives, the hazards they encountered, and the journey west. On the Western frontier, men and women had to work together to clear land, build houses, and work in the fields. Women had to become self-sufficient, assume new roles, and undertake new tasks, none of which belonged to the nineteenth-century ideal of what women were supposed to do or be.

Pioneers moving west endured miseries of every sort. Though they had pictured bright futures, the ordeal of getting to their destinations was dangerous and exhausting. Roadways, no more than mere trails, were difficult or non-existent. Bone-wrenching weariness was a daily fact of life. Yet the pioneers kept going and along the way summoned up determination and courage.

While some families bought steamboat passage to the Missouri River for their departure point, many more piled everything into a wagon and began the overland trek from the east. Emigrants consulted geographies and school texts, travel accounts, guidebooks, and newspapers and magazines for descriptions of the Western country and the best routes for getting there.

The principal route was the Oregon Trail, beginning in Independence, Missouri, and ending in the Northwest. The main route to the Southwest was the Santa Fe Trail, which linked up with two routes to southern California, the Gila Trail and the Old Spanish Trail.

The *Madonna of the Trail* project began in 1909 when a group of Missouri women decided that the Santa Fe Trail should be marked. The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) joined the group in 1911, when the Missouri chapter appointed an Old Trails Commission to establish a national memorial highway across the continent. In 1912 the National Old Trails Road Association was established to assist the DAR in marking trails and to encourage construction of a national memorial highway from coast to coast. World War I interrupted activities, which resumed in 1921. In 1924 Judge Harry S. Truman (later the thirty-third president of the United States), of Independence, Missouri, became president of the association.

Mrs. John Trigg Moss, of St. Louis, chairwoman of the Old Trails Committee of the National Society DAR, conceived the idea of markers to be placed on the trails as a memorial to pioneer motherhood. (Early suggestions to mark the roads were tin signs every mile across the continent [3,095 in all]. Kansas in 1906 had already placed ninety-six granite markers across the state on the Santa Fe Trail.)

In the 1920s the DAR installed one copy of the *Madonna of the Trail* in each of twelve states through which pioneers passed on the National Old Trails Road. The road is not a single highway but an aggregate of Indian trails, colonial pikes, military roads of the Revolutionary period, post roads, and stagecoach and covered wagon trails — an ocean-to-ocean route tracing the main artery of Western travel.

LOOKING AT THE SCULPTURE

To the honor and glory of the great motherhood of the past I stand.... a sacred shrine. May all who pass within the shadow of my form, pause awhile, and understand the faith, the ideals, and the real inner beauty of soul of these mothers of old, as they passed down the great homing trail of the nation.

MRS. JOHN TRIGG MOSS,
originator of the *Madonna* monuments

A tall woman of stately bearing presses forward with an air of purpose. She has a strong face and wears a plain dress of homespun and a neatly tied sunbonnet. She appears to be a sturdy, work-hardened woman with a determined attitude. Cradling a baby in her left arm, with her right hand she holds the barrel of a rifle, its stock at her feet. A young son clutches at her long skirt as she strides ahead in heavy boots. At the woman's feet is a bush of thistle, symbolizing the thick underbrush of the wilderness.

The statue is constructed of Algonite stone, a composite of crushed granite, stone, marble, cement, and screenings of lead ore, with a warm pink color coming from the Missouri granite.

The sculptor, August Leimbach (1882–1965), described the image as portraying a narrative: “The pioneer mother with her two children was waiting for the father at her block-house in the wild West, for the father did not come home as he had promised. She, believing him to be in danger, put her little child in a blanket, grasped the gun and with the boy ran out in the field to look for the father.”

Leimbach was proposed as the sculptor by the head of a stone manufacturing firm that had been awarded the contract for making the *Madonna of the Trail*. The artist had to complete the design in three days. A few days afterward, he was asked to send the model to Washington, and just days later the DAR accepted his design. Leimbach later remarked, “I doubt if any other sculptor ever created a design and had it accepted in such a short time.”

Copies of the *Madonna* statues were placed as markers on sites commemorating local historic events along the National Old Trails Road. The route crosses twelve states and combines the following old trails:

Sites of *Madonna* Statues

1. Bethesda, Maryland
2. Washington (Beallsville), Pennsylvania
3. Wheeling, West Virginia
4. Springfield, Ohio
5. Richmond, Indiana
6. Vandalia, Illinois
7. Lexington, Missouri
8. Council Grove, Kansas
9. Lamar, Colorado
10. Albuquerque, New Mexico
11. Springerville, Arizona
12. Upland, California

1. Braddock's or Washington's

Road begins at Bethesda, Maryland, and continues to south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, connecting the Potomac River at Cumberland, Maryland, with the Monongahela River at Turtle Creek, south of Pittsburgh. It was built in 1755 by Major General Edward Braddock for his march to Fort Duquesne in the French and Indian War.

