

The building of Rock Ledge House

In the summer of 1874 Robert and Elsie Chambers and their two children left their home in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, bound for Colorado. Elsie suffered from tuberculosis and Colorado's climate was reputed to have curative powers for respiratory ailments.

The family of four stopped first in Denver, where Elsie Chambers' former schoolmate lived. Robert heard about land for sale in the newly platted town of Colorado Springs to the south and he journeyed there to see if the area would meet his family's needs. He needed land with sufficient water to sustain orchards, vegetables, and perhaps dairy cows. His visit took him to the Camp Creek Valley, just east of present-day Garden of the Gods, where he found what he sought.

Robert Chambers was not the first to be smitten by the Camp Creek Valley, which had been traversed by the Ute Indians for centuries. Just a few years earlier, in 1871, a bachelor homesteader named Walter Galloway filed a claim on 160 acres in the valley, just southeast of the Garden's Gateway Rocks. Shortly before Galloway could "prove" his claim by residing on the land for five years, however, Robert Chambers appeared. It remains unclear whether Chambers offered to buy Galloway's land, or whether Galloway was already intending to sell it. But in November 1874 Galloway satisfied his claim with a cash payment to gain title, then sold the land and its water rights to Robert Chambers for \$1,400. Robert soon brought Elsie and their two children, Benjamin and Eleanor, to live at the site, which Elsie named Rock Ledge Ranch.



Rock Ledge Ranch, circa 1885

In January 1875 Robert Chambers hired carpenter Joseph Leighton to build a modest one-story wood cabin, with a porch on its north side. Leighton was contracted to build the frame structure and supply all materials for \$304.00. The Chambers made their home in this snug twelve-by-twenty foot dwelling while a larger, two-story addition was constructed of stone.

Contemporary records have not revealed who constructed the stone structure, but Chambers family reminiscences mention that the stone was quarried on the property. The carefully constructed rock ranch house reflects that the Chambers were a relatively prosperous family. In modern times, historic architects have concluded that the architecture shows “colonial” and “federal” influences from Pennsylvania, particularly the rough-faced, ashlar stone walls and the placement of the home’s entrance. The gable front, the mansard roofed bay, the roof overhangs, the gable tracery, and the two-over-two, double-hung windows represent styles used in the East around the year 1875. None of the architectural pattern books of that day reveal any houses akin to this finely crafted home.

Earning a living

Despite the modest flows of Camp Creek, the region’s arid climate required the Chambers to build an irrigation system to make the Rock Ledge Ranch a viable farm. The arable soil of the creek’s bottoms would have to be augmented, as it quickly gave way to sage and cactus flats, bordered by sand and rock outcroppings. So Robert Chambers constructed a small reservoir just west of his rock home and, with help from local laborers, he built an irrigation ditch to transport water diverted from Camp Creek to his fields. (In 1901, after General William Jackson Palmer, founder of Colorado Springs, purchased the property from the Chambers, he enlarged the reservoir. The well-crafted stonework of the overflow pan and drainage controls of Palmer’s expanded reservoir still remain.)

With a reliable water supply the Chambers family could sustain a fruit orchard (just south of the stone house), and plots for vegetables and crops. They began dairy operations, but those efforts apparently were modest and short-lived. Colorado Springs’ growth, however, created a good market for the Rock Ledge Ranch’s fruits, vegetables, and other productions. Young Benjamin Chambers became a skilled plumber and is thought to have designed heated greenhouses for the ranch. The Chambers’ third child, Mary (later Mary Chambers DeLong), was born just as the new stone house was completed. She referred to the greenhouses and other improvements at the ranch in oral

By the late 1870s the Colorado Springs area began to grow rapidly. When the Chambers arrived in 1874 the local population numbered in the hundreds. By 1880 the population had reached 4,000. A decade later, when Robert Chambers retired, the area held close to 30,000 people. Colorado Springs was becoming well-known as a vacationer's resort, as a therapeutic destination for people suffering from respiratory ailments, and as a staging and supply base for mining towns in the mountains. With few hotels to service this influx of people, "Room to Let" signs were commonly seen on many private residences—an opportunity for income not lost on the Chambers. They rented out portions of their home for two decades, no doubt because it brought much needed cash income. Within the first decade of their residence at Rock Ledge Ranch, the Chambers made a number of alterations to the house, probably in response to taking in boarders. For instance, the two east-facing windows on the second-floor were replaced by French doors. The presence of boarders may also explain the many interior doors and passageways on the first floor. It must have been a challenge to maintain a degree of privacy with boarders joining the family in the Rock Ledge house. That challenge grew as civilization and its trappings took root here.

