

# **WE ARE THE LAND: AMERICAN INDIAN LIFE, LEGACY, AND FUTURE IN DENVER**

**DENVER CITY COUNCIL  
BUDGET & POLICY COMMITTEE  
FEBRUARY 9, 2026**

**LANDMARK PRESERVATION**

**ABBIE CHRISTMAN, PRINCIPAL CITY  
PLANNER  
BECCA DIERSCHOW, SENIOR CITY  
PLANNER**



# TODAY'S PRESENTATION

What is *We are the Land* ?

Project Components

Community Role

Why Center Native Voices?

Timeline & Funding

What We Heard

Community Recommendations

What's Next?



# WHAT IS *WE ARE THE LAND*?



# *WE ARE THE LAND*

- An oral history project that centers American Indian voices to tell a fuller story of Denver—one that didn't begin with the city's founding and didn't end with removal.
- A collaboration with Denver's American Indian community and Tribal Nations with deep ties to this land to document living history, traditional knowledge, and contemporary American Indian life.



# DENVER IN CONTEXT

Goal to recognize and honor all those who have been part of the Denver's history, celebrating diverse cultures and acknowledging tragic histories.

Key elements:

- Connect with community
- Identify significant places
- Elevate and share community stories
- Produce thematic contexts

## Nuestras Historias: Historias México-americanas/ chicanas/latinas en Denver

Un Contexto Histórico



Preparado para Ciudad y Condado de Denver



Preparado por  
**Mead  
& Hunt**

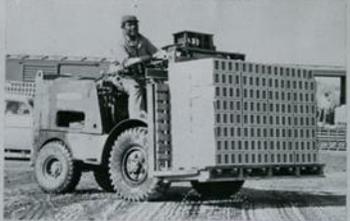
[www.meadhunt.com](http://www.meadhunt.com)

# WHAT IS A HISTORIC CONTEXT?

- Tell the story of how, when, and why a place developed
- Explore the political, social, cultural, and economic trends that have shaped our built environment and explain why our built environment looks the way it does
- Provide the tools needed to evaluate the potential eligibility of buildings, sites, and landscapes for historic designation
- Raise awareness and appreciation of a community's history

**COME TO DENVER**  
THE CHANCE OF YOUR LIFETIME !

**Good Jobs**  
Retail Trade  
Manufacturing  
Government-Federal, State, Local  
Wholesale Trade  
Construction of Buildings, Etc.



**Happy Homes**  
Beautiful Houses  
Many Churches  
Exciting Community Life  
Over Half of Homes Owned by Residents  
Convenient Stores-Shopping Centers



**Training**  
Vocational Training  
Auto Mech, Beauty Shop, Drafting,  
Nursing, Office Work, Watchmaking  
Adult Education  
Evening High School, Arts and Crafts  
Job Improvement, Home-making



**Beautiful Colorado**  
"Tallest" State, 48 Mt. Peaks Over 14,000 Ft  
350 Days Sunshine, Mild Winters  
Zoos, Museums, Mountain Parks, Drives  
Picnic Areas, Lakes, Amusement Parks  
Big Game Hunting, Trout Fishing, Camping



# PROJECT COMPONENTS



# PROJECT TEAM & ROLES

- Landmark: project management, grant writing and administration, community engagement, Tribal Convening organization, research assistance, write National Register Nomination, context editing
- Project Mosaic: engagement support, facilitation, oral histories, cultural competency, wrote 2 chapters of context
- ERO Resources: research, wrote 6 chapters of context



OUR TEAM MORE TEAM CONTACT US PUBLICATIONS



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Kick-off event at the Denver Indian Center in February 2023
- Booths at Denver March Powwow in 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026
- Tribal Convening in 2023 including a community celebration at the Denver Indian Center
- Tribal Convening in 2024 including a welcome event at TallBull Memorial Grounds
- Community Roundtable at the Denver Indian Center in October 2024
- Regular updates to
- Coordination with Denver's American Indian Commission
- Monthly Advisory Board meetings



# TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT

October 2023:

- McNichols welcome reception
- Discussions centered around “What does Denver mean to you?”
- Community gathering at the Denver Indian Center



# TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT

October 2024

- Tall Bull Memorial Grounds Welcome
- Discussions centered around “What would you like people in Denver to know?”
- Breakfast with Denver City Council
- Discussion on Environmental Justice with CASR
- Lunch with Denver American Indian Commission
- Questions from local youth



# ORAL HISTORIES

- 17 oral histories
- Oral history methodology prepared by Project Mosaic
- Release prepared with Advisory Board
- Context centered on oral histories

