

Chatfield History

Humans have been in the area of Chatfield State Park for at least 8,000 years, and possibly much longer.¹ The primary evidence for this comes from the Lamb Spring Archaeological Preserve, which is located just south of the modern park boundary. In 1960, the remains of five mammoths were unearthed here by Charles Lamb while digging a stock pond on his ranch. Over the next two decades, Smithsonian Institution archeologists found the remains of over 30 Columbian mammoths and other Ice Age animals at the site. Evidence suggests that these animals were hunted or scavenged by humans sometime between 9,000 and 8,400 years ago.²

Both people and animals likely came to this area looking for water. The Plum Creek-South Platte River confluence, upon which Chatfield sits, is as old as the Late Miocene Era over 11 million years ago.³ Fossilized remains of ice-age megafauna have been found throughout the greater South Platte watershed. That said, the Lamb Spring site is unique because it contains some of the best preserved evidence of human life in North America. This places it and the surrounding landscape--which includes Chatfield--as one of the oldest continuous human use sites on the continent. Visitors interested in learning more can visit the preserve's website at: <http://www.lambspring.org/>

This paleo human presence eventually gave way to some of the West's most well known indigenous tribes. The Mouache Ute claim much of the Front Range prior to European contact.⁴ Equestrian plains tribes such as the Jicarilla Apache, Comanche, Kiowa, Lakota, and Arapaho all occupied the area at various points of time as well. This is especially true after the sixteenth century, when the arrival of horses in the Americas shifted power dynamics across the plains.⁵ For all, water was an essential and often contested resource. Riparian cottonwood groves, like those found at Chatfield, allowed plainsmen and their horses to survive the worst of the winter months.⁶ The Arapaho were active along the South Platte well into the nineteenth century.⁷

¹ "History of Lamb Spring," last modified 2021, lambsprings.org.

² Ibid.

³ Steven Condon, "Geologic Studies of the Platte River, South-Central Nebraska and Adjacent Areas—Geologic Maps, Subsurface Study, and Geologic History," *U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper*, 1706 (2005).

⁴ Southern Ute Indian Tribe, "Early History," 2021, southernute-nsn.gov/history.

⁵ Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

⁶ Elliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1998), 84, 87.

⁷ Ibid, 67.

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Example of a Cheyenne winter camp. The tepee stands near a group of riparian trees and bushes. The man carries a war club; he wears leggings, a blanket, and a belt. The ground is covered with light snow.

Photo Courtesy: Denver Public Library

<https://digital.denverlibrary.org/digital/collection/p15330coll22/id/33230/rec/3761>

In the early 1800s, horses brought another nation to the Front Range: the Cheyenne. Originally from the upper Great Lakes region, the Cheyenne referred to themselves as the Tsistsistas, or The Called Out People.⁸ They viewed themselves as a chosen people literally “called out” west by the All Father--much like Anglo-Americans would view themselves only decades later. The Cheyenne soon allied with the Arapaho to become a major power in the region.⁹ As a nomadic people, the Cheyenne-Arapaho moved with the seasons. Spring and summer were spent hunting bison into the cool, alpine valleys of the foothills before returning east for a temperate Front Range winter. By 1815, the land of both Chatfield and Cherry Creek State Park were known Cheyenne-Arapaho trading council sites.¹⁰

The South Platte River was also an essential trade resource for European and American fur trappers. For them, the South Platte served as navigation into the mountains, as well as transport out of them.¹¹ Slocum Cabin, built along the river in 1852, stands as a testament to the nineteenth century fur trade and was one of the last fur posts built in Colorado.¹² Slocum Cabin is recognized as one of the oldest structures in the Denver area. The land belonging to the Slocum family was acquired by the Roxborough Land and Gravel Company in 1990, who then donated it to Chatfield State Park. Park staff renovated and moved the cabin to its current location that same year. Visitors can see the Slocum cabin by hiking along the Chatfield Perimeter Trail near the main park office.

⁸ Ibid, 76.

⁹ Ibid, 68-86.

¹⁰ Ibid, 82.

¹¹David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the Far West 1807–1840* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

¹² Cody Newton, "The Fur Trade in Colorado," Colorado Encyclopedia, last modified January 05, 2020, coloradoencyclopedia.org.

