



2010 Reconnaissance Survey of Pillar of Fire Structures and Historical Context

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Introduction

The Pillar of Fire Campus / Westminster University has been an important part of the Westminster community. Westminster University is the namesake for the metropolitan suburb of Denver, and its long history is a mix of religion, education, and local urban lore, as well as being the last large tract of land of historic interest north of Denver. Being an area of high historical interest for Westminster, the area remains un-annexed, mainly under the jurisdiction of unincorporated Adams County. This has been a point of question, if the area is not part of Westminster why the interest? If it weren't for the early interest in Westminster University that sparked the growth of the village of Harris, Westminster probably would not be as a large and successful city as it is.

The historical context of this report is not to be taken as a comprehensive history of the property; it is to fill in areas of the history that have been not as fully researched previously, such as the early land speculation of the area.

Also it was not possible to closely inspect many structures. Therefore, the tax assessor's records were relied upon for dates and types of construction. These data may be in error and should not be relied upon without personal inspection of the subject structures.

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Historical Context

Westminster University Development and Associated Real Estate Speculation



Photo by J. Price / Old Town Drafting

At the conclusion of the Civil War the Presbyterian Church (USA) took a major interest in developing schools of higher education. It wasn't until the 1890s that an institution was planned for Colorado. The Presbyterian Synod voted that the new university was to be upon Crown Point, the highest point in Arapahoe County, near Harris, Colorado. This decision was in part due to the efforts of a New York philanthropist Henry J. Mayham (1851-1927). Mayham was able to conceptualize a university at the location after he purchased a portion of the land and convinced Rev. T.H. Hopkins that it was the best location. Soon after, Hopkins organized a Board of Trustees and incorporated Westminster University of Colorado, a popular Presbyterian Church name, named after the Westminster Confession. The original design of the University's main building was designed by architect E.B. Gregory in 1891, detailing gray stone from the Coal Creek area. Mayham asked his friend and famed New York architect Stanford White to redesign the building. White is most noted for designing the second Madison Square Garden, and several other Protestant and university buildings, as well as his scandalous death.

June 6, 1892, was the groundbreaking for Westminster University of Colorado, keynote speaker Rev. John S. McIntosh, chairman of the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, noted that "Denver would surely become the strategic crossroads of all of America." The same thought was being made by the railroad markets in Denver trying to bid for direct lines from the industry. Mayham seemed to use the groundbreaking as an attempt to start his land speculation in the area; several notable Coloradans began to start buying land on Crown Point. Notable landowners in the area in 1892 included Charles Boettcher, Daniels & Fisher, and Gates. All bought tracts in close proximity to the university. Mayham was also starting to speculate on the land west (Observatory Heights) and north (Westminster) of the university. The Observatory Addition, platted in 1892, anticipated a growing academic

community with streets named after great musicians, scientists and mathematicians such as Agassiz, Faraday and Mozart.

Other endeavors by Mayham were the Westminster Electric Railway that was to bring students in from Denver, and the Colorado Military College. Major advertising attempts were made in 1892 about 1893 openings of the University and Military College, with statements such as "HEALTHIEST SPOT IN COLORADO," and "...are among the wealthiest and most refined citizens of Denver."

The Silver Crash of 1893 affected the University as well as the rest of Colorado, grinding construction to a near stop. Another Presbyterian school, Presbyterian College of Del Norte "The College of the Southwest," added financial competition to Westminster University. The building sat in an uncompleted state for several years, while the Denver Presbytery and Mayham watched their investments decline. The concepts of the Westminster Electric Railroad, and Colorado Military College were abandoned, and focus was made on the University. The Presbytery stated in communications with the Secretary of the Board of Aid for Colleges and Academics that a sum of a half a million dollars would be needed to continue. Mayham had been working on gathering donations, the most notable was from Nathaniel "Maxcy" Tabor (son of Horace and Augusta Tabor) (1857-1929), who donated \$106,060 from Augusta's estate in 1895. Mayham was also selling lots around the university for \$1000, which also included free tuition to the school once completed. The mathematics of the lot sales did not add up to a total long-term amount for paying for the land and expenses of the university. During Tabor's involvements with the university an unidentified eastern woman donated \$100,000 with stipulations that the school be patterned after Princeton University. The Denver Times quoted Mayham that \$1,000,000 would be required to "bestow professors and finish the building, if the Princeton of the West was to ever become a reality."



