

HISTORY OF EL CORTEZ APARTMENTS

608 East 12th Avenue, Denver Colorado 80203

Subdivision

Porter's Addition, home to the El Cortez Apartment Building, was first platted in the early 1870s by three partners: Henry M Porter, JW Smith, and Charles M Stebbins. The subdivision was named for Porter, an influential early Denver businessman who later had his own home built nearby at 975 Grant.

Porter's Addition, as well as the surrounding JW Smith's Addition and HC Brown's Second Addition, became attractive to Denverites due to two important developments: the construction of a city ditch bringing water up the hill from the Platte River and the donation of the site for the state capitol on land owned by Henry C Brown. By the early 1870s the neighborhood shifted from "Brown's Bluff" to the elite "Capitol Hill."

The Neighborhood Grows

Soon mining barons, bankers and wealthy businessmen began buying up Capitol Hill lots for their mountain vistas and distance from the seediness of downtown. They constructed fine homes and elaborate mansions. Some of the earliest homes in Porter's Addition still line Logan Street. Other Capitol Hill mansions were later constructed by philanthropist J K Mullen, H C Brown, and millionaire Dennis Sheedy. In 1889, the home of Molly Brown, "Heroine of the *Titanic*," was built just three blocks from the site of the El Cortez.

While the construction of large homes continued, by 1890 the neighborhood's first apartment building was erected at 1421-41 Pennsylvania Street. Following the 1893 silver crash, construction slowed for several years, but luxury apartments were soon all the rage in Denver's Capitol Hill.

The lot at the corner of 12th Avenue and Pearl Street, however, remained vacant. In 1895, the land was purchased by Fred Thompson, who sold the lots only two years later to William Hayden. Hayden was the son of Denver Water magnate Thomas Scott Hayden. In 1912, Hayden sold the land and it briefly passed through the hands of Frank Wheeler, a pioneer and former city alderman. Charles A. Kendrick then acquired the property. Kendrick had first made a living as a cattleman west of Denver but in 1891 he moved to the city and founded a stationery firm. He owned the land for twelve years, selling the still-vacant property to J H Peterson in 1924.

An Eclectic Architect

Peterson followed a growing trend on the Hill and hired local architect John J Huddart to build a new, luxury apartment building on the land. John J. Huddart was born and trained as an architect in England. He moved to Denver in 1882, where he was a draftsman for noted architect Frank E. Edbrooke. In 1887, he started his own firm, eventually expanding to



complete work, including six of Colorado's courthouses, throughout the state.

Huddart was especially well-known for his eclecticism. His 1889 Kinneavy Terrace at 27th and Stout, an early Denver apartment building, demonstrates his ability to mix styles. Huddart also designed the apartment building at 625 East 16th as well as the striking stone mansion at 1244 Grant. His work on the El Cortez came towards the end of his long career; he died only two years after the building's 1928 completion.

Mid Century Growth

By the time the El Cortez opened in 1928, the surrounding mansions were rapidly converted into multi-family structures. Some residents protested these changes, criticizing what they feared were "tenements." But with land values rising and the city population exploding, the neighborhood increasingly adopted apartment-style housing. In 1904, Denver was home to only 42 apartment buildings. By 1940, this number had risen to more than 900.

After a brief period of ownership by John M O'Connor, the El Cortez soon found more permanent caretakers. On November 6, 1937 George and Elizabeth Finkbeiner purchased the building and while it appears that they sold it in 1952, closer inspection reveals that the building merely passed to a new generation, Margery Ann Rentz and John E Duffy and his wife Viola, the Finkbeiner's daughter. Over the next several decades, the Duffys managed the apartments. At the same time they built careers in the community: John Duffy ran for the Colorado legislature in 1960. By the late 1960s, the Duffys passed some ownership duties to their son Jack and his wife Novella. The younger couple moved into unit 302 where they remained until 1984.

