

FIRST DRAFT

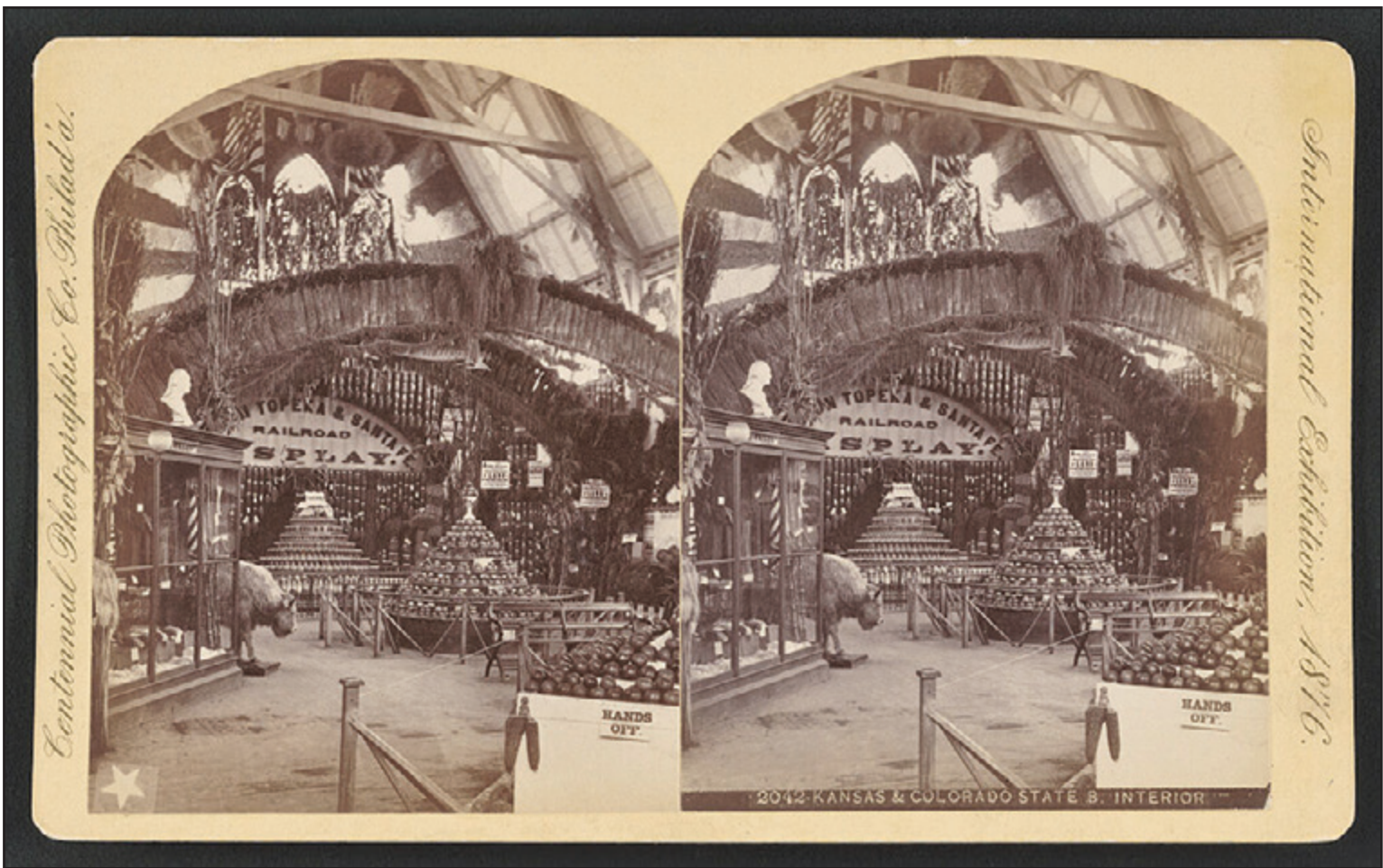
PATH TO STATEHOOD

Colorado becoming more than a territory required overcoming opposition from both out of state and within

When Congress was considering whether to allow Colorado Territory to become a state in the 1870s, there were plenty of naysayers. One Philadelphia newspaper argued that the territory of Colorado only “consists of Denver, the Kansas-Pacific Railway, and scenery. The mineral resources of Colorado exist in the imagination. The agricultural resources do not exist at all.” Others complained that Colorado’s population was too small to justify statehood. Just a few days before Congress passed the Colorado Statehood Enabling Act in March 1875, the Cincinnati Enquirer wrote: “There is no sense, there is no justice, in giving a few thousand miners who are transiently located in the mines of Colorado a State authority with two Senators, the same as New York and Ohio.”



BOB SILBERNAGEL



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Even before it officially became a state, Colorado joined with Kansas to create an exhibition at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition beginning in March 1876. The exhibit showcased some of the products and wildlife of Colorado and Kansas.

along Colorado’s Front Range on July 4, to celebrate both the centennial of the United States and Colorado’s impending statehood.

When President Grant signed the proclamation officially making Colorado a state on Aug. 1, 1876, it didn’t provoke the same celebration. Even so, it was that signature with the presidential pen through which Colorado officially became the 38th state in the United States.

It was only 18 years earlier that gold had been discovered at Cherry Creek, and the rush to Colorado began. Yet, by 1876, there had already been multiple attempts to make what was initially called the Pike’s Peak Region into a state.

Originally part of Kansas Territory, there were elections held in the gold-boom region as early as 1859 to create a separate territory that could then move to become a state. At first it was to be called Jefferson Territory, in honor of our third president, then Idaho Territory. Finally, the name Colorado Territory was agreed upon, and Congress approved it as a separate territory in 1861.

