

Town Building

Denver is a city of four thousand people with ten or twelve streets laid out; with two hotels, a bank, a theater, half a dozen chapels, fifty gambling houses and a hundred grog shops. As you wander about these hot and dirty streets you seem to be walking in a city of demons.

William Hepworth Dixon
New America, 1867¹

Denver's bars and brothels, where "a man's life is of no more worth than a dog's," appalled William Dixon, a touring English clergyman. Its men, he said, had many good qualities; "perseverance, generosity, enterprise," but they suffered from "frail" morals that, in his opinion, explained their aversion to marriage. He noted that up to the mid-1860s it was "quite usual for honest folks to be awakened from their sleep by the noise of exploding guns, and when daylight came to find that a dead body had been tossed from a window into the street." Still a frontier outpost, Denver frightened visitors and fell short of its founders' hopes. The Civil War, hostile Indians, isolation, fire, flood, lack of railroads, and a slow-down in Colorado's mining all retarded town building.

Respectable citizens wanted law and order. In January 1860, turkey thieves terrorized Auraria and Denver until blacksmith Thomas Pollock cracked one of the fowl-filchers' head with a rifle barrel. The others were exiled and the Turkey War ended. In July, James A. Gordon brutally murdered a popular barkeeper, John Gantz. Gordon fled to Leavenworth, where friends of Gantz caught him and beat him almost to death. Re-

turned to Denver in chains, Gordon faced the People's Court, which decreed that he be hanged four days later — tardy justice by frontier standards. Secret tribunals acted faster. On September 2, 1860, vigilantes hanged Black Hawk, a horse thief. The next night they executed one of his partners and the following morning they shot another. Within 24 hours in December 1868, vigilantes snatched two men from the city jail and hanged them both: one from a cottonwood on Twelfth Street near Larimer; the other from the Larimer Street bridge.

Not every crime led to punishment. In frontier Denver, as elsewhere, the color of a person's skin often distorted justice. When gambler Charles Harrison shot a black man for saying that he was as good as a white man, no action was taken against Harrison. When another African-American, William J. Paine, killed Oliver Davis, also black, Paine claimed self-defense and was acquitted. In 1864 the mulatto mountain man James Beckwourth shot Paine. "Bully for Beckwourth," people said on the streets.²

Dueling, although losing favor in the East, retained a lease on death in the West. James Denver had dueled and killed in California; no one held it against him when it came to naming Denver after him. Hundreds of people watched the first local contest, a nonfatal encounter between Richard Whitsitt, president of the Denver City Town Company, and Thomas Warren, who operated the South Platte ferry. When Warren later challenged William Byers, the wily editor selected his own weapons — words at a safe distance: "You may murder us, but never on the so-called field of honor under the dignified name of a duel."³ Colorado's first Territorial Legislature discouraged the slaughter by depriving both principals and their seconds of the right to vote.

Vendetta and vigilantism sprang in part from Kansas Territory's failure to enforce laws in its remote western parts. To strengthen their government, Cherry Creek pioneers created Jefferson Territory on October 24, 1859, carving it from parts of Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Utah. The territory, named in honor of President Thomas Jefferson, made Denver its capital and selected a governor and a legislature, but its authority was questioned locally, denied in Kansas, and unrecognized in Washington. The U.S. Congress mercifully killed Jefferson Territory on February 28, 1861, by forming Colorado Territory, naming it after the Colorado River.⁴ Soon, courts were set up, judges selected, and laws passed. One provided up to three years in jail for "putting out eyes, slitting noses . . . or disabling tongues." Horse thieves faced a minimum of 20 years; rowdies who made a ruckus on Sunday risked \$30 fines;

drunks paid for their insobriety by lugging water from Cherry Creek to fill fire barrels atop buildings.⁵

Nearly a year before Colorado Territory's creation, Denver and Auraria had ended their rivalry by consolidating. A moonlit ceremony on the Larimer Street bridge across Cherry Creek, April 6, 1860, ended the separate existence of Auraria, which had fallen behind Denver in the contest for stagecoach service and population. The gold region's first permanent settlement became west Denver, and its original name was largely forgotten.⁶



The Larimer Street bridge spanned an almost dry Cherry Creek in this 1873 view. (Colorado Historical Society.)

