

# General William Jackson Palmer

September 17, 1836-March 13, 1909

Information  
submitted by:

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ere it not for General William Jackson Palmer this book would not exist, nor would Evergreen Cemetery nor Colorado Springs itself.

Palmer, seeing extraordinary potential in a semi-arid stretch of land at the base of Pikes Peak, founded what would become Colorado Springs. He gave his town life, making it accessible by railway. He also gave it resources beyond all reasonable expectations and a vision that continues to this day.

Railroads were the foundation of Palmer's life and livelihood. He traveled many miles in the saddle surveying and developing them.

Palmer was born to Quaker parents in Delaware and his family moved to Philadelphia when he was five. There he was schooled and worked for a railroad company to supplement the family income. When he was 19, an uncle financed a voyage to England where young Palmer was to study railways, mines, and the burning of coke and coal in engines.

On his return to the United States, Palmer worked for his uncle's coal company, where his research came to the attention of the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad. He hired young Palmer to begin experiments with coal in engines and by the time Palmer was 25 his work had helped the railroad's 15-mph trains double their speed.

Believing that no man should be a slave to another, Palmer recruited a cavalry troop to help President Lincoln at the outbreak of the Civil



Photographer Paul Ideman,  
Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

Portrait of General William Jackson Palmer by Arturo de Ferraris  
of Vienna, 1903

War. As a result he was "read out" of the Quaker church. Serving in the Union Army with distinction, Palmer was captured and held prisoner in a rat-infested tobacco warehouse until his release as part of a prisoner exchange in 1863. Palmer ultimately was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, one of the youngest generals in the history of the U.S. Army.

A Quaker at heart, Palmer declined to continue his military career after the war, returning to railroading instead. Too restless for a desk job, Palmer asked to lead a western survey party from St. Louis to California. On his return East, Palmer was put in charge of building the Kansas Pacific Railroad line to Denver.

It was on this mission that he saw a beautiful spot at the foot of Pikes Peak while riding atop a stagecoach in the moonlight. He was convinced that a famous resort would be there someday.

A rail line along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains was essential to creating this resort town. Palmer couldn't persuade railroad officials to build an extension line from Denver because the government wouldn't subsidize a railroad that wasn't in keeping with its goal of western migration. Consequently Palmer decided to build the railroad himself.

Palmer set about fundraising in the U.S. and Europe. These development efforts sent him traveling, and in 1869 on a train through the St. Louis area, he met Mary "Queen" Lincoln Mellen and her father. Palmer fell in love on the train ride, although his love of railroading would forever be a rival for his attention.

The two married November 7, 1870, at the Mellen home on Long

Island, and sailed for a honeymoon in England. Because Palmer was working to raise money to build his railroad, his business interests occupied much of his time. Queen met and made friends who shared her love of music and the arts. On their return, Queen remained in the East and Palmer returned to Colorado.

Palmer succeeded in financing his railroad. Just three months after the stake was driven to found his Fountain Colony, later renamed Colorado Springs, trains began rolling between Denver and the new colony. Palmer's land and railroad ultimately contributed to bringing so many settlers to the Colorado Territory that it qualified for statehood in 1876. Palmer was asked to be governor but declined repeatedly.

On the day the stake was driven to found Colorado Springs, July 31, 1871, Palmer was making his way through the southern mountains. He did not return until October, by which point Queen had arrived. At the General's request, Queen started a school for the new colony's children. After teaching a few months, she turned the work over to Mrs. Lillier, the wife of the town newspaper's first editor.

Just before Christmas that year, Queen's father, stepmother, and six half-brothers and half-sisters joined her from New York. The Palmers and Queen's family stayed in nearby Manitou Springs while Palmer built the family's residence that would be called Glen Eyrie (Eye-ree), located north of Garden of the Gods.

Developing Colorado Springs' semi-arid land into the kind of resort Palmer envisioned was no small feat. Palmer devised an engineering marvel called the El Paso Canal to provide critically needed water for the many trees he had planted. Believing the area's beauty and mild climate would attract others as it had him, he once wrote that people might be willing to forego making more money in favor of enjoying what they already had. Little did he know that the Cripple Creek gold rush of the 1890s would make both possible.

Quality of life was Palmer's credo long before such a thing was ever discussed. His "Little London" was to be a health resort. He envisioned his colony as having wide, tree-lined streets, abundant parks, good transportation, quality education, the arts, and covenants against making or selling liquor in the town's limits.

When Palmer traveled to Mexico for a railroad survey, Queen went

along, with a friend from England named Rose Kingsley. The difficult trip by ship, stagecoach, and train was further complicated by Queen's first pregnancy. Palmer taught both Queen and Rose how to handle a pistol and each kept one tucked away just in case. When the group finally reached Mexico City more than a month later, Palmer went on a survey while Queen and Rose immersed themselves in the local customs, went sightseeing, and made friends.

The next stop was New York City, where Queen gave birth to Elsie. Another daughter, Dorothy, was born at Glen Eyrie in 1880. Due to health problems, Queen returned to the lower altitude of the East and eventually England, where third daughter Marjory was born in 1881. Palmer visited the family twice yearly.

Queen and the girls stayed in England until Queen's death from heart disease in 1894. Palmer brought Queen's ashes home to the Glen, where he kept them on a fireplace mantel in the Tower Room. He also brought his daughters home, but took them abroad often because they were homesick for England. When Palmer later sold his Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, he converted Glen Eyrie into a 67-room castle and traveled throughout Europe with his daughters in search of historic fireplaces and other interesting accoutrements, including the roof of an ancient English church.

Aside from founding his town and giving it a railroad, Palmer was also its greatest benefactor. He donated land for churches, hospitals, schools, sanitoriums, trails, boulevards and roads, and land for parks, which he maintained at his own expense. In his will Palmer even left a fund to continue the upkeep of his park land.

In 1906 Palmer was riding to the Garden of the Gods with daughter Marjory and a friend. Near the park's gateway, the horse Palmer was riding stumbled over a hole, throwing the general to the ground. Palmer was paralyzed and specialists predicted he would not survive, but he lived for two more years. So impressive was Palmer's long survival that his case was written up by the American Medical Association. (See the Will Howard Swan entry on pages 157-158.)



Queen Mellan Palmer

Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

When Palmer died, it was discovered that, in true Quaker simplicity, he had chosen granite boulders to mark the site of his and Queen's graves in Evergreen Cemetery. As a devotee of the Rocky Mountains and founder of this city, it is only fitting that stones from those mountains grace his family's lot on land that he donated for the cemetery.

After his death, Palmer's two older daughters returned to England where they lived out their lives. Marjory, who had married the Glen Eyrie house physician Dr. Henry Watt, remained in Colorado Springs. At their death, similar simple granite boulders marked Marjory's and Henry's grave sites. One other small boulder on the grave site marks the space of William Fisher.\* Fisher was the husband of Henry Watt's sister.

Twenty years after Palmer's death, an equestrian statue honoring him was placed in perpetuity at the intersection of Platte and Nevada avenues. There his beloved Pikes Peak serves as the backdrop for a tribute to the man who gave the world Colorado Springs.

\*William Fisher is sometimes mistaken for Thomas Fisher, one of Palmer's employees, who is not buried in the Palmer family lot.

Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum



Marjory Palmer (Mrs. Henry Watt) in her wedding dress

Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum



General Palmer's and Queen's children (from left to right): Marjory, Eisie, and Dorothy

Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum



Eisie Palmer, 1893

Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum



Dorothy Palmer