

Highland History

“She is upon a high eminence, proudly overlooking her smoky neighbor, the city of Denver, her atmosphere untarnished by factory or smelter smoke, but as pure and fresh and sweet as the God of Nature ever gave Man.”

Before Europeans showed up Denver was home to the Southern Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Shoshonis, and Utes camped along the Platte River. By the 1820s American and French Canadian fur traders and Mexican-American miners joined the tribes in the area. The first American gold seekers who arrived in 1858, rounded out the multi-ethnic community at the confluence of the Platte and Cherry Creek.

In December of 1858, William Larimer and D.C. Collier waded the partly frozen Platte to examine the land on the west bank. They staked out Highland across from the infant communities of Denver City and Auraria. At first not many people showed an interest in Highland. In fact, land values were so low that lots owners could not give land away. In 1859, A.C. Wright tried to trade 136 lots in Highland to Jose Merival for a horse, saddle, and bridle. Merival declined because the horse was worth more than the land. Through 1859 Highland existed only on paper although hopeful developers gave the streets names like Byers, Wootton, Wing, Wallingford, and Murphy, named after Denver luminaries. None of those names made it onto the official North Denver maps.

On December 3, 1859, the Jefferson legislature consolidated Auraria, Denver, and Highland into the City of Denver, Auraria, and Highland. Later that month they dropped “Auraria and Highland” from the name. The area called Highland in the early plats eventually became North Denver.

Potter Highland, between the current Zuni Street and Boulevard, later Federal Boulevard, was platted in 1864. It was the project of Reverend Walter Potter, the missionary preacher who founded First Baptist Church in Auraria. He and his sister platted the neighborhood to sell house lots to fund the new Baptist church. After Potter died, First Baptist Church continued to sell the lots.

Another independent neighborhood was Highland Park. It was a Scottish themed suburban development created by Roger Woodbury, David Moffitt and William Jackson Palmer (founder of Colorado Springs). The new houses and winding streets named after Scottish towns, drew residents of modest means and multiple nationalities. Although there is a modern myth that the village was called Scottish Highlands and housed Scottish servants of the neighboring rich, Highland Park never bore the name of Scottish Highlands. When it became one of Denver’s first national historic districts, it carried its true name of Highland Park.

The town of Highland incorporated in 1874 after Owen Le Fevre, Roger Woodbury, David Moffitt and a number of other developers petitioned the Arapahoe County Commissioners for the right to establish a village government. The village incorporated as a city in 1885. The 1889 town ordinances restricted livestock in the streets, children’s games, rude language, and the number of

saloons. In 1896, after considerable discussion, the residents voted to allow Denver to annex the town.

In 1902, the state legislature created the City and County of Denver. Highland and North Denver became part of that and mapmakers unified the Northside with the rest of Denver by changing most neighborhood street names to conform to the Denver names. Maps from before 1904 show the old street names.

But before Denver annexed Highland, Le Fevre's artesian well provided clean drinking water and the breezes from the west provided clean air by blowing away any smog. People supported bond issues for schools, a library, and other civic improvements because those services were what a town needed. Eventually, though the town fathers found it hard to maintain city services so in 1896, the residents voted for annexation by Denver.

Highland's residents were mostly Protestant and Republican. In 1892, the young men of the community formed the North Denver Athletic Club so they could have facilities similar to those enjoyed at the Denver Athletic Club, playground of Denver's elite. The women joined clubs including the North Side Women's Club, where they heard lectures and organized good works around the area.

By 1900, North Denver had an Italian community that centered around a six-block section of Navajo running from Thirty-second to Thirty-eighth Avenues with Mount Carmel Catholic Church, located at Thirty-sixth and Navajo, at the community's heart. The Germans in North Denver worked at the Zang Brewery near the banks of the South Platte River, as well as at the Denver City Brewery on 17th Avenue. The Irish built St. Patrick's Church at west Thirty-second and Osage and then the new St. Patrick's in 1905.

Beginning in the 1920s, North Denver became home to both Mexican-American migrants and Mexican, Central and South American immigrants. The first to arrive from New Mexico were the villagers whose families had lived there since the 1600s. Beginning in the 1940s, many North Denver Mexican Americans and Mexicans attended Our Lady of Guadalupe Church at west Thirty-fourth and Lipan. West 32nd Avenue between Tejon and Clay became the modern commercial center of North Denver's Hispanic, Mexican, and Central American community.

Since 2000 this business strip has begun to transform as the neighborhood begins to evolve from a working class Latino into a gentrified, middle-class increasingly Anglo-American neighborhood. Many older buildings have been replaced by modern apartments Single-family homes have given way to condos and row homes. Nearly 100 restaurants and bars have filled Highland with evening and weekend pleasure-seekers. The one constant in the neighborhood, during all of its history, has been change.

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