

Colorado history - territorial prisons

Canon City hosted first territorial prison

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Warden's home

The deputy warden's house, built in 1901 at 105 Main Street in Canon City, sits on the site of the Fremont House, which was Canon City's most famous hotel and stage stop in the 1870s. It was torn down in the early 1890s to make way for the deputy warden's house.

(Photo by Flip Boettcher/The Flume)

Originally, Colorado was just a vast, unexplored land in the extreme western part of the huge Kansas Territory. The land was very remote, isolated and lawless; far removed from the rest of the country, which was 650 miles and a long time away to the east.

The depression following the Panic of 1857 sent hard-hit mid-westerners and

bankrupt easterners to the Rocky Mountains seeking gold. With the discovery of gold along Cherry Creek near present-day Denver in the spring of 1858, the rush to the area was on.

Very little gold had been found in Colorado before the 1858 finds; however there were rumors of gold in Cripple Creek as early as 1859.

The Spaniards, who were always looking for gold, may have been mining gold south of Westcliffe at La Caverna del Oro (Cave of Gold) earlier than Pike's expedition in 1806, but this has not been proven.

In the spring of 1805, maybe as early as 1803, mountain man and fur trapper James Pursley from Kentucky, told Zebulon Pike in Sante Fe in 1806 that he had found gold while camping in South Park.

Pursley and the band of Kiowa he was traveling with were chased into the Rockies by a band of Sioux. Pursley may well have been the first American in South Park. Presumably he found the gold somewhere between Buena Vista and Leadville.

There is another account of a Frenchman named Du Chet who showed some

people in Sante Fe a pouch full of gold nuggets, which he found in South Park in the 1830s.

Also, Parson Bill Williams found some nuggets while trapping in South Park in 1848. Colonel William Gilpin, first governor of Colorado Territory, found gold in South Park during the Mexican War while on campaigns in the area.

After the 1859 gold strikes around Tarryall, Fairplay and Leadville, Canon City sprang up as the "Gate City to the Mountains," and to the gold, according to "Trappers to Tourists," by Rosemae Wells Campbell. In 1860, Canon City was a wild, lawless and wide-open town. "Every department of pleasure ran at capacity. Beaver and deer skins, as well as venison, was legal tender," wrote Campbell.

Officially, Colorado was part of the Kansas Territory starting in 1854. Unofficially, Colorado was known as Territory of Jefferson in 1859; and finally, officially Territory of Colorado in 1861.

Before the territorial penitentiary was built in Canon City, those who escaped the vigilantes and lynch mobs were put into small, local jails that were not equipped for long stays, and over-crowding was a problem.

Often prisoners were released before their time was up to make room for more recent offenders. Jailbreaks were common.

Citizens of the territory petitioned local and federal governments for a prison. In 1867, Congress passed an act creating the Colorado Territorial Prison, one of six to help curb lawlessness in the west.

Through a political deal Thomas Macon, Canon City businessman and legislator at the time, helped get the territorial prison

located in Canon City in exchange for helping get the territorial capital located in Denver.

Jothan Draper donated twenty-five acres of his orchard land east of the hogbacks for the new prison on the west end of town. The land was to be located no more than a half mile from the center of town, given freely to the territory and be not less than twenty-five acres.

Finally, in July 1868, work began, lacking funds, with only \$40,000 of federal funds to build and operate with a bid of \$100,000 to complete.

Built like the prison in Wyoming with granite quarried on site, the prison opened June 1, 1871, with United States Marshall Mark A. Shaffenberg serving as the first warden.

The first prisoner was John Shepley, admitted June 13, 1871, serving a seven-year term for larceny. Prisoner 24, the first woman prisoner on the rolls in the same year, was Maria Antoria Manzanares, a homemaker.

Manzanares was serving a life sentence for murdering her husband with strychnine. Manzanares' husband must have been a real gem, because she had help from the neighbors to poison him.

Manzanares was convicted along with some co-conspirators and imprisoned with the male prisoners. Manzanares received an unconditional pardon two and a half years later because she was pregnant, according to Stacey Cline, Administrator of Museum of Colorado Prisons.

Prisoner 60 on the rolls in 1873 used to be known as the first woman prisoner until Manzanares' records were found. Number 60 was Doctor Mary Solendar who was serving a three-year term for

manslaughter, after a woman Dr. Solendar, had performed an abortion on had died, according to Cline.

The two-and-a-half-story prison building with 42 cells proved to be totally inadequate for the frontier conditions. There was no kitchen, offices or worker's housing, until another out building was built.

Another small detail was that there was no wall around the prison in the early days.

When Englishman Richard Houle arrived by stagecoach in Canon City via the First Street bridge from Florence through Lincoln Park in 1872, the new territorial prison stood by itself at the far end of town, without a fence, facing a swampy field, according to Campbell.

With no fence and an inadequate force of guards, the prisoners often slipped out during the night to raid the town, returning before daylight or sometimes not returning at all.

A stone wall, quarried on site, was finally built by the prisoners themselves. The wall was four feet thick and 20 feet high, enclosing five acres of the property around the compound. Part of this original wall can still be seen on the west side and is still in use.

An 1873 federal food investigation of the prison was

prompted by the fact that the first warden was embezzling food from the prison supplies for his brother to sell at his mercantile store in town.

According to "Memories From the Foot of the Gorge," by Donna Taylor, the prison was "found to be in good order. The buildings were clean, the prisoners were well-clothed and cheerful, the food was

good, and there were no visible signs of cruelty."

Although, when old Cell House One was later razed, dungeons with leg irons in the walls for solitary confinement of prisoners were found.

There was also a heavy cardboard sign that read, "Notice to inmates. Those who are not in by 9 p.m. will be locked out. signed the warden," according to Taylor. In territorial and early statehood days, prisoners were released during the day to work on the roads. With too few guards, this was fair warning to those who might linger outside.

The food seemed pretty good. A typical 20-month food bill for the prisoners at the time was \$18,000. Some of the items on the bill included beef, bacon, flour, oatmeal, sugar, tea, lard, mustard, potatoes, cabbage, peas, and of course, tobacco. In fact, in 1872 some of the convicts threatened to leave if they were not furnished with tobacco.

When the federal government turned jurisdiction of the prison over to the territory in 1874, Governor Samuel H. Elbert appointed Anson Rudd, early Canon City pioneer, as the first warden of the territorial prison. In 1876, when Colorado became a state, the facility was renamed the Colorado State Penitentiary.

(This is part one of a two-part series on central Colorado prisons)