

# HISTORY OF THE MALO MANSION

500 East 8th Avenue is a designated Denver Landmark

## Family Origins

John Kernan Mullen was an Irish immigrant who grew rich by establishing mills and grain elevators across the Rocky Mountain West, helping to get crops from far-flung farmers to their urban markets. A noted Catholic philanthropist, Mullen became most famous for his Hungarian High Altitude Flour, the first commercially-available white flour in the region. His enterprise enabled poor and rich alike to afford the rare culinary treat of white bread.

But Mullen's imprint on this land in particular was established through his family. In order to keep a close-knit family, he built homes for each of his daughters less than a block away from his base at 896 Pennsylvania. Starting from the north and working south, Mullen established residences for his daughter Ella Weckbaugh at 450 East 9th, May Tettermer at 875 Pennsylvania, Katherine O'Connor at 860 Pennsylvania, and finally Edith Malo at 500 East 8th Avenue.

Edith and Oscar's first home was with the Mullens themselves, residing with her parents for four years. But with May suddenly widowed in 1912 and the Malos trying to raise children, May and Edith traded residences. Unfortunately for the Malos, it was only a temporary solution. When May met her next beau, John Dower, whom she married in 1920, the Malos had to move out to a home all their own.

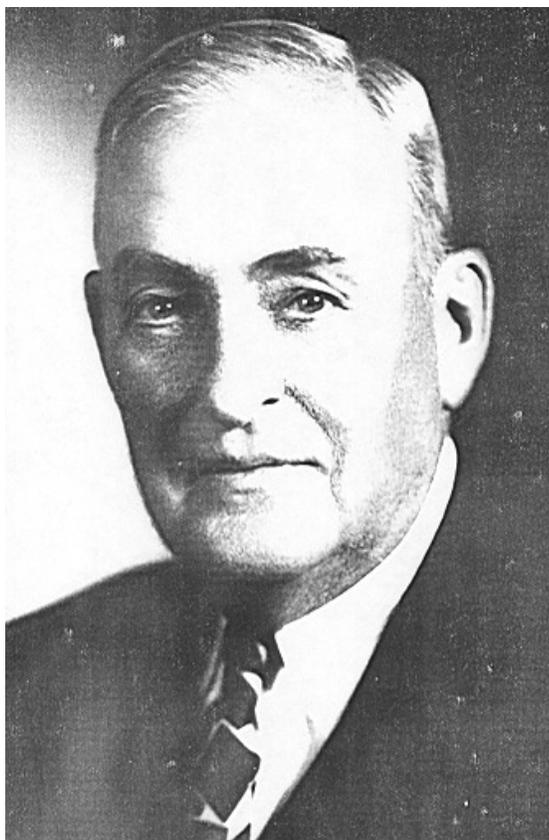
## Construction Era

Once part of the Grant-Humphreys estate, the block surrounding 500 East 8th Avenue had served as a private garden estate. But in 1919, Edith Mullen Malo purchased lots 1-7 from Mary Grant and Ella McNeil. Even as she sold lots 6-7 to Alice Humphreys, property ownership in the area would retain its predominantly female character for more than a decade.

To design a home for their new property, the Malos selected architect Harry James Manning. With credits including St. Thomas Episcopal Church, the Moffat mansion at 8th & Grant, and a sanitarium in Washington DC, Manning's work had caught the eye of the Catholic establishment, leading to commissions from Regis University, St Anne's in Arvada, and Oscar & Edith Malo.

## Style

500 East 8th Avenue was designed as an outstanding example of Spanish Colonial Revival style, with a low-pitched tile roof, wrought iron fences, arcaded entry, and ornate portico. Later observers would note its eclectic nature and mix of Italianate influences.



Construction began in Spring 1920, just as the Roaring 20s were getting underway.

## House of Sorrows

The first decade in the home would be turbulent indeed. On August 10, 1921, the Malo's eldest child, 9-year-old Oscar, died. One day shy of eight years later, patriarch J K Mullen passed away. And the omen continued in 1930, as Edith's sister Katherine died exactly 9 years later after her nephew.

Neighboring homes were also draped in black during this period. In December 1922, the home just across the alley at 777 Pearl suffered the suicide of John Porter. The sorrow was familiar to his wife, Louise Coors, because her first husband, Dr Henry Kugler, had killed himself eight years earlier. In 1927, the block's tragic character re-emerged as

Albert Humphreys Sr., owner of 770 Pennsylvania, shot himself. Despite his implication in the national scandal known as Teapot Dome and a written note pleading "please, doctor, let me cash in," his death was ruled accidental.

J K Mullen's passing elicited more than just sorrow; it broke the family apart. Though Mullen had placed Oscar Malo in the role as president of the Colorado Milling & Elevator Company, Edith's three sisters replaced him in favor of May's second husband, John Dower. Attempting to present it as an honor, they offered Malo a position as chairman of the board of directors. Yet the unannounced decision was clearly a shot across the bow... and an untimely one, just a month after Mullen's passing.