As pioneers put their towns together, the nation fell apart. Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency in November 1860 caused southern states to split from the North and to form the Confederate States of America. Scarcely six weeks after Colorado became a territory, the Civil War began. In Denver, Confederates flew their flag over Wallingford and Murphy's store near Sixteenth and Larimer until Unionists attacked the rebel banner. Southerners stockpiled guns, but northern sentiment prevailed since most Denverites came from northern states. By autumn 1861 many rebels, including Denver's first mayor, John C. Moore, had returned to the South.⁷

William Gilpin, booster of the West and defender of the Union, became Colorado's first territorial governor in May 1861. "I was surrounded by professional assassins just the same as Lincoln was," he later claimed.⁸ Fearing that Confederate Texans would march north to seize Rocky Mountain goldfields, Gilpin recruited the First Regiment of Colorado Volunteer Infantry, which he quartered at Camp Weld south of Denver.⁹ They rushed south in February 1862 to battle Texans near Santa Fe



William Gilpin, whom President Abraham Lincoln appointed first governor of Colorado Territory, promoted the Great American Desert as a new Garden of Eden. (Tom Noel Collection.)

at Glorieta Pass. There, in March, Major John Chivington led a daring foray against the Confederate rear, destroying their supplies and forcing them to retreat.¹⁰

The Glorieta triumph solved only one of the problems created by the war. Intent on fighting, the divided nation lacked the capital and the interest to finance mines, build smelters, establish farms, and develop cities in Colorado. Drifters hung out in local saloons, some trying to avoid the draft; others whetting their resolve to return to the North or the South to fight. Until peace unleashed a united people's constructive energy, Denver stagnated.

Gilpin, a man of deep foresight and shallow common sense, was himself a victim of the conflict. Without securing approval from Washington, he issued \$375,000 in federal promissory notes to pay for the First Colorado Volunteers. His bad checks propped up the local economy, but the Treasury Department's initial refusal to honor the unauthorized notes led, as William Byers put it, "to a war upon the governor" that forced him to resign.¹¹ Shrewd businessmen held onto the drafts, some of which eventually were paid.

Gilpin's successor, John Evans, reached Denver in May 1862. At 48, Evans looked back on a life many would have considered fulfilled. As a physician he had spearheaded the establishment of the Indiana Asylum for the Insane and had taught at Rush Medical College in Chicago. As a real estate developer he had helped create Evanston, a fashionable Chicago suburb named for him. As a public-spirited citizen and a dedicated Methodist he had helped found Northwestern University. Although not a close friend of Lincoln, Evans was an influential Republican. He had rejected the governorship of Washington Territory because it was too far from his Chicago business interests; Colorado suited him better. To his wife Margaret, who temporarily remained at their lakeshore home in Evanston, he wrote that he had settled in Denver, "really the only tolerable place" in the territory.¹²

Certainly, Denver surpassed Colorado City, 70 miles to the south, which enticed the Territorial Legislature into meeting there in the summer of 1862.¹³ Denver also shone in comparison with Golden, nominally the territorial capital from 1862 to 1867, a prize it won by promising lawmakers free accommodations, generous libations, and firewood. Moreover, the town that welcomed Evans was starting to shed its frontier rawness. Frame houses with siding, shingle roofs, and glass windows were replacing crude log cabins, while false fronts made one-story shacks look like substantial buildings. Visiting in August 1863, John Nicolay,



St. Mary's Academy, Denver's first private school, was opened by the Sisters of Loretto and Father Joseph Machebeuf in 1864 to offer Catholics and non-Catholics education in the fine and liberal arts. (Photo by Alfred E. Rinehart, Denver Public Library.)

