

Myth #7: Carson City: The Nation's Smallest Capital? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist and Dennis Myers, Journalist

For children growing up in Nevada for much of the 20th century, the experience of claiming Carson City as the nation's tiniest capital city was a familiar one.

For kids in the city itself, it was an even more noteworthy rite of passage. As the late Robert Laxalt, author of the critically-acclaimed *Sweet Promised Land* (1957), once wrote of his boyhood in Carson City in the 1920s and 1930s (when the population dipped below 2,000), "It was a point of pride that our town was the smallest capital in the United States. This was drummed into us from day one by townspeople and school teachers and the *Carson City Daily Appeal*. We accepted the boast and repeated it to each other as dutifully as though we were reciting one of the commandments."



The claim dates back to the 1890s when a shrinking Carson City inherited the title of the smallest state capital from Bismark, North Dakota; however it lost its foundation more than two generations ago. As a quiet hamlet of 5,163 residents, Carson continued to be the smallest state capital in 1960.

Yet during the early 1960s the town grew so quickly -- to 10,000 and beyond -- that by 1963 it passed Montpelier, Vermont (which at about 8,000 residents still holds the honor today).

Then Carson's population and physical size grew even more, spurred by a 1969 consolidation with Ormsby County, ranking it among the ten largest capital cities in area in the U.S. at 143.35 square miles. In 1970 the capital's population had reached 15,468. By the 1980 census Carson City more than doubled to 32,022 persons, which made it larger than at least 10 other capital cities. Ten years later, Carson City's population climbed to 40,443 and it surpassed Jefferson City, Missouri in size.

According to the 2000 census, 52,457 persons resided in the state capital and the estimated population in 2006 is about 57,000. Carson City has grown larger than the city of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which has lost population. Population projections suggest that Carson City has surpassed Cheyenne, Wyoming; Charleston, West Virginia; and Bismark, North Dakota, making it the 16th smallest state capital in the U.S. By 2011, a freeway is projected to link Reno to Carson City leaving only four state capitals--Dover, Jefferson City, Juneau, and Pierre-- outside the interstate system, all of them smaller than Carson City.

Photo: Nevada State Library & Archives

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