N. Maxcy Tabor between 1886 and 1901 - DPL Western History Photo

In 1903 the college in Del Norte failed, and revived the interest in Westminster. The Presbyterian Church wanted to open a new institute; other sites that were under consideration at this time were Canon City, Pueblo, and Colorado Springs. Each of the cities made bid packages to entice the Church for the new school; Mayham, Whitney Newton, and Maxcy Tabor made a bid to the Presbyterian Synod of Colorado. Included in this package was the present Westminster building and power plant, 40 acres for the campus, and another 80 acres for a University Farm. The committee voted in favor of the Westminster campus, although more delays in titling held up the institution. Once again the University went up for vote at the Presbyterian Synod in May 1906, with the idea of locating a Presbyterian college elsewhere;

Pueblo was again on the list of possible locations. In a vote of 57 to 42, Westminster was selected again and Rev. Joseph Weaver was selected as the institution's first President. James Husted was selected as President of the Board of Trustees, being a businessman he was able to find financiers from the east coast, and work out arbitrations to resolve the questions about title ownership.

September 18, 1907, Westminster University finally opened, although the main building was still under construction; classes were temporarily moved to Central Presbyterian Church in Denver. Almost a year later on September 17, 1908, classes were first held in the campus main building in Westminster, and the occasion was marked with water being installed. Also opening at this time was Westminster Academy of Westminster University, a private high school. The Academy would change to a public school in 1915 under School District No. 9. The Academy rented rooms from the university. The University's financial books of 1908 showed a loss of \$18,000, about the same as the faculty's salaries. President Weaver went public with accusations against the school and filed a lawsuit, along with complaints of lack of monetary support, transportation and lodging. After being audited by a public accounting firm, Weaver and other rogue faculty members were dismissed, and Salem G. Pattison was installed as President of the University. The change of faculty, and improved sales of lots around the University (now being made by Rev. G.E. MacLean D.D. Iowa), the first building boom took place on the campus. The Pattison Bungalow (8300 Irving), built 1908-1909, was named for the new President, and was used as the President's House while the formal President's House was under construction. During 1910 completions of the President's House, Kirkwood Hall (female dorms at 8260 Irving St.), O'Gorman Boarding House (male dorms at 8198 Irving St.), and the Rudolph House (male dorms at 7884 Quitman St.) were all finished as boarding and occupied.

Beginning in 1910 the Westminster namesake was starting to be used in the local community, beginning with Westminster Grange 184 incorporated using the name, and then a year later the town of Harris incorporated as a city under the new name of Westminster. 1912 marked as an important date for the University as it announced that all debts were paid off, and Westminster University School of Law opened.

Pattison stepped down from the President position in 1914, and was replaced by William Anderson Phillips. After taking office Phillips and the Board of Trustees moved to make the school an all-male institution. Part of this decision was made to copy the policies of Princeton, as well as the claim that parents of students refused to send their sons to a co-ed school. This decision would prove to be detrimental to the school. The entrance of the United States into World War I in 1917 and the Selective Service Act of 1917 pulled male attendance away from the school. The doors closed on the main campus in 1917; however the Westminster University School of Medicine and Law would remain in operation. The Westminster University

School of Medicine would merge with the University of Colorado Medical School in 1928. The Westminster University Law School still survives in name under the University of Denver as the evening classes program. The Westminster University Law School changed its name to Westminster College of Law in 1956 and then merged with the University of Denver in 1957, with several concessions made; several of the board members and faculty were transferred, and the library had carried the name of the Westminster Law Library.

During the years of the closure a local farmer used the main building as a barn and chicken coop. Some locals at the time referred to the old university building as the largest chicken coop in the world. Westminster Academy stayed open attending classes at the Westminster Grange.