Lincoln's private secretary, stayed at the Planter's House, "a frame hotel built of pine, of tolerable size and for this country very well kept. . . . An excellent dinner was served."¹⁴

Here and there a brick building, made with soft, crumbly blocks, suggested the city to come, among them the Army Commissary at Eleventh and Larimer with its 20-inch-thick walls and the U.S. Branch Mint, misnamed since coins were not struck there, at Sixteenth and Market. A few churches also introduced civility and stability to the dusty little settlement. Almost in the country, near Fifteenth and Stout, stood the city's first Roman Catholic church, St. Mary's. More centrally located at Fourteenth and Arapahoe was Denver's first church building, built by the Southern Methodists, whose numbers dwindled at the outbreak of the Civil War. In spring 1862 Episcopalians bought the church and renamed it St. John's in the Wilderness.

Still, it took faith to see promise in the town. Most congregations wandered from temporary home to temporary home, often holding services in public halls and saloons. The Methodist church paid Henry C. Brown, one of its members, \$21 a month rent for a building he had constructed in the bed of Cherry Creek. In 1865, Methodists spent \$21,000 for a real church at Fourteenth and Lawrence. The Presbyterians worshipped in a small structure on Fifteenth between Lawrence and

Arapahoe. Jews, Congregationalists, and Baptists lacked permanent homes until after 1866.

Schools also languished. Owen J. Goldrick, called "the professor" because he claimed a college degree and cursed in Latin, opened a pay school in 1859, in a log cabin with a leaky roof and a sod floor on Twelfth Street between Larimer and Market, where he taught Anglo, Hispanic, and Indian students. Goldrick's short-lived school was succeeded by several other small private institutions, the principal one run by Lydia Maria Ring. Children without tuition money had to wait until late 1862 when a free school opened in rented quarters near Eleventh and Larimer. Public schools operated in temporary homes throughout the 1860s with African-American children shunted to a school in the African Methodist church from 1869 to 1873. Such overt segregation disappeared in 1873 when Denver, at last, constructed its first regular school building, the Arapahoe School between Seventeenth and Eighteenth on Arapahoe.

In the 1860s Denver City was, as the *News* put it, "so treeless, grassless, bushless" that Frederick J. Bancroft, a pioneer physician, imported dandelions to brighten the landscape.¹⁵ Townsfolk let their pigs grovel in the garbage that filled streets and yards. "Once in a while some huge porker knocks down a child or trips up a lady," the *News* editorialized. "There is room for reform."¹⁶ Many residents did not care. "The multitudes who made the instant cities," historian Gunther Barth has observed, "did not make instant citizens."¹⁷ Just as gold had attracted many get-rich-quick dreamers in 1859, the difficulty of freeing pure metal from refractory ores caused many to leave in the early 1860s. In June 1864 Nathaniel P. Hill, a chemistry professor from Brown University, arrived in Denver. In a letter to his wife he complained, "I do not enjoy living in a country where every man you meet thinks it safe to carry a loaded pistol."¹⁸ Calming his qualms, Hill stayed to build smelters that eventually would extract pure silver and gold. Meanwhile, mining slumped and so did Denver.

Things grew worse before they got better. A fire started by late-night revelers at the Cherokee House near Fifteenth and Blake on April 19, 1863, blackened the heart of the business district, causing some \$250,000 in damage. Winds fanned the flames toward volunteers desperately chopping down buildings in the fire's path. Afterward, citizens recognized the folly of wooden structures and rebuilt in brick. By 1865 red brick business blocks gave the northeastern side of Cherry Creek an air of permanence lacking in Auraria, which had escaped the blaze.

