
Myth #142: Brothers Denver by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Virtually everyone has heard of Denver, Colorado. Nevada had a Denver too. Not a town, but Frank Denver, the younger brother of attorney James William Denver. It was James who was serving as governor of Kansas Territory in 1858 when the fledgling community located at the base of the Rocky Mountains was named. Before Congress created Colorado Territory in 1861, the town of Denver was in western Kansas.

Frank Denver was a controversial Nevada lieutenant governor from 1871 to 1875. While Frank was ex-officio warden of the state prison in Carson City, there was a major prison break involving twenty-seven inmates on September 17, 1871. Denver was seriously wounded in the confused melee.

Nevadans were unhappy with the circumstances surrounding the escape and demanded something be done about the prison operation. At the recommendation of Governor Lewis Bradley, the 1873 state legislature passed a law creating the position of warden, which required professional law enforcement qualifications, and a Board of Prison Commissioners.

While the new law went into effect on April 1, the Prison Commissioners, which included the Governor, and the new warden decided to take over the prison operation on March 13. Initially Denver resisted the takeover, but had second thoughts when state militia units arrived to take the prison by force if necessary. Denver formally surrendered the prison and kept a low profile as lieutenant governor for the rest of his term.

Until the James Denver papers were examined recently at the University of California's Bancroft Library in Berkeley, it was generally assumed that James and Frank were brothers. U.S. census records in 1860 and 1870 noted that James and Frank were born in Virginia. Still, no family connection could be made from the entries. In 1860, James, a former U.S. Representative for California identified in the census as a "gentleman" living with his wife, and Frank, a jeweler, were living in Sacramento, but not in the same domicile.

Frank, 48, died in San Francisco on August 8, 1875. Obituaries and death notices in Nevada newspapers make no mention of a brother. James, 75, died on August 9, 1892. He was buried in Wilmington, Ohio, where his family had moved in 1830 from Virginia. The national wire-service story noting James' death in Washington, D.C. did not identify a brother.

The evidence that links James and Frank as brothers is more than a dozen letters from Frank to James between 1850 and 1871. The first letter is conspicuous because Frank sent it from Wilmington, Ohio, on March 25, 1850 to James who was preparing to leave Platte City, Missouri, to move to California. A letter dated June 8, 1868 from Virginia City, Nevada, to James confirms that the Frank Denver identified in the city directory as a "Commissioner, Pacific Railroad," is the same Frank Denver who wrote his brother that he was the newly appointed railroad commissioner. The last letter in the collection is dated February 26, 1871 from Lt. Governor Frank Denver in Carson City to his brother James.

For more information on Frank Denver, see Phil Earl, "Frank Denver and the Prison War of 1873," *This Was Nevada, Volume II, The Comstock Lode* (Reno: Nevada Historical Society, 2000), pp.121-23.

Photo credit: Frank Denver, lieutenant governor and warden of the Nevada State Prison. Photo courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society, Reno.

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