

The Nathan Meeker Home in Greeley, Colorado

Did you know the area near Lincoln Park in Greeley has some of the city's oldest buildings including a two-story 132 year-old "experimental" house made of adobe bricks? This is the story of that house, which is known today as the 1870 Meeker Home Museum at 1324 A9" Avenue.

Nathan Meeker, the agricultural editor of The New York Tribune, wanted to start a new town in "the West. He started a company called the Union Colony; and recruited educated and hardworking people who paid \$155 to join. In the spring of 1870, Mr. Meeker used the money collected from the members to buy fertile land lying between the Cache la Poudre and South Platte Rivers in northern Colorado. The Union Colonists arrived in April and May and in the summer of 1870 began building the first stores and homes. People complained Greeley looked like the Great American Desert and griped about Colorado's dry climate. A young mother, Annie M. Green, arrived with her husband and two young children. She said, "After securing several lots in the new town, we pitched our tent which was almost daily blown to the ground."

The cottonwoods growing along the Cache la Poudre River at Island Grove Park were the only trees in town. With no lumberyards or brick factories, building materials were expensive as they had to be shipped to Greeley via the railroad from big cities in the East. Some, like Annie Green, lived in stuffy, dusty tents and got very hot, tired, thirsty, and discouraged at

first. Those who had more money bought small one-story frame homes in Evans owned by Denver - Pacific Railroad workers who had lived there while building the railroad from Cheyenne to Denver. Skids were put under the houses and pulled by horse teams from Evans to Greeley or taken apart and the lumber recycled into "new" buildings.

With winter coming, many worried about the shortage of cheap lumber, bricks, and other building materials. However, Mr. Meeker had a solution. He reminded the colonists that the fertile soil beneath their feet could be used for building houses as well as growing potatoes and cabbages. He had read about the American West, and knew the Hispanic people, Pueblo Indians, the Mormons in Salt Lake City, and even the fur traders in Weld County had constructed very good dwellings and forts of adobe. The word, "adobe" comes from a verb in the Spanish language, "adobar" which means "to plaster." Soil with a high clay content was mixed in shallow pits with manure, straw, and water and shoveled into wooden molds to make building bricks or blocks. As the "adobes" began to dry, they would be tapped out of the molds and set out in the hot Colorado sun to finish drying. Adobe houses were inexpensive, strong, and well insulated.

Ralph Meeker said his father spent all his savings and then borrowed money to purchase a large corner lot on the outskirts of town to build a big adobe home as an experiment. A carpenter named Arthur Hotchkiss built the house for \$6,000. Mr. Meeker, his wife, Arvilla, and daughters Rozene, Mary, and Josephine lived in a tiny makeshift shed at the back the property

and watched as their new residence became the tallest house in Greeley. It had two parlors and a kitchen on the first floor, and three bedrooms on the second floor. There was a cellar under the kitchen for storing perishable foods. Mr. Meeker dug a well just a few feet from the kitchen door, but the water in it wasn't pure and clear like the water in Greeley today. It smelled badly of sulphur. A frame barn and outhouse were built at the far northeast corner of the property.

Mr. Meeker later built a small adobe office building in downtown Greeley for his new business, *The Greeley Tribune* newspaper.

From the windows of the west bedrooms on the second floor, the Meekers had a spectacular view of Long's Peak and the Rocky Mountains. They liked their new home and spent a lot of time planting trees, gardens, and grass. Arvilla and her daughters planted 6,000 currant cuttings and put in an acre of asparagus in 1870. They also raised pie plant (rhubarb), gooseberries and strawberries. Notices in *The Greeley Tribune* warned young boys they would be punished if they were caught stealing fruit from Mrs. Meeker's garden!

On Oct. 12, 1870, Horace Greeley, the owner of the famous newspaper, *The New York Tribune*, came to see the town in Colorado Territory named in his honor. All of the people in Greeley turned out to hear him speak. Mr. Greeley was pleased with the progress, in the new town

and liked being a guest in the Meekers' new home with its beautiful view of the Rocky Mountains.

There have been many changes to the original Meeker Home. The first roof leaked badly and almost melted the east wall in 1878, and a new style of roof was installed. In 1884, a two story brick addition doubled the size of the original house. Mrs. Meeker and her daughter Rozene rented the extra bedrooms to college students, which provided them with some income. Mrs. Meeker died in 1905 and Rozene lived in the house until 1913, when she was forced to sell the house because of financial difficulties. She moved to a smaller house in east Greeley, and other people lived in the Meeker home.

In 1928 and 1929, individuals, clubs, and the City of Greeley teamed up to buy the home. It became the city's first museum and was renovated in 1959 and in 1995. The 1884 brick addition and porches were removed in 1959, returning the home to its original 1870 appearance and size. Mr. Meeker wrote in his newspaper that the people of Greeley should have a museum and collect things which showed how the Union Colonists built the town of Greeley and learned to irrigate the "desert" He would be surprised and happy to know that his experimental adobe house is now a museum and that his little village of 500 people has grown from one mile in size to almost 42 miles with a population of 76,000 today. In the first edition of *The Greeley Tribune*, Nathan Meeker wrote, "...the highest ambition of a family should be to have a comfortable, and if possible, an elegant home,

surrounded by orchards and ornamental grounds, on lands of its own.” His home is a living example of the vision he had for a prosperous and beautiful community of citizens all working together towards common goals.

The 1870 Meeker Home Museum features lovely Victorian-era furnishings and nine interpretive markers on the pocket-park grounds. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Greeley Historic Register.