2. National (or Cumberland)

Road, begun in 1806, was the nation's first great highway. The only highway ever built directly by the federal government, it linked the East Coast with the Mississippi Valley. Beginning at Cumberland, Maryland, and running through Pennsylvania and what is now West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, the route connected capitals of the emerging states — Columbus, Ohio; Indianapolis,



The *Madonna of the Trail* monument at Bethesda, Maryland, commemorates the eastern terminus of the Cumberland Road.

Indiana; and Vandalia, capital of Illinois between 1820 and 1839 and the end of the road. The highway lives on today as U.S. Route 40 or 40 Alt. Interstate 70 generally parallels the route and in some places supersedes it.

3. **Boone's Lick Road** began at St. Louis and continued to Old Franklin, Missouri, where the Santa Fe Trail began.

4. From Old Franklin, Missouri, the **Santa Fe Trail** continued down through Kansas, skirting the Colorado Rockies and ending at Santa Fe, New Mexico, where it connected with Mexico's *El Camino Real* and routes to California.

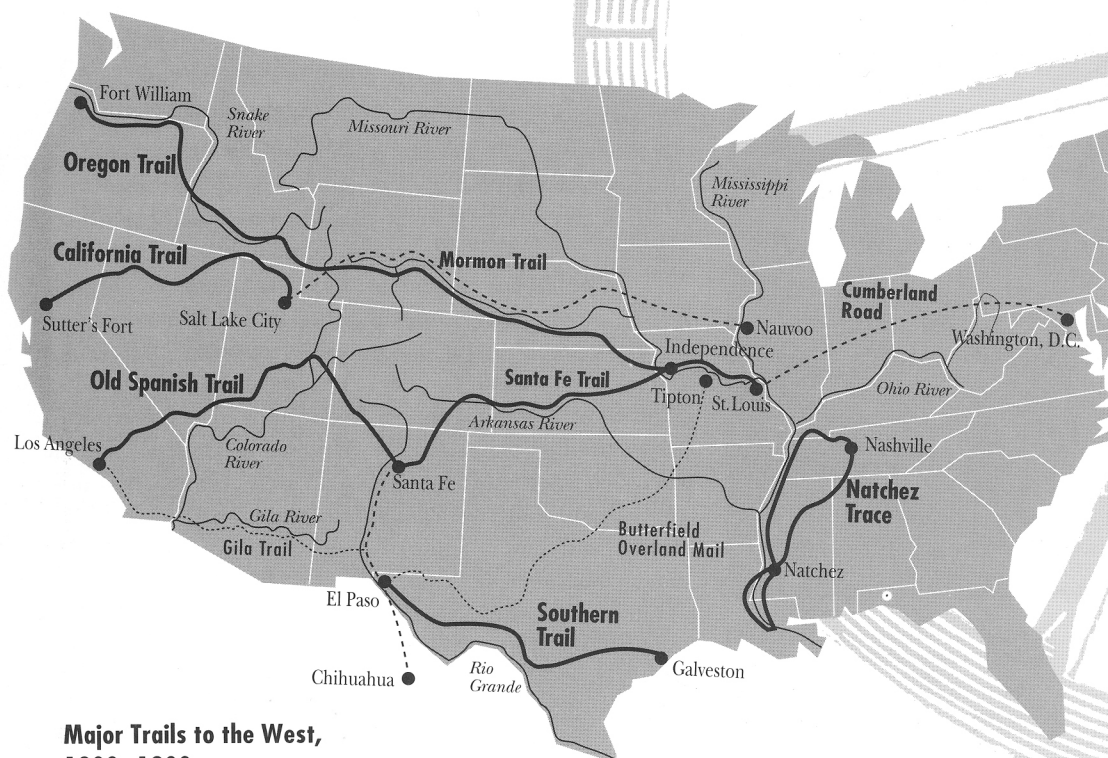
5. The **Old Spanish Trail** commenced at Santa Fe and wound through Arizona and Nevada into California and on to the Pacific Ocean.