Auraria's urban renewal came with the flood of May 20, 1864. Ignoring warnings from Native Americans and mountain men, settlers built ramshackle frame buildings, some of them on stilts, in the bed of Cherry Creek. They thought the creek bed safe since only twice had they seen much water in its sandy channel.¹⁹ After several rainy days, Cherry Creek and the South Platte flooded, inundating low-lying Auraria. John Chivington braved the swollen South Platte in a flatboat to rescue William Byers's family from their ranch several miles south of town. *Rocky Mountain News* printers, sleeping at the office, escaped by grabbing a rope thrown from shore. "The water engine of death dragging its watery train of maddening waves," as Professor Goldrick described it, swept away the *News* building, the Methodist church, and the City Hall.²⁰ At least eight died; losses were calculated at \$350,000.



Barney Ford, a prominent African-American pioneer, operated a successful restaurant and hotel on Blake Street. After the 1863 fire reduced his place to ashes, Ford quickly rebuilt on the same spot. (Colorado Historical Society.)

Troubles continued into the summer of 1864 when Indian attacks on wagon trains, coupled with merchants' market manipulations, drove up prices. Winter brought bitter cold and, at Christmas, a violent windstorm that toppled St. Mary's 800-pound bell. Grasshoppers invaded in 1865, devouring garments drying on clotheslines and stripping the ground of vegetation. Real estate values fell from highs in 1859 and 1860 to ridiculous lows in the early and mid-1860s. Whole downtown blocks changed hands during the poker games that preoccupied the stagnant town's wheeler-dealers. In 1864, Congress granted clear titles to residents, all of whom, up to then, were technically squatters on government land. Outside the boundaries of the 960-acre Congressional Grant, speculators such as Henry Brown claimed tracts under the Homestead Act. Still, the exodus continued. From 4,749 in 1860, the town's population shrank to 3,500 in 1866.²¹

Many of the '58ers and '59ers left. The Russell brothers, who had been in and out of Denver since 1858, left permanently in 1863. William Green and Joseph Oliver joined the Confederate Army; Levi went prospecting in Montana. Uncle Dick Wootton, a Kentuckian, also may have favored the South and hence felt uncomfortable in Denver. He said that

he relocated at Raton Pass on the Colorado–New Mexico border because Denver was so unstable. William Larimer, Jr., and his fellow town founder Samuel Curtis went east to command Union troops. Henri Murat and his wife moved south to Palmer Lake, where the countess lived into the twentieth century. William McGaa went north to LaPorte, sometimes visiting Denver for a drink. He died in 1867 in jail, where he had been thrown to sober up. James Beckwourth, who had left Denver for Wyoming, also died in the late 1860s on a visit to his old friends, the Crows. Mountain man Jim Baker tended a toll bridge north of town where he made pets of the prairie dogs around his adobe house. Cruel teamsters shot at the tame little rodents, which “discouraged and disgusted him with civilization.”²² He left in 1871. Others drifted away because, unlike John Evans, they did not find the place tolerable. “Damn a country,” one homesick pioneer griped, “where dried apple pies are a luxury.”²³

Among the remaining faithful were stalwarts whose fortunes were so intertwined with Denver’s that they fought to save the town. From time to time joined by newcomers or succeeded by their sons, they were to provide Denver with remarkably stable and able leadership for over 40 years. Homer L. Thayer’s 1872 real estate map reveals that Henry Brown, William Byers, Walter Scott Cheesman, John Evans, George W. Kassler, Charles B. Kountze, David H. Moffat, and Daniel Witter all owned tracts surrounding Denver. Their futures were tied to Denver’s.²⁴ Many of them had been born in either New York or Ohio and had lived in the Midwest before coming to Colorado. Moffat was typical. Born in New York in 1839 he had moved to Iowa in 1855 and a year later was working in an Omaha bank. He came to Denver in 1860 to sell books and newspapers. Miners, hungry for news, had paid Moffat’s newsboys 25¢ a copy for the *St. Louis Democrat* and the *St. Louis Republican*.²⁵ In 1866, Moffat became a cashier at the First National Bank, which had been founded the year before by another New Yorker, Jerome B. Chaffee.

