

University of Northern Colorado

## Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC

---

Bent's Old Fort

Colorado National Parks

---

### State Looks at Its self in a New Mirror

New York Times

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/beol>

---

# A State Looks at Itself in a New Mirror

DENVER — An East Coast visitor's first reaction, provincially enough, has to be skepticism: does Colorado even have that much history?

Enough history to justify a \$110 million museum — the History Colorado Center

**EDWARD  
ROTHSTEIN**

— which is opening on Saturday, with plans for 40,000 square feet of exhibitions costing an additional \$33 million, state-of-the-art technological displays, a research center and archival

storage for over 15 million items, including more than 750,000 photographs and 200,000 artifacts?

The state is under 140 years old, and even if you include the ancient cliff dwellings preserved in Mesa Verde National Park, there is little documented history before the incursion of outsiders in the 18th century.

Yet this building, designed by the Colorado architect David Tryba of Tryba Architects, is meant to be as monumental as the museum's ambition.

It is built in the shape of Colorado (rectangular) with interior surfaces including polished Colorado sandstone, Colorado Douglas fir and Colorado pine. Just beyond the lobby, the terrazzo floor of an immense central atrium is devoted to the Colorado artist Steven Weitzman's 40-by-60-foot map portraying the state's terrain as seen from 400 miles up in space. Reaching two stories above the map is a "dynamic media wall," with 132 interlocking LCD screens showing a 10,000-year video timeline of Colorado history that unfolds over 20 minutes.

Perhaps the museum doth protest its Colorado-like immensity too much. Many events on that timeline are hardly Rocky Mountain-size milestones: the opening of the Coors Brewery (1873); the

*Continued on Page 9*

Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**History Colorado Center** *A time machine stands on Steven Weitzman's 40-by-60-foot state map in the central atrium of this museum in Denver.*

# Colorado Looks at Itself in a New Mirror, Mixing Irreverence and Boosterism

From First Arts Page

declaration of the Columbine as the state flower (1899); the pardoning of a convicted cannibal, Alfred Packer (1901); the town of Longmont's starting "Pumpkin Pie Days" and serving 10,000 pies (1908); and the naming of one Phil McCarty as Colorado State Liar (1933). Early on we learn about Shep the Turnpike Dog, a stray who, beginning in 1951, was so "beloved by drivers on the Denver-Boulder turnpike" that they supported him with donations.

It is as if we had landed in a small town, folksily celebrating its exaggerated achievements. But there are winks here that let us know that Kathryn Hill, the museum's chief operating officer, and the state historian, William J. Convery, its director of exhibits, are being a bit playful. (The exhibitions were developed by Janet A. Kamien, and the designers include Andrew Merriell & Associates.)

That means that Colorado pratfalls are featured along with Colorado eccentricities. In 1896 the town of Leadville hired an architect to build a palace out of 5,000 tons of ice: it melted prematurely and was too expensive to rebuild. In 1946 the town of Uranium sensed a golden future mining uranium-238: it had to be evacuated because of radiation poisoning. Another town, Keota, the subject of a 5,000-square-foot exhibition here, became a model of small-town community life after the 1880s: it thrived scarcely 40 years before beginning a slide into oblivion.

Clearly, irreverence is mixed with Colorado boosterism, and the effect grows more solemn as you proceed. The institution is actually the latest incarnation of a series of museums created by the State Historical Society of

The History Colorado Center opens on Saturday in Denver; [historycoloradocenter.org](http://historycoloradocenter.org).

Colorado (now renamed History Colorado), which was founded in 1879.

In some ways the new museum retains the almost devotional view toward its surroundings that historical societies have typically nourished. In other ways, it undercuts and revises that role.

Indeed, this museum's predecessor proved disappointing, attracting no local audience of any significance beyond school trips. So the decision was made to rethink and reshape history for a new generation in a new building. Reconsiderations and reinventions have been undertaken by other historical societies in recent years (including in New York), though this one is unusually ambitious in scale.