In 1887 the Chambers and their neighbors established the Glen Eyrie School District and the following notes from a school board meeting reveal another example of the Chambers' resourcefulness: "Jan. 12, 1888, Meeting of school board at R.M. Chambers (house). Moved that the west room of R.M. Chambers house be rented for use as a school-room at \$10.00 per month, including stove, coal, and blackboard. Carried. Rent will begin from time of occupancy."

Also at this meeting it was established that "... school be in session 5 hours a day; to be opened Feb. 1st, 1888, that teacher pay be \$40.00 per month and that there be 3 months of school." Elsie Chambers was hired as a teacher and she kept that position for about one year. It was voted on February 7th "... to spend \$24.00 for desks and seats, \$33.50 for dictionary, globe, and maps for screws and crayons, 75 cts."

In 1895 there were so many boarders at Rock Ledge that Benjamin and his wife, Madge, were living in a "tent house", near the spring. It is said that their first child was born in that tent. Shortly afterwards Benjamin moved his family into Colorado Springs, where he pursued landscaping and plumbing.

After 26 years of hard work Robert and Elsie Chambers decided to retire. They sold Rock Ledge Ranch to General

testimony given to her daughter, Grace DeLong. "This ranch, just south of the east gate to the Garden of the Gods, prospered because of good Chambers work and enterprise. Ben invented and devised many helpful things such as a sauerkraut mill. Father, besides his fruit orchard, asparagus, etc., had two very fine heated greenhouses. He sold out-of-season produce and mother's jams and jellies to the Antler's Hotel. They also took in summer boarders, often T.B.ers from the East."

From an article in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* dated Wednesday, June 19, 1875, we learn that "Mr. R.M. Chambers has just finished his handsome stone residence near the Garden of the Gods, and has opened a boarding house. Already he has quite a number of guests for the season, and we understand they are delighted with the location."



Chambers Family, circa 1880

Palmer in 1900. Their children were grown and out in the world, which allowed Robert and Elsie time to travel. They settled for the last time in Pasadena, California.

Change and rebirth

General Palmer discontinued farming operations, apart from raising hay for his stables, at the ranch, which appears henceforth to have been occupied by tenants. The Rock Ledge House constructed for the Chambers in 1875 and modified in the following two decades for their boarders remained virtually unchanged again until the 1930s, when indoor plumbing was installed. In the 1940s and '50s the rooms were renovated in contemporary fashion. Gypsum wallboard replaced lath and plaster walls, and most existing walls were refinished. The south wall's coal-burning fireplace was covered. The house's exterior was eventually covered in stucco to deter rodents and, probably, to forestall deterioration of the original mortar holding the stone walls.

In 1968 the city of Colorado Springs acquired the Rock Ledge Ranch property to prevent it from being swallowed by residential development and in fall 1993 restoration work began on the Chambers' house. For interpretive purposes the city decided to focus on the period 1875 to 1900, when the Chambers lived at the ranch. But because the Chambers made many changes to the house over the course of 25 years, ensuring historical accuracy at this site has been a challenge. The Chambers left no records to indicate when and how alterations were made to the original structure. Through a painstaking process known as "destructive analysis," however, layers of walls or floors, and sections of the house have been carefully removed and documented by trained museum staff. Each step in this process represents, in effect, a step back in time to the Chambers' days here. By



*2nd floor wall
paper fragment*

careful analysis of the house's physical components, and research into contemporary historical references, the house is being faithfully restored to replicate the period in which the Chambers lived here. Paint colors, wallpapers, textiles, furnishings, and hardware are being carefully researched to aid in the restoration of the Chambers' original, 19th century home.

Major support for this project comes from:

- ❖ The State Historical Fund of the Colorado Historical Society
- ❖ Holly Berry House Folk Art Shop
- ❖ Rock Ledge Ranch Living History Association
- ❖ Colorado Springs Parks and Recreation

If you'd like to contribute to this project contact Carol Kennis at 719-578-6777.