**Rick  
Williams**

**Grace  
Gillette**

**Dr. Tink  
Tinker**

**Dellmarie  
Dull Knife-  
Bradfield**

**Lucille  
Echohawk**

**Montoya  
Whiteman**

**Kathy and  
Keith TallBull**

**Bessie Smith**

**Glenn Morris**

**Patrick Kills  
Crow**

**Donald  
Whyte**

**Warren  
Queton**

**Fred  
Mosqueda**

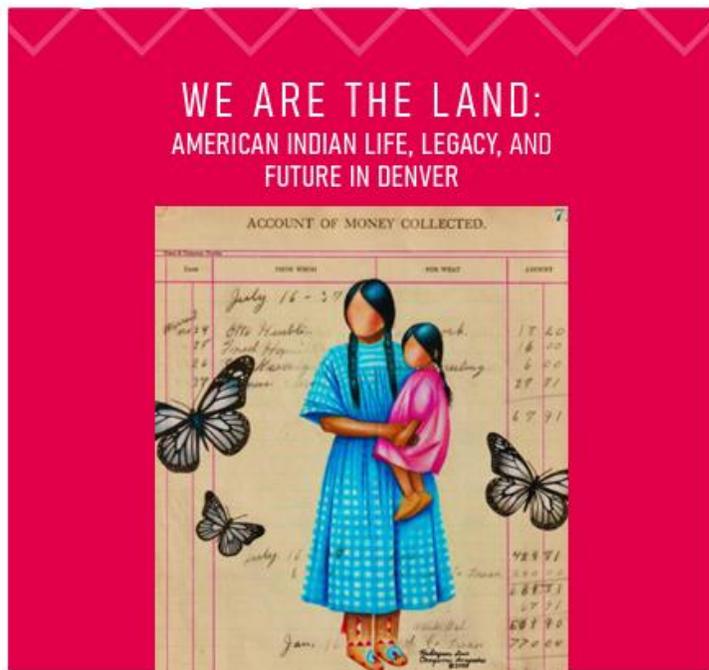
**Gil Vigil**

**Rick Waters**

**Robert  
Upham**

**Cecelia Bull  
Bear**

# HISTORIC CONTEXT



**DENVER IN CONTEXT**  
December 2025

Denver Landmark Preservation  
City and County of Denver  
denvergov.org/DenverInContext

**Artwork:**  
Carrying Forward by Halcyon Levi  
(Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho  
tribes of Oklahoma and Kiowa)

**Prepared By**  
**ERO Resources Corporation**  
Lakewood, CO  
eroreources.com  
**Project Mosaic LLC**  
Denver, CO  
projectmosaicllc.com



Tommy Wayne Cannon's (Kiowa and Cadó) Epochs in Plains History mural depicting Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Arapaho histories from the beginning of time to the mid-1970s. Epochs in Plains History: Mother Earth, Father Sun, the Children Themselves, 1976-1977. Oil on canvas, 96" x 240". Collection of Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, Seattle, Wash. © 2019 Estate of T.C. Cannon. Photo by Gary Hawkey/laColor.

**THE LINES ON A MAP OF DENVER EXIST BECAUSE IT IS A PLACE WHERE THE GRASS GROWS LATE IN THE SEASON. THE BISON CAME TO EAT THAT GOOD GRASS AND FERTILIZE THE SOIL.**

With the bison came the first people. Some were always here. Others found it by spotting the white mountains from far away on the plains, then following creeks and rivers to their meeting place. A confluence at the spine of the continent. This is when it became a crossroads.

This place at the center of the four directions was where people of different languages and looks came together year after year. The people knew at certain times of the year they could find others there to trade ideas, goods, and foods. This is when it became a marketplace.

When the people from the four directions came together, they shared meals, songs, and prayers with each other and the land. It was different from the windy places to the north and the dry places to the south - a welcoming place during the hard seasons. This is when it became a relative.

When the people came together in winter, they had discussions. They wrestled with big problems and figured out strategies for diplomacy with other nations. This is when it became a place of governance.

Because the people made trails to visit this relative, the wagons came and a town was started. Because the wagons came, the trains came and a city was started. The cars and airplanes came to the city and made it one of the busiest crossroads in the world. The land made fertile by the bison then grew everything from cows to cannabidiols and made it a center of international trade. It hosted culture, spirituality, and recreation for people from around the world.

Long before Denver existed as a city, this confluence of waters was already significant—a sacred center where multiple nations gathered, traded, and renewed their relationships with the land and each other. The Front Range, rising like the spine of the continent, guided the seasonal movements of countless generations who understood this landscape as a living relative, not a resource to be owned.