Moffat’s friend and fellow New Yorker George Kassler also had clerked in an Omaha bank before moving to Denver where he boarded with Moffat and joined him in business. Walter Scott Cheesman, yet another New Yorker, had worked in New York City and Chicago before arriving in 1861. Charles Kountze was reared in Omaha. In 1864, at the age of 19, he had joined his brother Luther in Denver where they ran Kountze Brothers Bank, renamed the Colorado National Bank in 1866. Many of these would-be empire builders were young: Moffat, Cheesman, and Kassler were in their early 20s; Byers 30 on his arrival. Henry Brown, on the other hand, was 40. On his way to California in 1860 with his wife

Jane and their baby son, he had stopped in Denver because Jane, fearing Indians, had refused to go farther. Bela M. Hughes, who arrived in 1862 as president of the Holladay Overland Mail and Express Company, was another oddity among the pioneers since he was not only over 40, he was also a Southerner and a Democrat.

These experienced town builders knew how to make a city. Brown had learned carpentry in Virginia, built a sawmill in Washington Territory, farmed in California, and founded a town in Nebraska. Hughes had been a lawyer, public official, and soldier. The younger leaders were similarly well prepared. Moffat and Kassler had started their banking careers before they entered their teens. Prior to coming to Denver, Byers had hauled railroad ties, surveyed in Iowa and Oregon, and helped lay out Omaha, where he built one of the first houses. Evans had studied medicine at Philadelphia's Claremont Academy, but many of the other leaders only briefly attended school. Byers had taught himself to read and write. In Denver they pursued various businesses, humdrum compared to get-rich-quick prospecting, but profitable in the long run. Cheesman was a druggist, and Kassler first went into banking, then into stationery, then he sold insurance and eventually joined Moffat at the First National. Chaffee was one of the few who made his fortune directly from mining in the 1860s, money he used to establish Denver's First National Bank.

In 1870, census takers asked residents to estimate their wealth. Evans claimed assets of \$1,450,000, a questionable figure since nearly 90 percent of it was land of unproven value. Moffat more conservatively stated his worth at \$70,000, a believable fortune since in 1875 the credit agency R. G. Dun and Company judged him worthy of up to \$250,000 in loans.²⁶ Many held government jobs — payrolls for troops and territorial officials helped sustain them and the town in the early 1860s.²⁷ Kassler was assistant army paymaster and later clerk in the U.S. Mint. Byers was postmaster from 1864 to 1866, and Moffat acted as territorial treasurer. Witter, whose wife Clara was the half-sister of the powerful Indiana congressman Schuyler Colfax, was the U.S. tax assessor. Anxious to please the goose who laid the golden egg of a federal job, the Witters paid \$2.50 a dozen for eggs when Colfax visited in 1868 so that, as Clara explained to her children, "brother Schuyler could have his boiled egg for breakfast."²⁸

From a few cabins on Cherry Creek in 1858, Denver had grown to a town of nearly 5,000 by 1860. After that, the "instant city" seemingly went dormant, like a caterpillar in a cocoon.²⁹ The census of 1870 showed a population of 4,759, an increase of 10 persons in 10 years. The

paltry growth, however, masked real progress. During the turbulent 1860s the town edged out local rivals, established schools, churches, and a stable government, and attracted able business leaders. Spurred by self-interest, they dedicated themselves to making Denver a real city.

Gold created Denver. Conquest secured it. Location, leadership, and federal money kept it alive.³⁰ By the mid-1860s the Civil War was over, the Native Americans mostly subdued, law and some order established, fire and flood merely bad memories.³¹ Yet the energetic empire builders could not rest. In December 1866 they learned that Union Pacific Railroad had decided to build the nation's first transcontinental line through southern Wyoming bypassing Denver. Without railroads they knew that their city and their fortunes would wither. Of all the challenges Denver was to face during the rest of the nineteenth century, none was more important to its emergence as a major Western metropolis than the building of railroads.