

2026-7-27

Washington Street. Lincoln Street. Colfax? Learn how Denver streets got their names.

CTK

The Denver Gazette 27 Jul 2026 · BY MATT KYLE The Denver Gazette

Washington Street, Fillmore Street, Grant Street, Lincoln Street. Colfax?



Anyone who drives around Denver knows that many of Denver's streets bear the name of past presidents. But you may not know why this is the case or why Denver's most important street somewhat follows this trend.

Denver as a city predates Colorado's acceptance into the union as a state by almost 20 years, so some may wonder: Why did the city's founders name so many streets after presidents?

Well, the answer isn't simple. Alison Salutz, director of education and community impact with Historic Denver, said when the city's streets were first being plotted, the names of streets changed quite a bit as different people developed their land and gave different names to the streets.

Many of the first streets in Denver were named after city founders, their wives or local Native American tribes, Salutz said. Some of these street names, like Wynkoop, Blake, Stout and Larimer, survived to the present day, while others were renamed during the 1870s during efforts to unify the city's streets.

"Streets would change names pretty frequently as they moved from such and such's edition of the city to somebody else's, and it was really confusing," Salutz said. "The water company could not figure out where some addresses were, and it was leading to double billing or people not receiving service. So,

some of the early efforts of unifying the street names kind of come from this desire to actually have a functioning city.”

An example of a renamed street, Salutz said, is Market Street, which was initially named after a town founder who later became an alcoholic and died in a Denver prison. So the street was renamed to Holiday Street, after a stagecoach company which itself was named after its founder. After the founder died, his family asked the city to rename the street, since it was host to the city’s red light district at the time, leading to the street’s current name Market Street, Salutz said.

As for the cluster of presidential streets, Salutz said it was less to follow a theme of presidents and more to honor Civil War heroes from the Union side, which was fresh on the minds of city planners since the war had ended only recently.

The cluster includes Grant Street, named for 18th president and Union general Ulysses S. Grant, Sherman Street, named for Union general William Sherman (whose name was also given to the biggest tree in the world) and, of course, 16th president Abraham Lincoln, who presided over the country during the American Civil War.

Salutz said businessman Henry C. Brown was responsible for naming the streets, and he admired the heroes of the Civil War.

As for Colfax, that name also carries on the presidential theme but secondarily. The street, which was initially called Grand Avenue, was renamed Colfax in 1968 to honor U.S. House Speaker Schuyler Colfax, who later became Grant’s vice president.

The street was named in his honor in an attempt to garner support for Colorado’s statehood. The effort wouldn’t pay off as Colfax would leave office in 1873, three years before Colorado gained statehood.

The presidential naming theme also predates the Civil War, according to a historical map of Denver from the late 1850s. The map includes a number of streets named after presidents, of which many no longer carry the names, such as Van Buren, Buchanan, Quincy, Polk and Taylor.

Katherine Mercier, a historian with History Colorado, said that naming streets after presidents was just a common naming convention of the time and isn’t unique to Denver. The trend is particularly common in the west and Midwest.