

A Brief History of Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak Region

In 1893, poet and author Katharine Lee Bates boarded a train in Massachusetts headed to Colorado Springs. Escaping the sweltering New England summer, she planned to soak up the region's dry, mild climate and serve as a guest lecturer at Colorado College. During her stay, she made her way to the top of nearby Pikes Peak where she stood in awe of the scenic grandeur of the surrounding mountains and plains. This view from the summit inspired her to write the poem "America the Beautiful." Once set to music, her vivid descriptions of "purple mountain's majesty" and "amber waves of grain" became, for many, our national anthem.

Bates was just one of countless people over the centuries that was attracted to and inspired by Pikes Peak. The oral tradition of the Ute people says that they have always lived close to the mountain. They call it *Ta-Wa-Ah-Gath* – or "Sun Mountain" – for the way it collects and reflects the morning's rays. The Spanish, who settled in northern New Mexico and explored the area beginning in the 16th century, called it *Almagre* for its vibrant red coloring.

The first American official to encounter the mountain was a dashing young Army lieutenant named Zebulon Montgomery Pike. In 1806, as Lewis and Clark were returning from their expedition, Pike was dispatched to explore the southwestern boundary of the newly acquired Louisiana Territory. Pike named the mountain Grand Peak when he first caught a glimpse of it looming in the distance. A few weeks later, he attempted to climb the peak in an effort to survey the surrounding landscape and chart the rivers. Deep snow deterred him from the summit, but in 1810 he published the account of his expedition and literally put the mountain on the map. As a result, his name is forever attached to the peak.

The discovery of gold spurred the first permanent settlement in the region. In 1859, bold businessmen established Colorado City at the lower end of the Ute Pass trail, which led to mining camps in the central Rockies. Their rugged and wild supply camp sold goods and equipment to eager miners on their way west. Old Colorado City is still a distinctive community on the west side of Colorado Springs. It is an historic district with its own personality, quirky shops and unique restaurants. It survives as a living legacy of the region's frontier spirit.

Today's incorporated city of Colorado Springs sprang from the lively imagination of one man. General William Jackson Palmer, a Civil War hero and railroad magnate, established Colorado Springs in 1871. A planned community from its very beginnings, the city was without an industrial or manufacturing base but it prospered just the same. Palmer used the area's enticing scenery, nearby mineral springs, and other amenities to attract residents to resort. He laid out the broad streets, hauled in 10,000 trees to make the city green and lush, and built lavish buildings with a European sense of style.

Colorado Springs was no frontier boomtown. From the start it attracted wealthy residents and capitalists, as well as intellectuals, artists, writers and inventors. It served as a destination for tens of thousands of health seekers hoping that the community's abundant sunshine and fresh air would cure tuberculosis. After the 1891 discovery of gold in Cripple Creek, just to the west of Pikes Peak, even more wealth came to the Colorado Springs. For a time, the city had more millionaires per capita than any other place in the county.

Entrepreneurs and visionaries continue to add intricate layers to the economy. Colorado Springs is an art colony, college town, military installation, destination for the high-tech industry, and home to the U.S. Olympic Committee headquarters. Peel away those layers and you still find Palmer's healthful, attractive community with an extensive park system, trails galore, red sandstone spires, and that ever-present mountain.

The Pikes Peak region is a cultural and geographic confluence. It's where the mountains meet the plains, where the Southwest joins the heartland, where ancient cultures converge with 21st century society, and where the past informs the future. For some, it's stirring enough to inspire poetry.

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