

# The City of Durango's buildings: A quick historical tour guide

Revised 10/10/19, by Todd Ellison, City Clerk's Office

**Carnegie Building:** Durango's small original Carnegie Public Library building at 1188 East 2nd Avenue was completed in 1907, at a total cost \$17,500, including \$15,000 donated by Andrew Carnegie.



Railroad tycoon General William J. Palmer, whose railroad company basically established Durango, donated the land.

These two images are on postcards that we

have dated to circa 1907 to 1914. The building shown is the quarter of the current Carnegie where (upstairs) the City Clerk's records team works on scanning and indexing permanent records of the

City. The building suffered a 1996 addition; a few individuals debate whether the new entrance addition in 1992/93 is also regrettable (architecturally) or a worthy addition to this strongly built original structure.



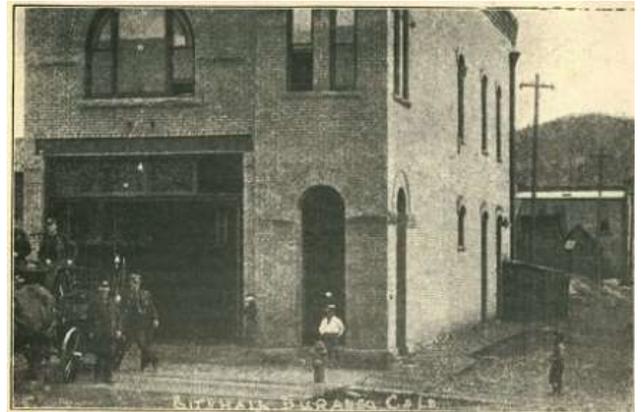
**City Hall:** See the bulletin board to the right of the front door? The City started posting agendas and other notices on a board there in December of 1913. On 10/18/2011, the City named the plaza in front of City Hall after Robert F. "Bob" Ledger, Jr., who was the City Manager for 25 years ending in 2007. The current City

Hall building was built in 1963 and expanded toward 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue in 1997. Its two walls are composed of two layers of brick with no insulation. The original City Hall, pictured here at the turn of the previous century, housed the fire department (including the pair of horses and the fire wagon they pulled) downstairs, City jail in the back, and



City offices and sleeping quarters for the

"fire boys" and their bedbugs upstairs. On 1/21/1913, Alderman Meuser of the City Hall and Jail Committee reported that the radiator in the **City Jail** had been lowered, plumbing work repaired (the pipes had frozen and burst), part of the floor re-laid, and that "the jail was now more in-



habitable." The 7/1/1910 minutes recommended a bread and water diet for certain prisoners who were undesirable citizens, convicted and fined in the police court, until they paid off their fines by doing street work for the City.

The south parking lot for City employees was created in October of 1990 when Hicks House Movers moved the "Old Willis House" from that lot to its new location at 1033 Avenida del Sol. (Here it is passing under a low-hanging wire.) The house became the new Durango community shelter, "a haven for 20 homeless people."



The mid-1890s photo on the right shows Durango's firefighting crew (2 men and 2 horses) in front of the original City Hall/ fire house with the George Kephart fire wagon. Mr. Kephart was the mayor from 1892 to 4/15/1895. On 7/19/1898, Council changed the wagon's name to the William J. Bryan, in honor of the American orator and politician who was a promoter of "Free Silver" and was a force in the populist wing of the Democratic Party, under whose auspices he ran for US President in 1896, 1900 and 1908.



**Durango Police Station:** This building at 990 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue once was called the Safety Building when it housed the Police and Fire Department, the Communications Center (upstairs), and Municipal Court. The photo on right was shortly before the Durango Fire Department moved to its current downtown station on the upriver side of the back of River City Hall in 1982.