On all twelve monuments, the same inscription appears on the front and back panels. On the front is: "The Madonna of the Trail/ Memorial to the/ Pioneer Mothers of the/ Covered Wagon Days." Carved on the back are the words, "Old Trails National Road." Side panels are inscribed with twenty-five words describing actions taking place at the particular site. Altogether, inscriptions on the twelve monuments outline a major portion of United States history.

Glossary

Madonna (literally, "my lady" in Italian), the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus.

pioneer, an innovator or someone who ventures into unexplored or unclaimed territory to settle there.



**Major Trails to the West,
1800–1900**

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. “Madonna” refers to the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. In medieval and Renaissance art, the Madonna was depicted as a youthful mother holding and adoring her baby. Why do you think Leimbach’s

statue was entitled *Madonna of the Trail*? Is the title appropriate?

2. One stereotype of pioneer women is that of the “Gentle Tamer,” a woman somewhat self-sufficient but fearful, who had to be protected from danger. How does or does not Leimbach’s statue convey that image?

3. What skills would have been most useful in life on the frontier? What character traits most desirable? How does the *Madonna of the Trail* express characteristics discussed?

4. What rights do women have today that nineteenth-century women did not have? What kind of monument

would honor contemporary mothers? How would it resemble or differ from the *Madonna of the Trail*?

5. If the Madonna were constructed of brightly colored fiberglass, as used in Luis Jiménez’s *Vaquero*, how would the glossy finish and bright colors change the overall expression?

PROJECTS

1. Working in teams, identify and report on one woman whose contributions, in your opinion, were important in the historical development of your town. Discuss how a public memorial would commemorate this woman.

2. Write a travel diary or journal account covering ten days during your family’s overland move from east to west in the years between 1840 and 1915. Choose a family role and discuss your experiences, addressing the following concerns:

- Select a one-year period between 1840 and 1915.
- Name the city from which you left and your destination, describing the route taken and comparing and contrasting Western with Eastern scenery.

- Discuss the mode of travel and clothes and equipment taken by your family. How long will the journey take? How many miles are covered each day?
- Describe experiences on the journey, people you meet, difficulties encountered, and pleasures experienced.

3. Literary stereotypes of the Western woman vary from the refined lady unable to adjust to the frontier way of life, the weary and forlorn frontier wife, the sturdy helpmate and civilizer, or the “bad” woman. Moreover, African-American and Native American women were rarely seen as frontierswomen until recently. Collect advertisements in newspapers and magazines that present contemporary stereotypes of women, and write an article for the magazine supplement to your Sunday newspaper, contrasting present-day stereotypes with the reality of women’s lives today.

4. In an essay of no more than seven paragraphs, discuss what it means to be a pioneer, identify two women who are pioneers today, and explain why they can be considered pioneers.

5. Tape-record an interview with a woman over age sixty-five (family member, neighbor, or acquaintance) about her experiences as a woman. Make an outline listing your findings, and present an oral report.

6. Draw a map showing historic local trails or routes between your house and school or other places you visit, such as a friend’s house (for a useful guide, see Pam Beasant and Alastair Smith, *How to Draw Maps and Charts* [London: Usborne Publishing Ltd, 1993]). Describe or design appropriate markers for the routes.

7. Write twenty-five-word inscriptions for hypothetical markers of three historic sites in your town.

8. Working in groups, investigate one space route taken by astronauts. Prepare oral reports on how you would mark the route and what purpose the markers would serve.

9. The vast amount of information available today through computers has been compared to “pioneering” the “electronic frontier.” Imagine that you need to convince an elementary or high school audience that the analogy is or is not appropriate, and prepare a short speech for that purpose.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

August Leimbach (1882–1965)

August Leimbach was born in the village of Kaltennordheim (near Eisenach) in Germany. Visiting his brother in St. Louis in 1910, he was asked to create architectural sculpture in Waco and Galveston, Texas, after which he worked on the San Francisco World's Fair buildings in 1915 and other commissions. Deciding to remain in the United States, in 1916 he returned to St. Louis, which became his headquarters. Leimbach's primary interest was architectural sculpture. His work is found across the country, from Springfield, Illinois, through St. Louis and various cities in Texas, to San Francisco and Sacramento, California. He is buried in his native Germany.

FURTHER READING

Madonna of the Trail

On the statue, the most important source is Fern Ioula Bauer, *The Historic Treasure Chest of the Madonna of the Trail Monuments* (Springfield, Ohio: DAR Lagonda Chapter, 1993). For the important role of pioneer women, see Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), and Cathy Luchetti and Carol Olwell, *Women of the West* (New York: Orion Books, 1982) (includes journals, diaries, letters, and documentary photographs). See also Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–60* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), and Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).