

Street-Name Patterns in Denver

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IN THE LATE AUTUMN OF 1858 some of the Pikes Peak gold prospectors decided to winter at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Although they were merely squatters on Indian territory they staked out a tract of land at the junction of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River, and on November 6 proceeded to map in grid-iron form, the first streets of what later became one of the central parts of Denver, Colorado.¹ They named their creation Auraria, after the Georgia home town of one of the founders. In having the streets parallel the banks of the intersecting streams the pioneers adopted a diagonal pattern that still puzzles both natives and strangers. After the United States Congressional Grant was made and surveyed in 1864, all additions to the then legally constituted city of Denver were laid out with streets running north-south and east-west.

Following the popular street-name pattern instituted in 1682 by William Penn for his colonial capital, Philadelphia, they called one set of streets First, Second, etc., beginning at the South Platte River and extending to Twenty-third. These were intersected at right angles by named streets. Instead of using tree names as Penn had, they called theirs Front (fronting on Cherry Creek), Cherry (after the Creek, on whose banks wild Cherry trees grew), Ferry (since it extended to the ferry that operated across the South Platte), St. Louis (former center of the fur trade), Cheyenne and Arapahoe (after tribes claiming title to the town site). Then came the names of the presidents of the United States, in chronological order—perhaps the most frequently used of all street-name patterns. This series extended from Washington to Buchanan, who was then in office, but omitted for some now unknown reason both Tyler and Fillmore. Quincy was substituted for the last name of the second Adams. By inserting a Platte Street, the map-makers reached the

edge of their domain, at the South Platte River, and were ready to sell lots.

About two weeks later a rival town company established itself across Cherry Creek from Auraria and began the survey of Denver, named for Governor J. W. Denver, of Kansas Territory, who had commissioned some of these pioneers as officers for Arapahoe County, Kansas Territory, which then included the new gold region. Disdaining to imitate Auraria and with no intentions of joining it, the Denver city fathers laid out their plat with streets called A, B, C, etc., stretching in alphabetical order from Cherry Creek out onto the plains. The intersecting thoroughfares were named after the founders themselves, with some Indian terms interspersed.² The latter were suggested by an old mountaineer, William McGaa, alias Jack Jones, who was residing on Indian Row, on the neighboring bank of the South Platte, when the first town-builders arrived. Such names as Wewatta, Wazee, Champa, and Wapoola are supposed to have honored friends and relatives of McGaa and his fellow squawman John S. Smith, but no one is sure of their meaning. Denverites still use for downtown streets all except the last one, as well as Arapahoe and Cheyenne, which both Auraria and Denver had on their original plats.

Denver Town Company members whose fame is still perpetrated in street names include Bassett, Williams, Wynkoop, Blake, McGaa, Larimer, Lawrence, Curtis, and Stout. The names of several others were replaced as the result of the 1864 survey. Williams Street was later changed to Chestnut, for no known reason. In 1866 McGaa Street was renamed Holladay, in honor of Ben Holladay of overland stage-coach fame, but only after McGaa had been jailed numerous times for drunkenness. Later, the street itself fell into ill-repute, as a center for warehouses and commercialized sin; then, it was appropriately renamed Market Street.

Later in 1859, still another town company surveyed a plat; this was located on the bluffs across the South Platte from Auraria and Denver and was called Highland. Its streets paralleling the river were numbered, with the intersecting streets named for the town founders and other pioneers. But this project failed to prosper, and few of its street names have survived. Some of the others, however, reappeared later in Denver's newer additions. The three rival towns were consolidated in 1860, under the name of Denver.

With the coming of the railroad to Denver, in 1870, there began a rapid expansion in population and in building that soon revealed the need for reducing to one unified system the street names in the older parts of the city. Accordingly, the city council passed an ordinance on February 20, 1873, "changing the names of certain streets within the corporate limits of the City of Denver and providing for the numbering of the same." In West Denver, formerly Auraria, the named streets were changed to First, Second, etc., beginning at the South Platte River. This system was extended across Cherry Creek into old Denver, where numbers replaced the old alphabetical designations, with F Street becoming Fifteenth, G becoming Sixteenth, etc., out beyond what had been Z Street, now Thirty-fourth. The alphabetical system, limited to twenty-six letters, was of course not suitable for an almost indefinitely expanding city. The numbered streets in old Auraria, now in conflict with the new pattern, were given the names of those streets into which they ran when projected across Cherry Creek into old Denver, with Fifth becoming Larimer, Sixth becoming Lawrence, etc.

The city map of 1892 indicates that a system of numbered avenues had replaced the east-west named streets in the newer parts of Denver, east of Broadway from Elsworth Avenue north to Thirty-ninth Avenue, and extending on to Sixty-seventh Avenue, in a suburb named Arvada. Quite ingeniously these east-west avenues were so numbered that some of them joined the like numbered northwest-southwest diagonal streets in the older business section of Denver, from Fourteenth Street to Fortieth Street. Here Denver resembles New York, with numbered avenues running at an angle to numbered streets. But Denver tried to join a new pattern onto an old one, while New York left alone the old names in lower Manhattan when its new system was adopted in 1811.

