

Matthews/Winters Park History

The Front Range, foothills, and adjacent eastern plains have repeatedly been folded, faulted, uplifted, and eroded, creating a dramatic backdrop for both the prehistoric and historic use of Matthews /Winters Park. From 12,000 to 7,000 years ago, Paleoindians followed wildlife and ripening vegetation from the plains to progressively higher elevations as far away as South, Middle and North Parks, west of the Front Range, and then wintered at lower elevations before beginning their annual cycle again. From 7,000 to about 2,000 years ago, semi-nomadic Archaic Indians settled in camps along the foothills, occupying open ridges, valleys and shelters among rock outcrops. They chose locations offering a combination of water, shelter, diversity of plant and animal resources, and unobstructed views. Small groups began to stay in one place long enough to construct shelters and cultivate plants.

The Plains Ceramic Stage began nearly 2,000 years ago and lasted until approximately 200 years ago, the first Indians to use of pottery and the bow and arrow. Although the Foothills region was used as hunting grounds by several Indian tribes, none had a strong hold on it and little resistance was offered to Anglo settlements.

When gold seekers first arrived in this remote part of the Kansas Territory, they felt the distant government ignored their needs. They wanted civil laws to safeguard any gold they found and criminal laws to punish murderers, robbers and claim jumpers. A constitutional convention met in June, 1859, to create either a state or territory to be called Jefferson. Although the gold region's population was estimated to be over 10,000, only 2,650 people voted that September, deciding to become a territory. A constitution was written October 24, 1859, and Robert W. Steele, a lawyer who had worked in the Nebraska legislature, was elected governor of the Jefferson Territory.

Dr. Joseph Casto founded the Town of Mount Vernon in 1859 on what is now Matthews/Winters Park. A lay preacher and land promoter, Casto came from Ohio to make his fortune in the gold rush. He reputedly grubstaked John H. Gregory on his prospect in Gregory Gulch, and later discovered the famous Casto lode near Central City. Casto hoped Mount Vernon would become a supply town for the mines. He advertised in the *Rocky Mountain News* and *The Golden Mountaineer* that building lots were available at no cost to anyone who would build on them.

Governor Steele settled in Mount Vernon, which became, de facto, the first state capital. As governor, Steele's salary was set at \$3,000 per year, but taxes were hard to collect, and Steele told his executive officers that they probably would not be paid. Having no official building, the new legislature met in various buildings, including the Mount Vernon Stage Stop, near Steele's residence in Mount Vernon. With no secure place for storing official papers, Steele carried them in the crown of his tall hat. Whenever he found himself with a quorum of representatives, he conducted an executive session.

In 1859, three cities within miles of one another, Mount Vernon, Golden City, and Golden Gate City, incorporated within the new Jefferson Territory, and the geographic boundaries of Jefferson County were drawn. The territorial capital moved from Mount Vernon to Golden during 1860, seduced by the offer of board at "\$6 a week, wood, lights, and hall free." By January of 1860 Mount Vernon boasted 44 registered voters. During that summer the

Reverend Mr. J. R. Dean opened a summer school in Mount Vernon, so children from surrounding areas could attend school while the roads were passable.

Mount Vernon boasted the first Wells Fargo Express stop, probably located in Matthews House and was the first opportunity to change horses. Morrison House served as a toll station for the Denver, Auraria and Colorado Wagon Road Company. Their toll road climbed Mount Vernon Canyon and then ran southwest to Bergen Park and Bradford Junction, and on to Park County. Travelers on it paid \$1.00 for their first span of horses and 25¢ for each additional span. The Denver, Idaho and Georgetown Express Company inaugurated service on June 20, 1867, via Mount Vernon. Wells Fargo Express originally offered twice-weekly service, but by 1869 provided daily service to Georgetown via Mount Vernon.

The Colorado Territory was legally formed February 28, 1861, and Governor Steele quietly stepped aside for the federally appointed governor, William Gilpin. Steele moved to Georgetown and discovered a rich silver vein, the Belmont Mine. The political and economic hub of Colorado shifted to Denver, and, like Arapahoe City and Golden Gate City, Mount Vernon dwindled away. Dr. Casto's Mount Vernon dream and his town had died.

"Chief" Colorow, a ubiquitous, half-Ute, half-Apache Indian held councils with his renegade band on the Hogback area of Matthews/Winters Park. Colorow loved biscuits and molasses, which pioneer housewives baked whenever he and his followers appeared in the area.

The Matthews/Winters area has been used since settlers arrived for agricultural production, ranching and mineral extraction. The Indians first mined clay from the Hogback for mud baths. Settlers mined the Hogback extensively for clay, sandstone, limestone, marble and coal. Clay mining continued in the area until the 1960s.

The 1885 U.S. Census for Mount Vernon lists William E. Matthews (farmer, age 65), his wife, Elizabeth F. (47), and their seven children, Thomas G. (13), Elizabeth (11), Rowland (9), John (8), Robert (6), Clara (3), and Rose (9 months). William and Elizabeth were born in England, and the children were born in Colorado. In 1888 William bought four full town lots and fractions of five other town lots (total value \$825.00) at a tax sale for \$315.00. Apparently William gradually enlarged his holdings, buying more land whenever possible.

In 1974 Nick Matthews, William's descendent, sold 353 acres to the new Jefferson County Open Space Program. In June, 1972, William Winters bought 520 acres of Hogback land, which he sold to Open Space in 1974. Open Space has contracted for several cultural studies, which document evidence of the prehistoric and historic uses of Matthews/Winters Park.