

Boulder Dam. Hoover Dam. Boulder Dam. Hoover Dam. Take your pick. The name of the modern wonder of the world that dams the Colorado River between Arizona and Nevada near Las Vegas has gone by either name at different times. Today it is officially known as Hoover Dam. However, there are many Americans, mostly senior citizens who still refuse to call Hoover Dam anything but Boulder Dam.



Why all the confusion? The first viable site considered for a dam on the Colorado River was in Boulder Canyon. Full-scale geological testing began in January 1921 and was completed by the end of the year. A major report in 1922 had mentioned Boulder Canyon as the probable site. Congressional legislation introduced in 1923 was labeled the Boulder Canyon Project Act. The press had started to refer to the Boulder Canyon Dam, or Boulder Dam, as it tracked the progress of the bill. And by the time another report in 1928 designated Black Canyon as the best site for the proposed dam, the name Boulder had already become synonymous with the project. President Calvin Coolidge signed the Boulder Canyon Project Act on December 21, 1928.

So now the plan was to build the Boulder Canyon Project in Black Canyon, or so everybody thought. On September 17, 1930 at a ceremony south of Las Vegas to celebrate the project's start-up, President Herbert Hoover's Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur concluded his speech by stating "I have the honor to name this greatest project of all time—the Hoover Dam." The announcement naming the dam after the sitting president, who had been involved in planning for the dam earlier in his career, drew only scattered applause with the nation sinking into its greatest economic depression. Some in attendance predicted that the proposed dam workers' town would be named Wilbur City instead of Boulder City. The *Washington Daily News*, referring to the controversy in Congress over naming the dam, editorialized that "we care not even a tinker's dam who calls it what, so long as it goes up pronto and does its job in the southwest." A congressional appropriation act passed on February 14, 1931 made the name Hoover Dam official.

By April 1931, work was underway in Black Canyon to build Hoover Dam. The construction proceeded ahead of schedule. The diversion tunnels around the dam site were opened in November 1932, shortly after Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeated Herbert Hoover for the presidency of the United States. With a new president came a new Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, and a return to the name Boulder Dam. On May 8, 1933, in one of his first administrative acts, Secretary Ickes declared that henceforth the dam rising from the floor of Black Canyon would be called Boulder Dam and no longer Hoover Dam. Ickes claimed the name change would end the public confusion caused by his predecessor's political decision to honor his boss, who Ickes argued had contributed virtually nothing to the project. Author Joseph Stevens, in his comprehensive work *Hoover Dam An American Adventure* (1988), states that Ickes' claim that Hoover didn't help in bringing the Boulder Canyon project to fruition was "blatantly false" and "it appeared that Ickes' renaming of Hoover Dam was a political act, a mean-spirited attempt to shred the already tattered reputation of the former president, as well as an unsubtle snub to those who had supported him." However, the name of the dam was never officially changed from "Hoover."



President Roosevelt, in a nationwide radio broadcast from the dam site, dedicated Boulder Dam on September 30, 1935. Just the same, the name game was not over.

On April 30, 1947, the name Hoover Dam was "officially" restored by a joint resolution of a Republican-dominated Congress and signed by President Harry S Truman, a Democrat. Former President Hoover in a private communication to one of the resolution's sponsors expressed his gratitude that an insult had been rectified. Still, many Roosevelt partisans continued to call the great concrete edifice Boulder Dam and still do. Public reaction to the controversy was colorfully articulated by Frank Romano, Sr.

Myth #103: What's in a Dam Name? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

who proposed, in a May 10, 1947 letter to the Las Vegas Review-Journal, that the name be changed a third time to "Hoogivza Dam."*

*For more information on this topic, see the website of the Boulder City Museum and Historical Association at <http://www.bcmha.org/history.html>

Photos courtesy of Weber State University, Stewart Library, Special Collections. Top photo: (center) stopped to visit the dam on November 12, 1932, shortly after his resounding defeat in the presidential election on November 8th. He was accompanied by officials of the construction consortium. Bottom photo: Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States, at the dedication of Boulder Dam, September 30, 1935.

Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, April 2006 edition. The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal*; the *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley; the *Humboldt Sun*; the *Battle Mountain Bugle*; *Lovelock Review-Miner*; and *Nevada Observer* (online version).