Rebuking her sisters for an unimaginable insult at such a time of grief, Edith fomented in the newspapers that she was "thunderstruck, to put it mildly." Her anger was palpable. She announced that reconciliation would never be possible.

In response to this slight, Oscar formed the Intermountain Elevator Company, directly competing with the in-laws. He also maintained business interests in other areas, including Shorego oil and the Sargeant-Malo realty brokerage.

## *Criminal Mischief*

In this last firm, Malo was subject to a sensational extortion plot in 1932, receiving an anonymous note which read:

*Your firm has been assessed the sum of \$2,500 for its protection for this year. You are hereby directed to go to the bank and secure \$2,500 in \$5, \$10, and \$20 bills. You will place this money in a strong, white canvas bag. You will take this money and leave your home and go to the Union Station in Denver where you will purchase a ticket to Colorado Springs on the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad – on train No. 15, which leaves at 7:30 pm, Saturday, Sept. 24. You will go to the rear car of this train and sit on the rear platform. Somewhere between Denver and Colorado Springs you will see a flashlight go on and off four times. When you see this signal you will drop the bag containing the money off the train. If you fail to heed these instructions, our pineapples will work.*

With ransoms eliciting national attention given the Lindbergh baby kidnapping just six months earlier, the Denver police sprung into action. Edith and the kids sat under heavy guard at 500 East 8th Avenue while Oscar boarded the train. Accompanied by 100 undercover detectives, neither the flashlight signal nor the threat of violence ever came to pass.

Less than three years later, the Malo mansion was implicated in yet another crime. At the formal debut of daughter Edith Malo into Denver society, a hired patrolman named Ernest Ayers grew drunk and was ordered out. Too intoxicated to remember any events from the evening, the patrolman awoke seven hours later to find his companion cold and dead, his hand still clenching the ignition key. The 23-year-old Andrew Ware been apparently murdered by a police officer too drunk to know any better.

## *Malo's Legacy*

Amidst the turmoil, the Malo children matured and soon moved out. J Kenneth joined the Navy in World War II and married a Minnesota girl. Edith overcame the trauma of her coming out party and married Melvin Roberts, the longtime president and chairman of Colorado National Bank. The youngest child, Jack, worked with his father in the grain elevator business.

Oscar and Edith continued to lead social and philanthropic causes. While Edith supported a nursery for underprivileged children, Oscar participated in the Denver Country Club, Harvard Business Club, and Chicago Board of Trade. Committed members of the Immaculate Conception Cathedral, the couple also donated a gymnasium at

Cathedral High School and a Catholic lodge near Estes Park called Camp St Malo, which gained world renown in 1993 when Pope John Paul II visited the site. For all his good works, Oscar Malo was dubbed a Knight of Malta, the highest lay honor bestowed by the Catholic church.

## *New Life*

The Malo mansion itself became a gift to the church in 1957. Intended for the use of Denver's auxiliary bishop, the home eventually grew so dilapidated that it was labeled "a hazard to life, health, and property." Fortunately, historic preservation in the 1970s reinvigorated the home with purpose, as Historic Denver Inc. obtained a preservation easement and the city of Denver formally acknowledged the home as a Structure for Preservation.

Converted from a residential unit to a commercial space with more than 20 offices, the home passed into the ownership of the Colorado Housing Finance Authority in 1980 for less than \$200,000. After a prodigious string of building permits, their public investment paid off, raising the property's value to \$466,200 just two years later.

That price was no object to the home's next owner, Swanee Hunt. As the youngest daughter of famed oilman H. L. Hunt, Swanee claimed a powerful role in civic affairs in the mid-1980s by committing half of her annual income to charity. The Malo mansion would become the public home of her public initiatives, targeting homelessness, poverty, and feminist causes. With photographs of angelic children in rags dotting the mansion, the home served as headquarters for her do-good spirit, initiating her formative years in public service and divvying up her private largesse.

Hunt left Denver in 1993 to become U.S. ambassador to Austria and now directs Harvard's program on Women and Public Policy. But it was in the Malo mansion at 500 East 8th Avenue that she reflected on the meaning in history.

*"The past and future aren't separate. If you can make peace with the past, you can arrive at the future with some sense of congruity."*

## *Coming Home*

Now owned by Copland Properties, the Malo mansion is home to Buchanan Yonushewski Group. Led by John Yonushewski (noted AIA architect) and Brad Buchanan (former chair of the Denver Landmark Preservation Commission), the company provides single sourcing for architecture, construction, and project management.

For such a group, 500 East 8th Avenue provides a quality and character that can't be found in generic office space. Instead of sterility, the Malo mansion represents a comfortable environment adapted for the contemporary age.

As one recently remarked, "It's like coming home to work."