**Transit Center:** The City opened this centrally located LEED-certified building (affectionately known as the glass castle) on 8/14/2009, 12 months after the groundbreaking. The architect was Dean Brookie, who was Mayor of Durango for the year beginning in the spring of 2015. *[To reach the next site, cross the river on the 9<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge and angle over to the right on Roosa Avenue to make a tight quick left up Cemetery Road.]*

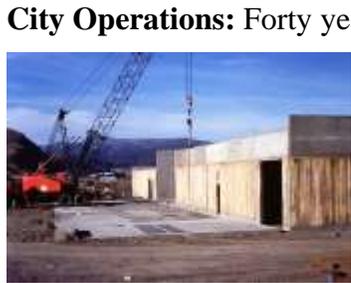
**Greenmount Cemetery:** The City established this 40-acre cemetery (called Green Mound Cemetery at first) in 1886-1887 by Ordinances 37 and 38. The 11/17/1886 Council minutes mention that the City had bought the plot of ground for the cemetery for \$300. (Today an adult grave costs \$700; an infant grave is \$400.) There are more than 12,000 graves, back to 1857; sections are for the Elks, Catholics, Masons, veterans, et al.

**Recycle Center:** In 1989 City Council started to adopt a City recycling program. By 2010, the City was moving forward with a \$3.2 million plan to expand this at the Durango Tech Center (uphill from US 160 West). According to a *Durango Herald* article dated 9/28/1989, the Public Works Department's proposal for the 1990 budget estimated that the annual operation would cost \$38,130; the recycled material the City collected was expected (or shall we say hoped?) to bring in \$30,838 per year (gotta love those precise numbers) and was anticipated to "save the City about \$5,720 a year from the decrease in trash hauled to the landfill." In other words, the bottom line was that recycling would only cost the City \$1,572 per year. As it turns out, the budgeted cost of recycling for the City for 2016 is \$866,730, which is 23 times the original 1990 annual cost estimate. *[Return to Camino del Rio, heading south past Smelter Mountain—site of enrichment of uranium for (possibly) the bombing of Japan, and during the Cold War.]*

**Wastewater Treatment Plant:** Originally called the **Sewage Treatment Plant**; the City has increasingly sanitized the name of the facility: its next incarnation (completed Oct. 2019, the City's most costly capital improvement project ever, at a scaled-back \$68 million) is the **Santa Rita Water Reclamation Facility**. But first, some history. It was not until 2003 that the City adopted an ordinance regarding illegal discharges into the municipal sewer system. Myrle Cornelius (mayor of Durango, 1975-76 and 1978-79) recalled the sign in Durango bathrooms in the early days: "Please flush the toilet; Aztec needs the water." At its 12/18/1934 meeting City Council considered a letter from the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works in Denver directing the City to build a sewage treatment plant—estimated to cost \$50,000. The City responded by asking for a deferral until it could afford such a project, because Council had no authority to issue bonds without a vote by the citizens. The City calculated that if it were to have called for such a vote at that time the measure would most certainly fail. Over the next four years the City considered using federal government loans to build both a sewage treatment plant and a water filtration plant. Finally, on 5/21/1940, Council approved a contract with an engineer in Denver to draw up plans and specifications for a sewage treatment plant; it (or rather, *they*) were built by 1942. On 10/27/1942, the City Manager informed Council



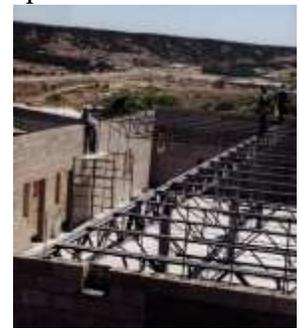
that City sewage would be turned into the new sewage treatment plants on Monday 11/2/1942, and that the City would be placing half-page advertisements in the *Aztec Independent-Review* and the *Farmington Times Hustler* announcing that after so long a time Durango had at last completed its sewage disposal plants and would not be dumping any more raw sewage into the Animas River. All was not perfume and roses yet, however: on 8/7/1945 Council heard complaints about an obnoxious odor from the North Side sewage treatment plant, and informed the public that this smell would prevail for some time yet. By 11/5/1957 Council was discussing the proposed (and eventually built) sewage treatment plant site south of the Animas River at the site of a previous Hispanic community called Santa Rita. The continued odor was a large cause of voter acceptance of the indebtedness the City has incurred to renovate/expand/replace the “Water Reclamation Facility” (pictured here in Oct. 1989).



