



Westminster University 'Princeton of the West'

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by Albin Wagner)



Pleasant DeSpain, Sr. was the first settler in what is now Westminster. DeSpain was born in Kentucky and moved to Illinois. He brought his family to Denver in 1863. At the time of the Cherry Creek Flood, May 19, 1864, he was operating a ferry between Denver City and Auraria. In 1862 he claimed 160 acres north of what is now 76th Ave. between Lowell Blvd. and Federal Blvd. This stretch of 76th Ave. was known as DeSpain Lane. Here he and his five sons cleared the land, planted grain and apple and cherry trees, and built the first home in Westminster, a sod house. He also worked as a teamster, hauling timber from the Coal Creek area, hauling supplies to the miners in the gold fields, and as an excavating contractor.

The DeSpain family was joined in 1871 by another Midwesterner, Edward Bruce Bowles, who homesteaded south of the DeSpain farm. Bowles was a native of Springfield, Mo. He came west in 1863, driving a herd of cattle across the plains. He settled in Denver where he hauled freight, making 11 trips across the plains. The large, red brick house he built after his marriage in 1871 to Elizabeth Lougan of Ralston Creek still stands at 3924 W. 72nd Ave. The Westminster Historical Society made an unsuccessful attempt to buy the house in 1975. Bowles was a well-known breeder of fine horses. His interest in the community led him to donate funds to construct the DeSpain Junction depot when the Denver, Western and Pacific Railway (now the Colorado and Southern Railroad) was built through the area in 1881.

Before the railroad was completed, settlers reached Denver by crossing Clear Creek on a ferry operated approximately at Sheridan Blvd. Mountain Man Jim Baker operated a ferry near the same location during the Gold Rush. He lent his name to the Baker area.

DeSpain Junction became Harris Park, or just Harris, when a South Carolina real estate developer, C. J. Harris purchased land from tax burdened settlers and divided it into small farm tracts. To enhance the development, Harris planted the row of trees along Bradburn Blvd. (then called Connecticut Ave.). He built an elaborate three-story mansion on the corner of 80th Ave. and Bradburn Blvd.

Farmers along the rich Clear Creek Valley supplied much of Denver's produce. Some of the first dry land wheat in the area was grown by Fred J. Thompson in 1901. Thompson began farming part of what is now Highland Hills Golf Course in 1882.

Shaw Heights was covered by the Madison Orchards, owned by the Koontz family of Colorado National Bank.

In 1891, the year of the death of Pleasant DeSpain, Sr., the community was chosen by the Denver Presbytry as the site for a Presbyterian college. The name for the new school was "Westminster University," a popular name for Presbyterian institutions, named after the Westminster Confession. The cornerstone was laid on Crown Point, which commands a magnificent view of the mountains and the valley below. But the financial panic of 1893 and competition with the Presbyterian college in Del Norte, Colorado, "the College of the Southwest," delayed construction.

In 1903, after the failure of the College of the Southwest, new support was found for Westminster University, including \$106,060 from Augusta Tabor's estate and \$100,000 from an unidentified eastern woman, who stipulated the college be patterned after Princeton University, also founded by the Presbyterians. Construction was begun on the three-story main building designed by Stanford White, a well known New York architect, built from red sandstone quarried from the Red Rocks.

Classes opened September 14, 1907 in Central Presbyterian Church in Denver and were moved with some reluctance to Crown Point a year later. Sixty students assembled in the chapel to be addressed by James D. Husted, president of the Board of Trustees. The small college, Husted said, was destined to become the "Princeton of the West."

To help promote the university, the college officials formed the Westminster Realty Co., which subdivided part of the school's land to sell as home sites.

A growing need for an adequate water system for the community of Harris, brought 60 residents to petition the county court on February 24, 1911 to set a special election for incorporation of the community as the town of Westminster, in honor of the university. Only 36 residents voted in the election held April 14, 1911. Six were opposed to incorporation.

Westminster University expanded in 1912, establishing a law school in Denver. The law school educated many prominent Colorado attorneys, judges and political figures until it finally merged with the University of Denver in 1957. Many students from Denver attended Westminster University, commuting on the Denver and interurban electric railroad. A special spur was built up the hill to the college, but was later abandoned.

In 1915 the Board of Trustees decided to change the school to an all-male college. The decision was very inopportune. World War I emptied the halls of the university of all its men, and the institution was forced to close its doors in 1917.

The college buildings were rented to a farmer who lived in one wing of the castle-like main building and used the basement as a chicken house.

The Pillar of Fire Church, a Pentecostal denomination, purchased the property from the Board of Trustees in January, 1920. The church established a junior college and bible seminary there, which after 1925 was called Belleview College. The campus of the school was frequently used for meetings of the Ku Klux Klan during its hey-day in Denver, and residents recall burning crosses high on the hill.

Today Westminster covers a large area in Adams and Jefferson counties with an estimated population of 21,600 in 1976. In 1977, the Community College of Denver opened their new North Campus just west of Federal Blvd. on 112th Ave. in Westminster. The 1,000 foot long building is one of the world's largest solar-heated facilities. Westminster is, once more, a "college town." The Community College Of Denver was founded in 1967. It also has campuses at Red Rocks and the Auraria Higher Education Complex in downtown Denver. The former North Campus at 1001 E. 62nd Ave. was established in 1968.

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