By 1897 the street names in various residence districts of Denver were so mixed up that, for example, what is now known as Albion Street had eleven different names as it extended through Denver and on into adjoining Arapahoe County. Mr. Howard C. Maloney, one of the Denver Union Water Company officials, began to work out with the city administration "a system that would not be confusing either to home people or to strangers."⁸ Finally, an ordinance was passed by the Denver City Council, on February 18, 1904, reducing the names of the streets in recently annexed additions to

one single name for the various parts now joined, and adopting several alphabetical patterns for renaming streets and for naming those that might be added. By using names arranged in alphabetical order, instead of the letters of the alphabet alone, no limit was put upon the repetition of this basic pattern. Fortunately, the plan was adopted also by the commissioners in Adams, Arapahoe, and Jefferson Counties, so that their street names were a continuation of or in harmony with those of neighboring Denver.

Streets west of Broadway, the main north-south thoroughfare, were given Indian tribal names in the first series; then those of famous men, preferably American; then those of United States senators or members of the Supreme Court. The Indians thus honored—with the once hostile Apaches and Utes conspicuously absent—have their names arranged as follows: Acoma (pronounced a-kó-ma in Denver), Bannock, Cherokee, Delaware, etc., to Yuma and Zuni. The list of famous men begins with Alcott and Bryant, runs through Newton and Perry to Xavier and Zenobia. Then senators and judges are remembered in a series running from Ames and Benton through Lamar and Otis to Yarrow and Zephyr, with exceptions made where alphabetical demands exceeded the original supply.

East of Colorado Boulevard, another north-south thoroughfare, a rapidly developing residence district extended. For it a system was devised that provided two names for each letter: the first, a place or person; the second, a tree, plant, or shrub. Denver's first double alphabet series includes among others the following: Albion, Ash, Bellaire, Birch, Clermont, Cherry, Dexter, Dahlia, Pontiac, Poplar, Quebec, Quince, Xanthia, and Xenia.

Since 1904 Denver has annexed a number of areas, but the basic plan of street-naming has remained unchanged. One series of streets in South Denver was named after the states: Nevada, Dakota, Virginia, Kentucky, etc. A small group near the University of Denver referred to benefactors and inspirers of that institution and of the Methodist school of theology affiliated with it, including Evans, Warren, Iliff, and Wesley—all intersecting University Boulevard. Beyond these extended a series named after other universities and colleges: Harvard, Vassar, Yale, and then Amherst, Bates, Cornell, etc., in alphabetical order to Tufts and Union.

Although *street* and *avenue* are the dominant terms, with *place*

used for short streets and *court* for short avenues, Denver has some through streets called *drive* and *parkway*, in addition to the older *boulevard*. An arterial road now under construction through the city is named Valley Highway. In some of the newer and perhaps more exclusive residential areas there are a few short, usually curving streets named, for example, Michigan Way, Belcaro Lane, Brook Drive, Lynn Road, Ivy Lane, and Amherst Circle. It might be added that houses in Denver are numbered, usually one hundred numbers reserved for each block, running north or south from Ellsworth Avenue and east or west from Broadway, with even numbers on the east and south, odd numbers on the west and north.

NOTES

¹"Map of Denver, Auraria and Highland," in *Denver City and Auraria, The Commercial Emporium of the Pike's Peak Gold Regions, in 1859*. Reprinted in Nolie Mumey, *History of the Early Settlements of Denver*, Glendale, California, 1952.

²Jerome Smiley, *History of Denver*, Denver, 1901, pp. 447-448.

³"How Denver's Streets Were Named and Numbered," *Denver Municipal Facts*, Denver, Colorado, I: 16 (June 5, 1909), pp. 3-5.



Chuparro and *Chupamiel*.—I like Loye Miller's suggestion that *Chuparro* Spring derives its name from the *chuparro*, which means humming bird, or from its extension to a particular plant found in the vicinity. Francisco J. Santamaría, in his *Diccionario General de Americanismos* (3 vols., Mexico, 1942), lists *chuparro* with the meaning of humming bird as well as that of a plant called *huichichil* (*Loeselia mexicana*, Brand.). Is it necessary to add that the name represents one of the commonest ways of forming a compound word in Spanish (verb plus noun object)? A similar formation is *chupamiel* which is used also for hummingbird and in El Salvador may refer to certain plants. The doubling of the *r* is not an error but a customary phonetic procedure. The Spanish initial *r* is trilled and when made internal must be doubled to indicate the pronunciation which otherwise would be a flap instead of a trill.

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