

A Jefferson License Plate?

By Dennis Payton Knight

Can you picture on your DeLorean or Jeep a green and white license plate with JEFFERSON emblazoned below the silhouette of a mountain range? Would your bumper have a sticker reading "Jefferson Native?" It might have happened that way if some of our earliest citizens had gotten their choosing.

In the 1850s, Kansas Territory cut a wide swath from Missouri west to the top of the Rockies where it met the Utah Territory. Most of what would become Colorado was designated Arapahoe County in 1855. They didn't get a government in place for it though, because Kansas itself was experiencing a period called Bleeding Kansas, violent confrontations among slave interests and abolitionists concerning whether Kansas would become a free state or a slave state.

In April 1859, a group convened in the town of Auraria on Cherry Creek to discuss setting up a government to fill the void, deciding then to create the state of Jefferson, honoring President Thomas Jefferson who authorized the 1803 Louisiana Purchase that included much of their proposed state. A constitution was drafted but later rejected in a public referendum. Not that the people didn't want statehood, but if it was established as a territory first, it could be funded by Congress, whereas a self-governed state would not.

Instead, it would be Jefferson Territory, a big rectangle covering present-day Colorado and 70 percent more, extending 138 miles further north and 50 miles further west. It was legally part of the five territories of Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Utah, and Washington, but remote from the governments of any.

In November 1859, the newly elected Governor, Robert Steele, opened the provisional legislature in Denver City. Jefferson Territory successfully filled the void in local governance, but it was extralegal and never recognized by the United States Government. Settlers hailing from eastern Kansas resisted, electing their own representative to the Kansas Territorial Legislature.

Meanwhile, Jefferson Territory was losing population (and potential taxpayers) as the gold boom waned. Governor Steele sought an accommodation to merge back into Kansas Territory, but Kansas officials wanted nothing to do with what they considered an outlaw government.

In November 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President and all the federal government's attention was focused on dealing with secession by the slave states. Governor Steele had been a staunch Democrat and vocal opponent of Lincoln and the Republican Party. Those facts and circumstances eliminated any possible endorsement by the United States Government of Jefferson Territory.

In February 1861, shortly before Lincoln's inauguration, Congress passed, and President James Buchanan signed a bill that organized the new Territory of Colorado instead. In May 1861, William Gilpin, the newly appointed governor of the territory arrived in Denver City. On June 6, 1861, Governor Steele issued a proclamation declaring the Territory of Jefferson disbanded and urging all employees and residents to abide by the laws governing the United States.

And that is how we got Colorado emblazoned on our green license plates.