

Henry A. Staats

## A Biographical Sketch

There are a few old log structures built in the 1880's still remaining in the upper Capitol Creek Valley to bear witness to the first homesteaders who staked their claims in the Capitol Park area.

Henry A. Staats, born in Egypt, Illinois, July 9, 1848 was the first to make a claim in the Capitol Creek Valley. In 1881 he staked his claim on Lime Creek, on what is now property of St. Benedict's Monastery.

Charlie Jacobs, an acquaintance of Staats, had staked an earlier claim and built a cabin where the Fred Light Ranch is on East Sopris Creek. Many were to follow soon after.

Henry Staats enlisted in the Union Army for the Civil War in Illinois in 1861 when he was 14 and served one year as messenger boy for the quartermaster of his command.

After leaving the army, he engaged in railroad contract work in Illinois until 1874. He helped build the Eads bridge over the Mississippi and the tunnel there at St. Louis. When he was 36 years old, in 1874, he came to Denver and prospected over a wide area of central Colorado. He went to the San Juans and New Mexico where he worked in mining for four years, locating and disposing of some of the richest claims in that territory. In the summer of 1879 he returned to Colorado and took up residence in Leadville. After being there a month he learned that gold was discovered in the Independence Mine, so he crossed the range over Independence



Pass in company with Wilson and Thomas Durant, reaching Aspen on July 18th, reputedly with a violin under his arm. Henry Gillespie hired Staats to do assessment work in Aspen and in order to get over the pass in the winter, Staats accounts that it was his idea to have "boats" made. "They were two feet wide, four feet long and one foot deep, with holes bored near the the top along the sides. They were turned up at each end, had about three feet resting on the snow and had sheet iron bottoms nailed on the edges of the boards. I put two hundred pounds on each boat... using the bored holes in the sides to run the rope through. ... Two men handled each boat. I told the men we would travel only at night and sleep in the daytime. We started at the edge of the snow about ten o'clock at night; the snow was hard then. We arrived at the top of the range in about four hours and then down the other side below the Independence Mine by sunup." Apparently no other men crossing over the pass thought of traveling at night, on the hard snow, and consequently got bogged down in the soft snow and had to return to Twin Lakes "to get more grub."

Staats built one of the first cabins in Aspen and also a blacksmith shop, and with the Staats brothers, ran a pack train between the new camp and Leadville and Twin Lakes. He also had the dry goods firm of Staats, Hunt & Co. As settlers started moving into Maroon Creek and up Castle Creek, Staats realized that no land in Aspen had actually been staked out. "It was sometime in July or August that I told them what I was going to do. The next morning I got about twenty-five stakes and started out. I set a stake on about that many lots, most of them were corner lots and by night most of the townsite was jumped... They came to me and wanted to have me pull up my stakes and have others do the same. I told them no. That we were right and were going to hold everything."

Indian threats drove out all the settlers in Aspen except 13 - among those remaining being Mr. Staats, Michael Lorenzo, Warren Elliott, Warner Root, Henry Tourtelotte, Keno-Jim and Jose Dietz.

"I started in the spring (1880) with about \$3,000. Christmas Day, I sat down to dinner in the back part of Jacobs & McPherson's store without one cent of money left. I had four mules, Angus McPherson got two and I kept two. The next spring, I went down on Capitol Creek and located a ranch, the second ranch that was located inn the valley. Charlie Jabobs' was the first; that is the Fred Light Ranch."

In 1881 Mr. Staats took up a pre-emptive claim on Lime Creek in upper Capitol Creek and made additions until the ranch comprised 400 acres. Staats undoubtedly saw the potential of the grasslands that thrived in the lush mountain meadows of Lime Creek basin for vital feed for the burros, or "jacks" that crossed back and forth over Independence Pass bringing supplies in and taking the silver ore out to Leadville.



"Hay was the only thing there was a big market for, and hay was \$120 a ton. A man could take a butcher knife and a gunny sack and make five dollars a day cutting hay. I had the first mowing machine and horse rake in the valley, which I bought to use on my ranch....I stuck to the ranch for the next two years, fishing and hauling hay, having a good time and a hard time and a hell of a time all the time," wrote Staats. In those days he would have taken the Midland train from Aspen down to Watson Depot.