In the 1980s, they decided to sell the building to Kenneth Marsh. However, after a series of disputes, Marsh defaulted on his loan and the building returned to the Duffy family. As a result the Duffy family remained at least partial owners until 2000, making their 63-year stewardship of the El Cortez a lasting legacy.

Staying Power

When the El Cortez opened in 1928, all but six units were occupied. Among the first tenants was Mrs. Enna Gilpin, who resided in unit 106 for 49 years, longer than any other El Cortez resident. Gilpin, sometimes listed as Emma, was born in Iowa in 1885 but moved to Jefferson County in Colorado with her parents. She married Burhl Gilpin in 1910 but, surprisingly for the era, soon divorced him and moved back in with her parents. Gilpin regained her independence with her move to the El Cortez, paying \$43 in rent and supporting herself by working as a clerk at the Fred Mueller Saddle Company. Gilpin retired in the early 1970s but remained at the El Cortez until 1978, 50 years after she had arrived. In 1984, she passed away at age 99.

Another long-time El Cortez tenant was Gladys Ritter, a teacher at Stedman Elementary School in Park Hill. She was one of a long series of educators at the El Cortez. Other teachers who resided in the building included Mary Adams, (unit 211, 1940s), George Jennings (unit 108, 1950s), and Beatrice Cleveland (unit 108, 1960s).

In addition to educators, the El Cortez was home to many nurses and doctors. School nurse Alma Kirkeby lived in unit 207 in the 1940s, Beryl Walker of unit 308 was a nurse in 1950 and Judi Cudney and Nancy Hendershot, also nurses, lived in the building in the 1970s. In the 1950s, Fitzsimmons Hospital driver Daniel Donovan and his wife Eola lived in the building, and Elizabeth Edison of unit 107 worked for Doctor James Philpott, who later became president of the Denver Medical Society.

Compared to other apartment buildings in the neighborhood, occupants remained in the El Cortez significantly longer than average. Whereas other apartment houses could keep only a quarter of its residents for more than five years, almost half of the El Cortez clientele remained. Indeed, a quarter of El Cortez's tenants stayed for more than a decade, an apt testimony to a place that strives to feel like home.

A Hollywood Connection

Joseph LeVeé and his wife Hildred may not have lived in the building quite as long as other tenants but they offer a unique claim to fame. When the couple moved into the El Cortez in the late 1940s, Mr. LeVeé (formerly known as "Joseph Levy") was listed as a salesman for Warner Brothers Pictures. This innocent occupation belied a famous connection: Joseph's daughter was Oscar-nominated screen actress Paulette Goddard.

Born Pauline Marion Goddard LeVeé in 1910, Pauline joined the cast of the Ziegfeld Follies on Broadway at age 13. Later she moved to Hollywood where, in 1932, she met Charlie Chaplin. The two performed together frequently, lived together for a decade, and enjoyed a common law marriage. In 1942 they dissolved the union, garnering a generous divorce settlement for Goddard.



Paulette Goddard and Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936)

Paulette continued to work as an actress, starring with Fred Astaire and Bob Hope. However, it appears that she was not close to her father and when he died in 1954; he left her an inheritance of \$1, which according to the *Rocky Mountain News*, she refused. Goddard married twice more, and when she died in 1990, she was more generous than her father, leaving twenty million dollars to New York University.

A New Era Dawns

On 11 August 2004, 960 Pearl Street Investments became the new owners of this remarkable property. Owners Ted and Lesa Oyler are passionate about Denver's invaluable historic resources. Their holdings include several other landmark and historical buildings. To honor the historical importance of their properties, they created Classic Properties of Denver.

Specializing in the management of Denver's finest historic apartment buildings, Classical Properties has acquired and restored over 232 individual apartments since 1999. Though they pride themselves in providing sophisticated living in historical surroundings, they credit their success to exceptional residents who appreciate the splendor of the past.

All of the foregoing makes clear that much has already happened at the El Cortez. But if history is any guide, it should be equally clear that the future is likely to bring something entirely new, and that the past is merely prelude.