

# Brief History of Carson City, Heart of Nevada

For nearly 4,000 years before the coming of white settlers, the Washoe Indians occupied the land along the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range that borders Nevada and California. In 1851 a group of prospectors decided to look for gold in the area that is now Carson City. Unsuccessful in that attempt, they opened up a trading post called Eagle Station on the Overland Stagecoach route. It was used by wagon trains of people moving westward. The surrounding area came to be called Eagle Ranch, and the surrounding meadows as Eagle Valley. In time, a number of scattered settlements grew up in the area and the Eagle Ranch became its social center.

As a growing number of white settlers came to the area and began to develop the valleys and mountains of the Sierra Nevada, the Washoe people who for so long had occupied the area were overwhelmed. Although lands were allotted to individual Indians by the federal government starting in the 1880s, they did not offer sufficient water. As a result, the Washoe tended to set up camp at the edges of white settlements and ranches in order to work for food. It would not be until the twentieth century that parcels of reservation land were established for them.

Many of the earliest settlers in the Carson City area were Mormons led to Eagle Valley by Colonel John Reese. When the Mormons were summoned to Salt Lake City, Utah, by their leader, Brigham Young, many sold their land for a small amount to area resident John Mankin, who later laid claim to the entire Eagle Valley. In time he subdivided the land and sold tracts of it.

## Birth of Carson City

In 1858, an ambitious New Yorker named Abraham Curry, along with three partners, bought most of Eagle Valley, including the ranch and trading post. Curry was correct in his prophecy that the western part of Utah Territory was soon to become a state, and he had the present-day site of Carson City surveyed. He promoted Eagle Valley, a fertile though rather deserted place, as the site of the future state capital.

Soon Major William M. Ormsby also became an enthusiastic promoter of a town that did not yet exist. He named it in honor of legendary mountain man Kit Carson, whose name was also borne by a nearby river. The town was laid out with wide streets and had a four-square city area that he named Capitol Square, but that later came to be called the Plaza. For those who are curious, Kit Carson never set foot in Carson City.

In 1859 silver was discovered mere miles from the site of Carson City, setting off a rush to the area. Curry sold his claim to the Comstock for a few thousand dollars, but those who bought it became millionaires. Still, Curry is remembered in the name of the mine, the Gould and Curry.

By 1860 the town's population stood at 500 people. Soon Abe Curry took steps to have Carson City named territorial capital. He argued that it was close to the main lines of travel in the region. On November 25, 1861, Carson City was named the permanent capital of Nevada Territory and the Ormsby County seat. A plaza was established at the site for future public buildings.

## Carson Named Capital of New State

Just one year later, the population of the town had nearly doubled. The year 1862 saw Carson become a station on the Pony Express and the eastern end of a telegraph line from San Francisco. Soon the town became a freighting and supply point for many mining and ranching communities in the central and southern part of Nevada.

About this time, both Carson and the entire surrounding area were having problems with cattle rustlers, claim jumpers, and other outlaws. As a result, the legislature passed laws designed to establish order. When the new legislature could not find a site large enough to accommodate its numbers, Abe Curry offered it the use of his Warm Springs Hotel, a rather primitive building located near the Carson River. In the early days a canvas curtain was used to divide the Nevada senate from the state assembly.

In October 1864, Nevada became a state, and Carson City was chosen to serve as the state capital. By then, Curry owned a sandstone quarry, a brickyard, a saloon, and the Great Basin Hotel. When a courthouse was needed, Curry again came to the rescue. He sold his Great Basin Hotel to the State of Nevada and it was used as a courthouse and legislature building into the 1870s. Because it was two miles out of town, Curry transported the legislators in Carson's first horse-drawn streetcar.

## The Early Years of a Capital City

A few years later the Warm Springs building was converted into a territorial prison that later became the Nevada State Prison (now closed) and Curry became its first warden. Prison labor used local sandstone to construct many of Carson City's early buildings. In 1870, a branch of the U.S. Mint was built in Carson and Curry was appointed its first superintendent. The mint processed the rich ore found in nearby mines. In rapid succession, Curry resigned that position, lost a bid to become Nevada's lieutenant governor, and built the huge stone roundhouse and shops for the Virginia & Truckee Railroad. This became America's richest short-line railroad, connecting the Comstock mines with mills on the Carson River. In 1873 Curry died of a stroke.

During those early years, Nevada's legislative business was punctuated by fistfights, vote-buying, and other acts of political corruption. In 1872, a State Capitol building, a large square stone structure with rafters made of hewn logs, was completed. That same year saw the completion of a 52-mile railroad linking Carson City to Virginia City, and other lines were to follow. In 1880, the population stood at about 8,000 people.

## As a New Century Dawned

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Carson City experienced boom and bust cycles common to the area. With the decline of the nearby mines, the population too began to decline. Railroad traffic through Carson City came to a halt when the Southern Pacific Railroad built a branch rail line that bypassed the city. That, and the departure of the rootless, restless miners, resulted in Carson City's settling down into a quiet community. In the late 1800s Carson City became home to the Stewart Indian School, which educated thousands of Native American children between 1890 and 1980, teaching them English and the ways of the white people.

In 1897, Carson City became the focus of worldwide attention when it became the site of a world heavyweight championship fight in which Britain Bob Fitzsimmons won over "Gentleman Jim" Corbett. A motion picture of the fight, the first of its kind, thrilled audiences, despite its bluish tint and flickering images. But soon after, between 1890 and 1900, the population of Carson City dropped from nearly 4,000 to just over 2,000 people.

## Carson City in the Twentieth Century

Carson City's fortunes gradually declined through World War I and with the coming of the worldwide economic downturn known as the Great Depression. By 1930, the population had declined to only about 1,500 citizens, a quarter of what it had been 50 years earlier. Then in 1931 state legislation was enacted that permitted gambling in the area and provided for speedy divorce and simple marriage procedures. These moves brought more tourists into the area.

Soon the population began to grow again, reaching 2,478 in 1940, doubling to 5,163 by 1960, then tripling that figure by 1970, when the population stood at 15,468 people. In 1969, Ormsby County was merged with Carson City, and government services were consolidated. The population doubled again in 1980 to 32,022 then jumped by 20,000 more in 2000. Today, the population hovers around 55,000.

As the capital of Nevada, this small city is economically thriving and serves as the power center of Nevada. The business climate is diverse and expansive and is driven by a highly educated workforce and prime open land for future development. Pleasant weather conditions throughout the year draw visitors to outdoor activities in addition to the wide array of entertainment options.

**Historical Information:** Nevada State Library and Archives, 100 N. Stewart St., Carson City, NV 89701-4285; telephone (775)684-3310 or (775)684-3360; fax (775)684-3330; email [nsref@clan.lib.nv.us](mailto:nsref@clan.lib.nv.us). State of Nevada, Department of Cultural Affairs, Division of Museums and History Office, 708 N. Curry St., Carson City, NV 89703; telephone (775)687-4340; fax (775)687-4333