**City Operations:** Forty years ago, the City was planning to build the City service center building in Bodo Industrial Park. The City Building Inspector described the proposed 14,000sf \$215,000 concrete tilt-up building (105 Sawyer Drive, kitty-corner across the highway from the Durango Mall) to Council at its regular meeting on May 5, 1976. City staff thought a concrete building would last longer than one made of metal and would have better insulating qualities. The low bidder, which had proposed a metal building, questioned the ethics and legality of giving the bid to a higher bidder even though the bid proposal stated that the contract would be awarded to the lowest bidder. Council tabled the matter until it could gain “a better understanding of what transpired.”

By the way (while you’re in Bodo): did you know? The City of Durango operated a **sanitary landfill** [dump] at Bodo from 1967 until around 1987. A resolution dated 8/3/1982 documents this aspect of the City’s history.

**911 Communications Center:** This solid building at 221 Turner Drive near the top of Bodo Park was constructed for the City in 1999 (picture on right).



**Durango Gymnastics:** This repurposed concrete-walled building near the main entrance to Bodo Park (144 Bodo Drive) is a hopping place for young gymnasts. The City spent \$2.1M on it; it opened in January 2017.

*[To reach the next site, drive south on Camino del Rio, turn right onto College Drive and up Goeglein Gulch and past the Hillcrest Golf Course—the City owns that land and leases it to the Hillcrest Golf Club. The Durango Municipal Airport used to be here; this is where Will Rogers and Wiley Post landed on their quick visit to Durango on their way to fly to Asia, but crashed and died in Alaska.]*

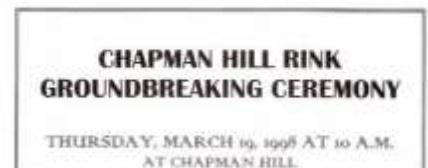
**Water Treatment Plant:** *[Turn right onto County Road 239 to reach the gate—which is locked at all times.]* The City opened this facility, on a prominent location overlooking the Hillcrest Golf Course, in 1956. Dale



Rea (then of Englewood) was the consulting engineer. He later joined City staff. He was the first President of Fort Lewis College from 1949 until 1962, when he resigned amidst allegations related to his purchase of a 1951 surplus college truck at a public sale. The clock tower at the center of campus was built in his memory. *[Continue north on North College Drive; turn left onto Florida Avenue.]*



**Chapman Hill Ski Area and Ice Rink:** This ski hill has ties with the 10th Mountain Division; during World War II the US Army trained troops for winter survival and skiing at Camp Hale, near Leadville and Tennessee Pass. Some of the ski troopers who returned to Colorado after the War were instrumental in developing the state’s ski industry. The equipment for running the rope tow was donated from Camp Hale after the War. The ice rink was dedicated on 3/19/1998—but there had been outdoor skating in the area for a long time before that. After thorny problems regarding the originally poured concrete slab for the floor of the rink, it was functional by the end of 1999.



As you reach East 3rd Avenue (“the Boulevard”—patterned after the similar tree-lined avenue in General Palmer’s Colorado Springs), on your right is the **Hood Mortuary**, one block beyond the Smiley Building. **A. F. Hood**, the undertaker and original owner of that mortuary, became the first City Manager of the City of Durango in July of 1915 when the City became one of the first in the nation to adopt the City Council/City Manager form of government. On your left, behind the tennis courts across the street, is the City’s **Mason Center**, which is now facing an uncertain future of demolition or change of use due to the City’s 2015 purchase of a building in Bodo Park that was renovated and is now the City’s new gymnastics center.