It includes a fervent embrace of new technologies. Stationed on that floor map, for example, are two weighty pieces of H. G. Wellsian sci-fi machinery. They are called time machines, and if they are slid across the map to geographical hot points, they offer a wildly varying historical selection of videos and narratives.

One spot yields a song about "Baby Doe," a mining-era gold digger who ultimately died a crazed derelict. Another yields a profile of a 1910 doctor — a resolute black woman, Justina Ford — who was prevented from working in hospitals because of her race but became a local celebrity delivering babies in her home.

In the Keota exhibition we learn that the town had "All the things that matter. Freedom. Independence. Opportunity. Community." But it didn't have Technology, and now it does. There are a video screen, on which you read an early-20th-century version of a Montgomery Ward catalog, and a reproduction of a Model T, in which you sit and feel the rumble as a video screen shows you rocking over a dirt road on the grassy plains.

But at the central exhibition

Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Above, a worker walking on the huge map of Colorado. Left, the skier Johnny Spillane on a ski jump simulator that the public can balance on.

here, "Colorado Stories," you begin to see how the historical-society model is evolving. Accounts are told about each of eight locations, showing the state's inhabitants "at their best — and worst."

The displays include an evocation of Bent's Fort, a frontier trading post in the 1830s and '40s,

where Mexicans, Americans and American Indians mingled and traded goods; a mock 1880 silver mine, with sound effects and video; and a survey of Colorado skiing, culminating in a virtual ski jump in which a visitor can balance on mock skies and view on screen the world as seen from the leap.

These galleries are of mixed effect. (The fort example is peculiarly difficult to follow.) But their celebratory tone is eclipsed by the exhibition's darker themes.

One particularly informative section surveys the history of racism in Colorado, where the Ku Klux Klan "grew nearly as powerful" as in the South, voting its allies into the governor's mansion and state legislature in 1922. That same year, as if in response, black entrepreneurs from Denver opened Lincoln Hills as a resort in the Rockies, where over the next 40 years black Coloradans, denied access elsewhere, vacationed and attended summer camps.

In another story, a typical barracks is reproduced from the Amache Internment Camp in Granada, Colo., one of the camps where Japanese-American citizens were compelled to stay during World War II.

Another exhibit focuses on the chilling Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, in which American soldiers killed 150 Cheyenne and Arapaho villagers, mostly women and children. This display is preceded by a warning of upsetting material, and indeed, the recently discovered letters of two witnesses are reproduced here, making the era's Congressional condemnation of the killings as foul and cruel seem like understatements.

There is also a pedagogical game in which visitors learn about various confrontations of cultures over 300 years, in which differing ideas of territory and rights came into conflict.

And finally there is an uninformed homage to the state's Ute

Indians, which, after the fashion of most exhibitions mounted about contemporary Indians, favors piety and praise over history.

That failing, though, indicates a wider problem: beyond the sense of wrongs done, we actually don't get a full sense of context in any of the examples. And we are unable to investigate more deeply. In the Sand Creek Massacre display, for example, much white wall space is meant as a kind of homage, but instead, it makes a visitor aware of how many gaps are left. What is the history of conflict between the government and tribes in Colorado? What were the treaties and the betrayals? What effect did the massacre have? We have to turn to books to get a deeper understanding.

We have to do the same to get an overall picture of Colorado history. It is as if replacing historical narrative with thematic explorations had eliminated the need to reconstruct that narrative so it might incorporate the failings of the past.

And here is a museum with an astonishingly large collection, but artifacts scarcely appear. A museum official explained that this was partly because of the exigencies of the move and the recent completion of a modernized archive.

It is possible that in the next two phases of development (which will at least double the current exhibition space), the museum's style will evolve. Certainly a draft of a 2013 show exploring water and culture in Colorado history suggests that it will have greater depth and resonance than the stories now on display.

But in the meantime, put aside provincialism. Colorado clearly has enough history to justify such a center. And enough history to make a visitor wish that the exploration were more complete and less ready to offer revision without real reinterpretation.