

History of Washington County, Colorado [From the old Washington Co Files]

What is now Washington County wasn't permanently settled until fairly late in the history of the United States. As shown by recent archeological finds, nomadic tribes lived in the area long before the Cheyenne, Arapahoe and Pawnee that Europeans found occupying the high plains moved in.

The first recorded Washington County explorer was Pedro de Villasur in an 1720 expedition out of Santa Fe to the confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers. French trappers operating out of Canada are known to have visited the Pawnee Tribes on the upper Platte River several years prior to that date. The South Platte was a major route into the Rocky Mountains for the fur trade from the mid 1700s to the mid 1800s. The South Platte route was also used by Major Stephen H. Long's party in 1819-1820 when he explored the new area for the United States.

Claimed by both France and Spain, northeast Colorado was part of the land given up by France to the young United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. First organized as part of Louisiana Territory, later Missouri Territory and then lumped with most of the rest of the west into "unorganized territory" what would become northeast Colorado remained largely unoccupied until after Colorado became a state in 1876. Most early maps of the area did little to encourage settlement since they were based on Major Long's survey map. He had dubbed the high plains area the "Great American Desert" in a drought year.

With Texas admitted as a state in 1845, the end of the Mexican War in 1847, gold discovered in California in 1849 and Oregon largely settled Congress turned its attention to organizing the west. In 1854 the lands that would become Colorado were split between Kansas Territory, Nebraska Territory, New Mexico Territory and Utah Territory by the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

(The faint red outline shows the area covered by the subsequent maps.)

In 1858 gold was discovered at the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek and the Denver City gold camp was started. By 1860 over 35,000 folks had moved to the Colorado gold camps and were asking for a separate territorial government. Their efforts to organize Jefferson Territory in 1860 failed but in August 1861 Colorado Territory was organized with 17 counties.

1861 Weld County with its county seat in Greeley covered most of the area of the former Nebraska Territory while Arapahoe County with its county seat in Denver was transferred almost intact from from the brand new state of Kansas. (The faint green outline is the present Washington Co borders.)

Stage lines along the South Platte to Denver City went through what would later become northwest Washington County. The area remained mostly unoccupied except by the nomadic Indian tribes until after the 1869 battle at Summit Springs.

The Indians were forced out of eastern Colorado onto reservations by 1870. But the Northeast remained mostly unoccupied except along the South Platte River until the Burlington & Missouri (later the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy) RR constructed an extension from St. Joseph, Missouri to Denver in 1882. That was followed in 1885 by the construction of a Union Pacific branch line from Julesburg to Denver. Also in 1885 the the President ordered that illegal fences be removed from the public lands which favored settlers over the cattle ranchers who had occupied the Colorado high plains since 1870.

With the government willing to provide up to 480 acres of cheap land to each family and the railroads actively promoting the area by providing reduced transportation rates ("immigrant cars") the area boomed. In 1887 the rapidly growing population of Northeast Colorado led to dividing Weld county in half and organizing Logan (blue) and Washington (red) Counties. Akron was designated as the Washington County seat. Arapahoe County remained stretching from the mountains to the Kansas line.

Only two years later in 1889, the booming settlement of the plains led to splitting off the eastern half of Logan county to form Sedgwick (light brown) and Phillips (violet) Counties. In the same reorganization Washington County was split in half to form the new Yuma County (yellow).

The southeast corner of Weld county was also split off to form the new Morgan County (dark brown).

Arapahoe County was still unchanged from its initial 1861 borders.

By 1901 voters in Denver and settled parts of Arapahoe County were demanding a separate voice in Colorado government. The 1901 Colorado legislature created Adams County (brown) by splitting Arapahoe County in half east to west. They also created a Denver County but that part of the act was overturned by the Colorado Supreme Court pending a change to the Colorado Constitution.

By 1903 the disputes raised by the 1901 act were settled by drawing different Northeast Colorado county lines. The City and County of Denver (red) was created from the extreme northwest part of 1901 Arapahoe County. Washington (red) and Yuma (yellow) Counties were doubled in size by adding the parts of the previous Adams and Arapahoe Counties that were south of them.

The 1903 changes were the last to the Washington County borders. Today the county remains true to its roots. Most of the land is still dedicated to farming and ranching.

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