*[Turn right onto 12<sup>th</sup> Street to head north on Main Avenue, across the bridge.]* On your way north to the new library from the Mason Center you will pass the City’s **Rotary Park** gazebo at the conjunction of Main, the river, 15th Street, East 2nd Avenue and the Animas River Trail. The City’s **Service Center** used to be here. City Council chose this location for a band shell and a park at its meeting on 4/7/1981.

**Durango Public Library** *[turn right onto Park Avenue]*: October 25, 2008 was the last day of service in the beloved but cramped old Carnegie Library. City voters approved a half-cent sales tax increase in 2005 to fund the Durango Public Library and parks and open space. In 2006, they approved \$15.9 million in sales and use tax revenue bonds to fund site purchase and construction of new Durango Public Library at 1900 East 3rd Avenue. The opening ceremony for the new building (at the former site of Mercy Hospital) was held on 12/1/2008. Costing over \$13.3 million, the building was placed in service on 8/31/2008. By the way, did you know the City didn’t create a Library Department until 1987? Until then the Public Library was rather its own entity, with its own Board of Trustees.

As you continue north on Main you enter the **former Town of Animas City**. Until 1948, it was a separate city (first settled in about 1860 by gold miners, then re-established in the 1870s and incorporated in 1878. Its southern boundary was north of Junction Street, and it extended northward to 37th Street. In October of 1947 citizens of the town of Animas City and the City of Durango voted to unite the two municipalities. Animas City needed Durango’s water supply system, and Durango needed access to the Town’s sewage treatment plant (which is no longer in existence). 294 citizens of Animas City (population 500) voted for the annexation (114 opposed). By 1948 Animas City had been officially absorbed into Durango.

**Durango Community Recreation Center** (this is just beyond the County Fairgrounds, which was the site of the first use of the photo-finish to record the winner of a horserace): In the 1999 City election, voters approved (by a margin of just 208 votes) a half-cent sales tax increase to fund the Durango Community Recreation Center and parks and open space. The City spent more than \$34M on the Recreation Center and the Animas River Trail between 2002 and 2013 (according to a 6/28/2014 *Durango Herald* article), after spending \$15.4M (not including interest on the debt) to build the Rec Center. The groundbreaking ceremony was a year later (4/14/2000)—on ground the City has leased from La Plata County at the north end of the Fairgrounds for 99 years. *[Head back south; you’ll turn right onto Camino del Rio after crossing the river.]* **Brookside Park**, on your right, once was a trailer park for vacationing tourists. In 1940, it was known as the City Camp grounds. The City paid the Durango Railway & Realty Co. \$1,500 for the park land in 1919.

**River City Hall**: The City bought this property in 1983. It previously was the home of the La Plata Electric Company (and that company’s predecessor, the Colorado Ute Electric Association). The City also bought the adjacent parcel that includes the old Western Colorado Power Company (WCPC) steam power plant (the City still owns it). Due to L. L. Nunn’s pioneering development of the use of alternating current at the water-powered Ames power plant near Telluride in 1881, Durango, along with other southwestern Colorado towns, was one of the first in the nation to have city lights (they debated whether to go with gas or electric, and chose electric). By 1937, the WCPC was making good progress bringing electricity to this corner of the state.

**Community Development/Planning** uses the front of this building at 1235 Camino del Rio. Both the presence and the lack of planning in some areas, especially at the start, has shaped Durango. The land between the railroad and the river was not part of the original Durango town site and quickly became a no-man’s land with squatters and illegal activities. The town itself, on the other hand, was planned carefully, using the natural features and slopes of the valley. Durango was laid out in tiers: Main Avenue (then named 1<sup>st</sup> Street) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue were intended to be the business streets, though the focus became Main. 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue would have the government buildings and the high school. 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue (initially named The Boulevard) would have the residences and the churches.

**We hope you enjoyed this historical tour of some of the City’s properties. There’s much more—including the City’s historic parks. Please email your comments and suggestions to [clerk@durangogov.org](mailto:clerk@durangogov.org)**