He returned to mining in Aspen, developing the J.C. Johnson silver mine with two partners, but after two years, disgruntled with the mining business, he writes "I went down to the ranch in the fall and built a good hewed log house. H.R. Harmon's ranch adjoined mine on the west and while I was building the house I met his sister."

Herbert Harmon, a native of Androscoggin County, Maine, had come out west with his two sisters - Ella and Columbia. They staked claims in Herbert's name and in Columbia's name on land adjacent and west of Staats', lying between Capitol and Lime Creeks.

The original Harmon buildings were situated some half mile south and east of the Hart home. The original Staats home, a large log structure was some half mile east of the Harmons and about one fourth mile north and east of St. Benedict's Monastery. (Chas. Hart, p.8)

Staats writes: "His (Harmon's) two sisters had come out from Minnesota. Miss Ellen was a schoolmarm and had taught forty terms up to that time. Her health had given out and she came to Colorado to get it back. After getting my house finished I got in the habit of going across the fence line to see the schoolmarm, and I finally made up my mind that I would get Miss Ellen before any other old bach got headed in her direction. That was the best move I ever made and the most profitable. She sure was a fine woman and a true helpmate. A woman of business ability and integrity of character.... For thirty-five years she stood by and carried her share of the load. We were married in 1887 and commenced to fight a mortgage right from the start. A mortgage is like the poor, it is always with you. My wife passed away one year ago the third of last May (1921). We worked hard and obeyed the law and I know that the Almighty will make a place for us."

"In the early days on Capitol, Lime and West Elk Creeks, the building of a new cabin was an occasion of great community interest. First the cabin was raised with all hands assisting, then a house warming followed and at all these occasions Henry Staats and his violin were the chief source of entertainment for both singing and dancing. This violin went with him at all times." (Chas. Hart, p.11)

Staats was a great story teller.

"A man we called Yank took up the ranch which joined me on the west. He helped me build my cabin and then I helped him build his. When we got my cabin built there was a pile of chips and trash out front. I stepped out one evening after dark and saw an animal of some kind rooting around the chips. I walked up to it and gave it a kick in the ribs and just

as soon as my foot landed I discovered it was a bear as big as a good sized burro. I let out a yell for Yank to bring the gun but by the time he had got out of the cabin the bear had gone up through the scrub oak. If anyone can tell me a better bear story than that I'll be hanged if I don't tell a better one."

"Well, this fellow Yank was the best true fisherman I ever saw. When we got our claims secured, we fished in the Roaring Fork and sold the trout in Aspen. We got from 50 cents to a dollar a pound, paid out our hard-earned dough for flour at \$15 a hundred and went fishing again."

Staats continued to work in the Vallejo shaft in Aspen — "until one time we all came very near to losing our lives by being knocked out by bad air. We had nothing but a leaky four-inch pipe to get air down to the shaft, and an old mule with a whim to hoist with. I never did get over being leaded until I got to living down at the ranch and drinking all the milk I could hold."

Around 1909, he and his wife Ella left Aspen and moved to the Denver area. Later they homesteaded on Bijou Creek south of the town of Byers in Arapahoe County where he engaged in ranching and started the Byers State Bank, of which he became president. He died in a hospital in Denver on March 12, 1924 at the age of 75.

"Mr. Staats was widely known in Pitkin county in the early days and highly regarded by all." (Aspen Daily Times, March 12, 1924)

Public Trustee's Sale: March 1, 1926 "according to the original survey as entered by and patented to Henry Staats, and also described as ... being the and known as the Henry Staats homestead; ... containing 522.28 acres, more or less, also all ditch, reservoir and water rights, and all enlargements and extensions of ditch, reservoir or water rights, which may be hereafter acquired by the said Sarah E. Tucker, as Executrix of the Estate of Reese H. Tucker, and Sarah E. Tucker, ... and especially a one-third interest in the Capitol Park ditch and water right, all of the Slate Mountain ditch, one-half interest in the Hughes ditch and water right, the Lime Creek ditch and water right from Lime Creek; the High Line ditch and water right, and all other water and water rights, ditches and ditch rights used on or belonging to said land, and all the rents, issues and profits which may arise or be had from said lands, premises, ditches..."

All quoted writings are directly from Staats' autobiographical piece "In the Early Days", a chapter in "Aspen on the Roaring Fork", by Frank L. Wentworth, first printed in 1935.

Two other quoted pieces are from Charles D. Hart's "History of Capitol and Snowmass Creeks". There is a link to this document in this History section of the website.