

Mount Falcon Park Historical Background

In 1879, the U.S. government asked John Brisben Walker to investigate agriculture in the arid regions of the West, so he purchased 1,600 acres in north Denver. He named it Berkley Farm, and introduced the production of alfalfa as a cash crop. John Brisben Walker was an inventor, innovator, and visionary, and truly was a "Renaissance Man." By the time he was 26 years old (in 1873), Walker had attended Gonzaga College, Georgetown College, and West Point Military Academy; served as a military advisor and general in a Chinese Army; run for Congress on the Republican ticket; married Emily Strother, "the prettiest girl in the valley of the Virginia;" and speculated on land in West Virginia, winning and then losing his first fortune. Walker spent the next three years as managing editor of the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette and the Washington D.C. Daily Chronicle.

In 1880, Walker purchased 500 lots near present-day Union Station and developed Denver's first amusement park, River Front Park, which boasted a race track, the Castle of Culture and Commerce, ball parks, an excursion steamer, and numerous other features, such as fireworks displays. He also staged Denver's first rodeo there.

In 1887, Walker purchased the "Swiss Cottage" in Morrison, a hotel built by Governor Evans and used by the Jesuits as a college for four years. Two of Walker's sons attended Sacred Heart College. On July 22, 1887, John Brisben Walker donated 40 acres of land to the Jesuits for the founding of Regis College (now Regis University). John Brisben Walker reopened the hotel as the Morrison Casino and added a swimming pool and other amenities. Gradually he purchased all of what is now Red Rocks Park and Mount Falcon.

Walker sold River Front Park to the City of Denver in 1893 and moved to Tarrytown, New York, where he purchased the faltering *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. Walker was the owner and editor of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* from 1889-1905, and increased *Cosmopolitan's* circulation from 16,000 to 400,000 during the five years he owned the magazine.

A new invention caught John Brisben Walker's imagination in 1899 – the Locomobile. It was designed by the Stanley twins, Francis E. and Freelan O., who went on to make the most famous steam powered car of all, the Stanley Steamer. John Brisben Walker, with backing from Amzi Lorenzo Barber, who had made a fortune in asphalt paving, offered to buy the Stanleys out for \$250,000. Having only \$20,000 invested in the project, they sold, using their \$230,000 profit to finance their re-entry into the car business in 1901.

Unfortunately, the Locomobile was too light to bear the strain of the abysmal turn-of-the-century roads, and the speed and freedom it offered made people want to travel much more than thirty miles it could manage in one day. After purchasing the rights to the new Stanley Steamer, Walker manufactured automobiles at his Mobile Wagonette factory on his Tarrytown estate. By 1900 his auto factory boasted 24 models, ranging from a \$750 economy model to \$10,000 racers. Always the innovator, Walker sponsored the first automobile race in the United States in 1895. Walker sold *Cosmopolitan Magazine* to William Randolph Hearst and the Hearst Corporation for \$1 million in 1905 and prepared to return west.

Walker and his new wife Ethel Richmond Walker returned to Morrison, where he concentrated his efforts on developing the Red Rocks area, which he named "Garden of the Titans." There he built a road to the area, a teahouse, and hiking trails. The famed opera diva Mary Garden, accompanied by Walker's wife, Ethel, on the violin, sang in the Red Rocks natural amphitheater and pronounced it "acoustically perfect." Walker proposed and enthusiastically promoted the concept that eventually became the Denver Mountain Park system. John Brisben

Walker had a vision of artists performing on a stage nestled into the perfectly acoustic surroundings of Red Rocks. Walker produced a number of concerts between 1906 and 1910 on a temporary platform. In 1927, George Cranmer, Manager of Denver Parks, convinced the City of Denver to purchase the area of Red Rocks from Walker for the price of \$54,133.

Always intrigued by innovations, in 1911 Walker built a funicular, an electric cog railway, from Red Rocks Park to the 8,000 feet summit of Mount Morrison, the longest cog railway in the world at the time. The Mount Morrison Incline Railway had specially designed cars, with a seating capacity of 80-100 passengers who rode backwards up the mountain to enjoy the panoramic scenery.

In 1911, Walker sponsored an automobile rally on Mount Falcon and laid out a golf course at its base. Walker also dreamed of a palatial Summer White House on Mount Falcon for President Woodrow Wilson. Walker commissioned prominent Denver architect Jules Jacques Benois Benedict to design a "Summer White House" modeled on the castle built by King Ludwig of Bavaria. The cornerstone was laid and construction begun. Despite enlisting every schoolchild in Colorado to contribute a dime, the Summer White House never proceeded beyond the foundation, due to lack of funds and the coming of World War I.

Near his hoped-for Summer White House, Walker built a grand mansion on Mount Falcon for Ethel and his many children. Ethel Richmond Walker died there in 1916 and was buried near the foot of Mount Falcon during a snowstorm. Two years later the mansion burned to the ground, possibly from a lightning strike. The ruins of Walker's magnificent house are still visible along Walker's Dream Trail, a timeless memorial to Jefferson County's greatest tycoon.

John Brisben Walker was a man of many visions. He made fortunes on land speculation in West Virginia and his purchase of Cosmopolitan Magazine, but other ventures were less successful. Although he held vast fortunes at various times in his life, Walker died penniless in 1931 at the age of 83.

Mount Falcon remained in private ownership until 1974 when the Colorado Open Lands Foundation and Jefferson County Open Space cooperated to make Mount Falcon a public park.