

Myth #62: Canyon Confusion: Carson River not in Brunswick Canyon by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

A rugged section of the Carson River valley between Carson City and Dayton is commonly misidentified as Brunswick Canyon. Confusion over the canyon's name has reigned for years. Recently, a newspaper story noted that "extending the V & T rail from Virginia City, through Brunswick Canyon and American Flats [sic], to the east side of Carson City would not only draw railroad enthusiasts, but provide a scenic trip for everyone." The truth, geographically speaking, is that the rail excursion will travel through the Carson River Canyon, not the Brunswick Canyon.

The Carson River stretches some 180 miles from the picturesque Sierra Nevada in Alpine County, California, into the Churchill County, Nevada, desert where it disappears in the Carson Sink. Portions of the unnamed river first appeared on a map of the Great Basin drawn by cartographer Charles Preuss in 1845. Explorer John C. Fremont named that feature for his scout Kit Carson and it first appears as Carson River on a map drawn by Preuss in 1848.

Detailed maps show the Brunswick Canyon is located in the northwest Pine Nut Mountains. The canyon stretches for miles in generally a north-south direction before it intersects the Carson River Canyon about a mile east from where the river leaves the Eagle Valley and proceeds northeast to Dayton Valley.

The Brunswick Mill, just east of the milling town of Empire, was constructed in 1863-64 on the Carson River to process Comstock gold and silver quartz. William Sharon of the Bank of California owned the mill, and it was one of the major quartz mills on the Carson River. At the height of its operation, the mill had 76 stamps to crush the rock and reportedly processed 150 tons of ore per day. Despite the decline of the Comstock mines in the latter 1870s, the Brunswick Mill operated late into the nineteenth-century.

The area became a voting precinct in Ormsby County by 1866 and the Virginia & Truckee Railroad established a station called Brunswick shortly after its completion between Virginia City and Carson City in 1869. The sizeable canyon whose mouth is near the Brunswick site, and runs in a southeasterly direction away from the river, apparently received its name from the mill. An earlier name for the canyon appears to have been the Merrimac[k] Canyon for the nearby Merrimac Mill.

It's anybody's guess as to when the modern confusion began in referring to the Carson River Canyon as the Brunswick Canyon. Newspaper stories dating back to 1930 make the mistake (*Reno Evening Gazette*, April 12, 1930, 6:2-5). The misapplication is not found on official maps, and it is interesting to note there are other canyons, including the Eureka and Santiago canyons, that terminate in the Carson River Canyon between Carson City and Dayton. Nobody seems to confuse the names of those features. Maybe because the Brunswick Canyon meets the Carson River so close to where the river leaves Eagle Valley, to course through rugged terrain, before reaching Dayton that people have mistakenly assumed the canyons are one and the same.

In the end, the confusion will likely persist despite anyone's effort to set the record straight.

Photo: Courtesy Nevada State Museum

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