The first proposal for statehood came in 1859, even before Colorado became its own territory, when a group of miners and others organized a meeting to draft a constitution for the proposed State of Jefferson. An election was held along Colorado’s Front Range, but the measure was overwhelmingly defeated.

The next attempt came in 1864, during the Civil War,

when Republicans were looking for more electoral votes to help re-elect Abraham Lincoln. That proposal was rejected by voters in Colorado, however, especially in the southern part of the state. Many voters were wary of the taxation requirements statehood would bring.

Attempts to win statehood for Colorado were made again in 1865 and 1866, but President Andrew Johnson vetoed the first effort, and the U.S. Senate rejected the second one. Johnson also rejected a subsequent attempt in 1867. And, although bills for Colorado statehood were introduced in 1868, there was little support for them in Congress.

When President Grant replaced Johnson in 1869, there were renewed efforts for Colorado statehood. They stalled, however, in part because Territorial Gov. Edward McCook, a Civil War friend of Grant’s, was embroiled in multiple controversies and scandals.

When Grant agreed to remove McCook and replace him with John Routt, congressional opposition to Colorado statehood declined significantly. Routt became the last territorial governor of Colorado and the first governor of the state of Colorado.

Fifty years after Grant issued his proclamation making Colorado a state, Colorado History Magazine celebrated the anniversary with an issue devoted to the Centennial State’s early history. A half-dozen authors recounted the story of how Colorado became a state,

and extolled the many virtues of the state.

One of those writers was Edward D. Foster, who in 1926 was Commissioner of the Colorado State Board of Immigration. Foster dismissed as unimportant early inhabitants such as Native Americans and Hispanics who were in the state prior to the discovery of gold in 1858. It was the American settlers who made Colorado into a state, he suggested.

“Gold was the magnet which brought the first permanent population to the territory, and upon the heels of increased population followed agricultural and industrial development,” he wrote. Agriculture was Colorado’s number one industry in 1926, with crops, livestock and poultry production totaling was more than \$200 million annually.

Gold and the production of other minerals were still important, but coal mining had become equally critical to the state’s economy, Foster noted. Furthermore, oil had become “second only to gold” in its appeal to the public, and production was in millions of barrels a year.

But the real bonanza in oil production was awaiting development on Colorado’s Western Slope, Foster said. In 1926, oil shale was “destined for immediate development” and according to conservative estimates the oil shale fields in Colorado contained “not less than 67 billion barrels of crude oil.”

However, a different author in the August 1926 edition

of The Colorado Magazine recognized another important industry that was developing in the state: tourism. And he refuted some of the criticisms from a half century earlier.

Theodore F. Van Wagenen was a mining engineer who moved to Colorado in 1871, and had been present when statehood was approved.

“We can fairly point with satisfaction to what Colorado has accomplished during its half century of life,” Van Wagenen wrote. He listed population growth and economic accomplishments from mining, agriculture and industry.

Then he noted that Colorado’s scenic landscape, which was once derided as a “mountainous and forbidding region” by Easterners “has become one of the great summer playgrounds of the continent.” By 1926, people from the East were coming to Colorado in “ever increasing thousands” to enjoy the state’s mountains and its scenery, he noted.

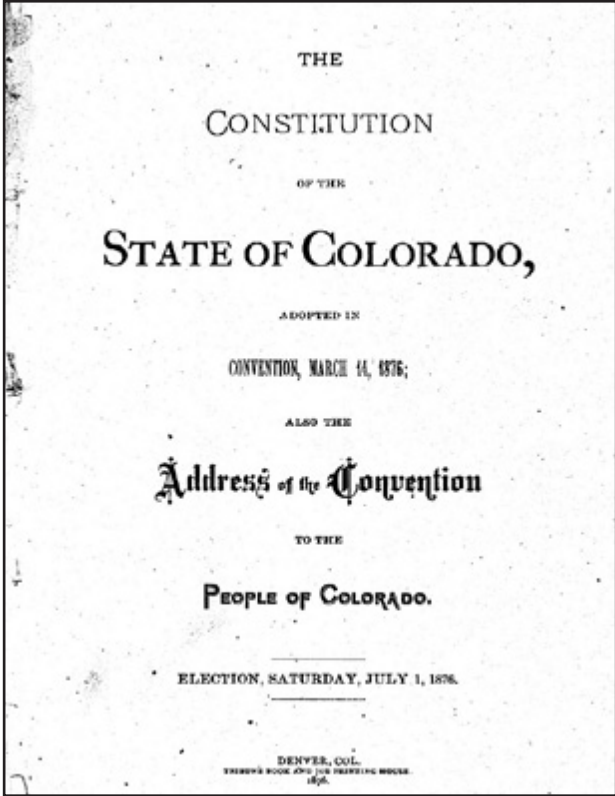
Sources: Early newspaper articles at www.newspapers.com; The Colorado Magazine, August 1926; “The Rocky Road to Statehood: Colorado Statehood and the Contested Election of 1876,” by Matt Bergh and Susan Shulten, DU Undergraduate Research Journal Archive, Vol. 5, Issue 1, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/duurj/vol5/iss1/6>; “Seventeen Years to Statehood,” by Katherine Mercier, The Colorado Magazine, July 28, 2026.

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President Ulysses S. Grant, who signed the proclamation on Aug. 1, 1876, making Colorado a state.



COLORADO STATE ARCHIVES

The cover of the original Colorado Constitution, which was approved by voters in Colorado Territory on July 1, 1876, making it possible for Colorado to become a state.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

John L. Routt served as the last governor of Colorado Territory and became the first governor of the state of Colorado.