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In 1858, gold was discovered at Dry Creek, only a twenty minute drive north of Chatfield. This discovery kicked off the Colorado Gold Rush, drawing more people west than the California Gold Rush a decade earlier.¹³ Resulting skirmishes between Anglo-American settlers and native tribes tragically culminated in the Sand Creek Massacre on November 29, 1864. A Cheyenne-Arapaho war raid was organized in direct response to the Massacre, and occurred at Chatfield's present site only a few days later.¹⁴ This series of events came to be known by Americans as the "Indian War of '64," and fueled another two decades of conflict across the Rocky Mountain West. The Cheyenne-Arapaho were formally removed by the U.S. government to reservations in Montana and Oklahoma in the 1880s—although many tribal members still live in Colorado to this day.

In 1870, a former Union army lieutenant named Isaac Willard Chatfield bought land at the Plum Creek-South Platte River confluence.¹⁵ He then sold the land to his cousin, Edward Livingston Chatfield, in 1874. By all accounts, the 32-year-old Edward was looking for a place to heal. He fought for the Union in some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, to include those of the Vicksburg campaign.¹⁶ That is, until the 113th Illinois Volunteers was captured by Confederate forces at the Battle of Brice's Crossroads in June 1864. Young Edward spent months imprisoned in the notorious POW camps of Andersonville, Millen, and Florence Prison.¹⁷ After a daring escape, Chatfield returned behind Union lines to conclude the war, sickly and haunted by his experience.

Edward Chatfield's greatest accomplishment is his public water works. A reputation for "fairness and competency" landed him the job of Littleton's city water works operator in 1891.¹⁸ During the next twenty five years, Chatfield oversaw the laying of pipes and construction of the city's water department. By the time of his death in 1924, at the age of 82, Littleton's system rivaled Denver Water for both quality and access.¹⁹ Chatfield's legacy lives on today through the reservoir that bears his name. With a storage capacity of 27,000 acre feet, and some of the best water quality in the state, Chatfield Reservoir provides water for millions of people in the Denver metro every day.

¹³ West, xv.

¹⁴ Ibid, 307.

¹⁵ Terry M. McCarty, "Chatfield Family," Littleton, Colorado, last modified March 2021, littletongov.org.

¹⁶ Terry M. McCarty, *The Chatfield Story, Civil War Letters and Diaries of Private Edward L. Chatfield of the 113th Illinois Volunteers* (North Charleston: CreateSpace, 2009-2010).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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Edward Chatfield, his daughter Edaline, and wife, Anna.
C.1886

Photo Courtesy: City of Littleton

<https://www.littletongov.org/my-littleton/littleton-history/biographies/chatfield>

Chatfield Reservoir itself was originally designed as a buffer against floods. In June 1965, catastrophic flooding along the Plum Creek and South Platte killed 25 people, injured 327, and cost the area millions of dollars in damages.²⁰ In response, Chatfield Dam and Reservoir was built by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1967. It was completed in 1975. During construction, engineers unearthed the 100,000 year-old fossilized skull of a Columbian mammoth. The very same skull, on loan from the Smithsonian Institution, is currently housed in the new Campground Registration Building for park visitors to appreciate.



The original Columbian mammoth skull found at Chatfield State Park is currently on display in the Campground Office.

²⁰ Kiersten J. Mayer, "Gone in a flash: Castle Rock reflects on anniversary of 1965 flood," *Colorado Community Media*, June 17, 2005, coloradocommunitymedia.com.

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Edward Chatfield is remembered for bringing safe, accessible drinking water to Littleton. It was his desire for good health and renewal, however, that drew him to this land in the first place. Work to convert the reservoir into a public recreational area began in 1973. One year later, State Parks began a 25 year lease of the site, and opened Chatfield State Park in 1975. Today, Chatfield is proudly known as one of Colorado Parks and Wildlife's "Big Three," along with Cherry Creek and Lake Pueblo State Park. Annual park visitation regularly reaches into the millions, and guests enjoy a wide variety of outdoor activities. The Dog Off-Leash Area, Fish Planting Base, and Cottonwood Grove offer a special connection to the past: all are built on-site of the old Chatfield farm and ranch.²¹

Ultimately, Chatfield State Park represents a tradition of stewardship at the Plum Creek and South Platte River confluence. People have loved this place for a very, *very* long time. By honoring the park's natural resources, this legacy is secured for future generations. Visitors are encouraged to practice leave no trace and remain respectful of wildlife. More information on leave no trace can be found through the National Park Service:

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/leave-no-trace-seven-principles.htm>

Laurel K. Teal, 2022

²¹ McCarty, "The Chatfield Story," 450.