[Pillar of Fire Era](#)

On January 31, 1920, the Westminster University was purchased by the Pillar of Fire for \$40,000. Bishop Alma White, founder of the Pillar of Fire, negotiated for four months with the Presbyterian Church to finalize the deal. Refurbishing the building after it sat vacant for three years was quite an endeavor which is noted in Arthur Kent White's book *"Towering Landmark on Denver's Northern Horizon; "" ...to say that we found the college in a sorry state of neglect is to speak with the utmost restraint." The Pillar of Fire did have the college opened in the fall of 1920, as well as a preparatory school for School District No. 9. During the reconstruction of the main building the President's House and Kirkwood Hall both needed heavy refurbishment, and several new buildings were constructed. The Beulah Cottage (8352 Grove St.), Bethel Cottage (8354 Grove St.), and Hendrix Cottage (8350 Green Ct.) were purchased in 1920 from local farmers following the initial sale of the University; all three buildings are believed to have been built by the construction workers from Westminster University as housing while working on the project. Several other residences and buildings were completed within the decade. The U.S. Army approached Alma White with interest to purchase the property for twice the price paid for a branch of the Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center.*



[Alma White's grave at Fairmount Cemetery, Denver, CO.](#) Photo by J. Price

In 1926 the Inspector of the University of Colorado accredited the school as Belleview Schools, dropping the Westminster name that had been linked to the Presbyterians, although the colors of Westminster University, blue and orange were held onto, and are still used today.

Water Issues

The need for water plagued the Pillar of Fire as during the days of the University. The original well was intact inside of the Power Plant, but was heavily abused. In 1928 the Pillar of Fire purchased a drilling rig and a star drill. With the need for water being a huge necessity for the Pillar of Fire, the organization banked on finding water. At 1620 feet water at a steady flow was found, although it wasn't until 1932 that a pump was purchased. The iconic silver water tower was bought by Rev. Louis Wolfgang in 1928 from a government camp in Trinidad, CO. The tower had to be dismantled on site and then reassembled on the Pillar of Fire property. Water would continue to be a problem on the property, over the years two more wells would be drilled, and a retention pond would be constructed.

Radio Broadcasting

The Pillar of Fire's interest in radio broadcasting started in Colorado in 1927, and by 1928 it was transmitting under the call letters of KGEY as a Christian station. Alma and Ray White purchased a transmitter that produced 15 watts for \$1,250. This was during the radio boom of the 1920s, with a multitude of stations forming in the Denver area. March 9, 1928 KGEY was formally sold to Ray White and the Pillar of Fire from J.W. Dietz, an associate of the church. At the time of sale the call letters were changed to KPOF with the approval of the Federal Radio Commission of the sale and name change. Until 1946 KPOF shared its air time with KFKA, a station from Greeley, with KPOF transmitting radio shows on Sundays and weekday mornings. After 1946 the radio station moved to the Radio House (8275 King St.) on the Belleview campus and the first of three radio antennas was erected. The station has since been moved back to the University building, utilizing part of the first floor and basement. KPOF and its partner stations, WAWZ (Zarephath, New Jersey), and WAKW (Cincinnati, Ohio) stand as the oldest Christian radio station network in the world, as well as one of the first to broadcast in High Definition.

Latter Half of the 20th Century

From the 1940s to the 1970s, the Pillar of Fire started to purchase land around the campus as rentals and housing for employees, at the same time large quantities of land were lost. Some of these losses were due to eminent domain, which is not uncommon with such a large tract of land in a growing suburb. Such properties include Shaw Boulevard, Ranum High School, and the Mountain Terrace Apartments.

Since the 1960s a handful of structures have been improved, built or added to the property. The most notable change was to the University building, the center turret that can be seen in early

photographs was removed when the aluminum roof was installed circa 1962. Belleview Christian Schools built the Kathleen M. White Building in 1965; the "Green House" (3431 W. 83rd Ave.) was moved from 92nd and Huron in the 1970s. In the late 1970s two apartment buildings and an associated garage was constructed, with four units each. The Bruchez house moved, now known as the Alstadt House, from 10971 N. Federal Blvd. in 1990. 3065 W 82nd Ave was demolished in 2006; at one time it served as an elementary school in the early history of School District #50.

In 1992 the name "Westminster University" and the campus celebrated its 100th anniversary. That same year the National Registry of Historic Places added the Westminster University. With the centennial celebration, a rumor that a time capsule was placed into the structure at the time of construction, which has been customary for large educational structures; after several attempts this search has been abandoned.

Since 2000, some attempts have been made to develop the area north of the campus area known as "University Farm." Conceptual plans have been developed for consideration, but the Pillar of Fire has not reached agreement with developers. Given the ensuing depressed housing market, development of this area is not likely in the near future.

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Appendix

The following spreadsheet and numbered map supplements the architectural reconnaissance survey on the structures that belong to the Pillar of Fire, or have had a part in the history of Westminster University.
