

Denver Historic Streets and Historic Men

By Donna Bishop

Are the names General William Larimer, Jr. or Schuyler Colfax familiar to you? Living in Denver you recognize two of our famous streets are Larimer Street and Colfax Avenue which were named to honor these two men.

General Larimer, Jr. was born in Pennsylvania in 1809 and spent his early adult years in a variety of business ventures, ultimately founding two early railroads in the Pittsburg area. He served for 20 years in the Pennsylvania Militia, earning the rank of major general. An economic downturn in 1854 forced Larimer to head west.

He spent some time in Nebraska involved in promoting the development of two townships in the Nebraska Territory. Using his eastern contacts he encouraged people heading west to settle there. Larimer moved his family on to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas where he organized a freight company. He was also elected president of the newly formed Kansas Republican Party. The discovery of gold brought Larimer to Colorado in 1858. He helped organize The Denver City Town Company which led to the establishment of Denver.

The main street of growth in early Denver was named Larimer Street by General Larimer himself. As the city grew commerce moved south and eventually Larimer Street experienced a slow decline into skid row. In 1960s the 1400 block of Larimer Street was successfully preserved for restoration by Dana Crawford and Partners. The majority of old Larimer Street has been renewed with modern architecture.

The same gold rush that brought Larimer to Colorado in 1858 established the trail that led from the east to the Rockies. That trail was called the Gold Road. Later it was named Grand Avenue. In 1865 Colorado first applied for statehood. That same year a popular politician from Indiana, Schuyler Colfax visited Denver. The city fathers decided to honor him by renaming Grand Avenue Colfax Avenue. Schuyler Colfax was the Speaker of the House of Representatives at that time and proudly signed the 13th Amendment freeing slaves. He later became Vice President of the United States under President Ulysses S. Grant.

Colfax Avenue has a long, long road of history. Once it was a dusty trail shared by desperate, adventuresome men and women seeking a fortune from gold and silver, or land to homestead. As Denver developed into a proper town the central part of Colfax was occupied by the well-to-do Denver residents in their mansions.

The commercial area along Colfax Avenue extends for 26.5 miles making it the longest commercial street in the United States. Colfax was the main street through Denver from east to west for decades until interstate 1-70 was completed. Modern traffic moved to the north and Colfax business owners' closed shop. Slowly the Avenue deteriorated with abandoned buildings and parking lots. Prostitution and drug trade replaced the once vibrant main street. Fortunately there are numerous efforts to revitalize this historic Denver street that crosses through the center of our proud city.