Delegates from the Society of American Indians view the foothills from Wildcat Point, part of the Denver Mountain Parks system. This was one of two images of the SAI published in Denver Municipal Facts October 1913. Image courtesy of Denver Public Library Special Collections, C352.078883 D4373muX2



Four buffalo in Genesee Park, Denver Mountain Park, Colorado; open glade area with scattered pines and aspens stands; fence and Rocky Mountains in background. Image courtesy of Denver Public Library Special Collections, MCC-3141

# YOUTH ART CONTEST

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# DOCUMENTARY



# NATIONAL REGISTER NOMINATION: DENVER INDIAN CENTER



# COMMUNITY ROLE



# CONTEXT THEMES

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Denver: Ancestral, Unceded Territory

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Honoring the Survivors and Victims of the Sand Creek Massacre

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Federal Indian Policy and Intergenerational Trauma

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Indigenous Language Revitalization and Cultural Preservation

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Ongoing Fight for Rights and Respect

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Indigenous Resilience and Cultural Resurgence

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Urban Native Communities and Connections to Tribal Homelands

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Denver as the Center of Indian Country: Past and Present

# CONTEXT: CHAPTER FRAMEWORK

- First Hill (Traditional Knowledge)
- Second Hill (Removal)
- Third Hill (Return)
- Fourth Hill (Reconnection)



# RECIPROCITY AND COMPENSATION ESSENTIAL

- Work on community timeline
- Honorariums
- Travel expenses
- Community connectors paid hourly
- Gift cards for oral histories
- Food at events
- Gifts for Elders
- Create opportunities for community and Tribal connections
- Youth involvement
- Youth art contest



# WHY CENTER NATIVE VOICES?



# BUILD TRUST



# WHAT DO YOU WANT DENVER TO KNOW?

The truth about  
our resilience  
despite people  
trying to kill us  
off for  
generations

The convergence  
of tribes around  
the Platte River

Kinship,  
our community  
is our  
spirituality,  
it's celebration

Native-ness  
is not homogen-  
ous  
There are many  
cultures

Came to  
Denver to  
work from  
Rez. no work  
there.

# CHALLENGE TRADITIONAL “EXPERTISE”

- Share power
- Balance different Narratives
- Value lived Experience



# ORAL TRADITION

- Written records often exclude Indigenous perspectives.
- Oral histories allow people to tell their own stories in their own words—about family, place, trauma, resilience, and belonging.
- Stories reveal relationships to Denver that you won't find in traditional archives.



# LOOK BEYOND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

- Denver sits at the intersection of important waterways, trade routes, and homelands for many Tribal Nations, and those connections didn't disappear when the city was founded.
- Center Native voices to tell that story from the perspective of people whose families and communities have always understood this place as part of a much larger Indigenous landscape.



# TIMELINE AND FUNDING



# THE BEGINNING (2022)

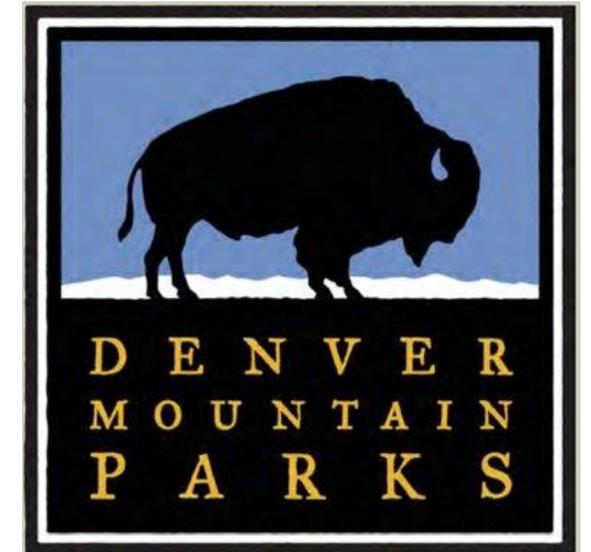
**Total Budget: \$77,500**

- National Park Service Underrepresented Communities Grant
- Peter Grant Fund for Colorado of the National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Denver Mountain Parks

## **Scope:**

- Hire consultant to complete a historic context study
- Landmark staff to complete a National Register nomination

**Timeline: 2 years**



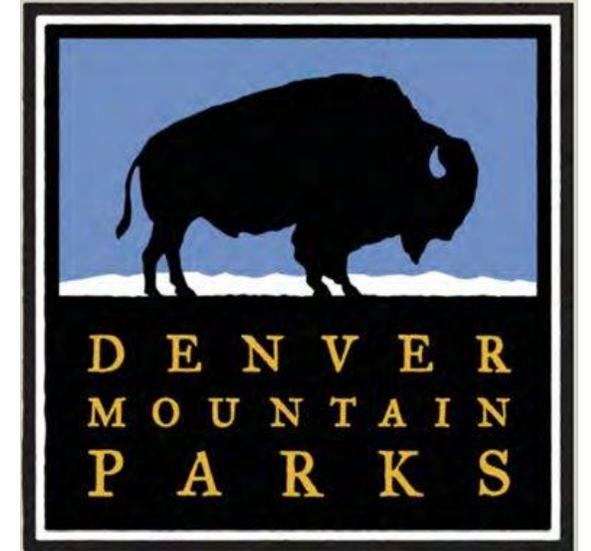
**National Trust *for*  
Historic Preservation®**

# CURRENT BUDGET = @\$320,000

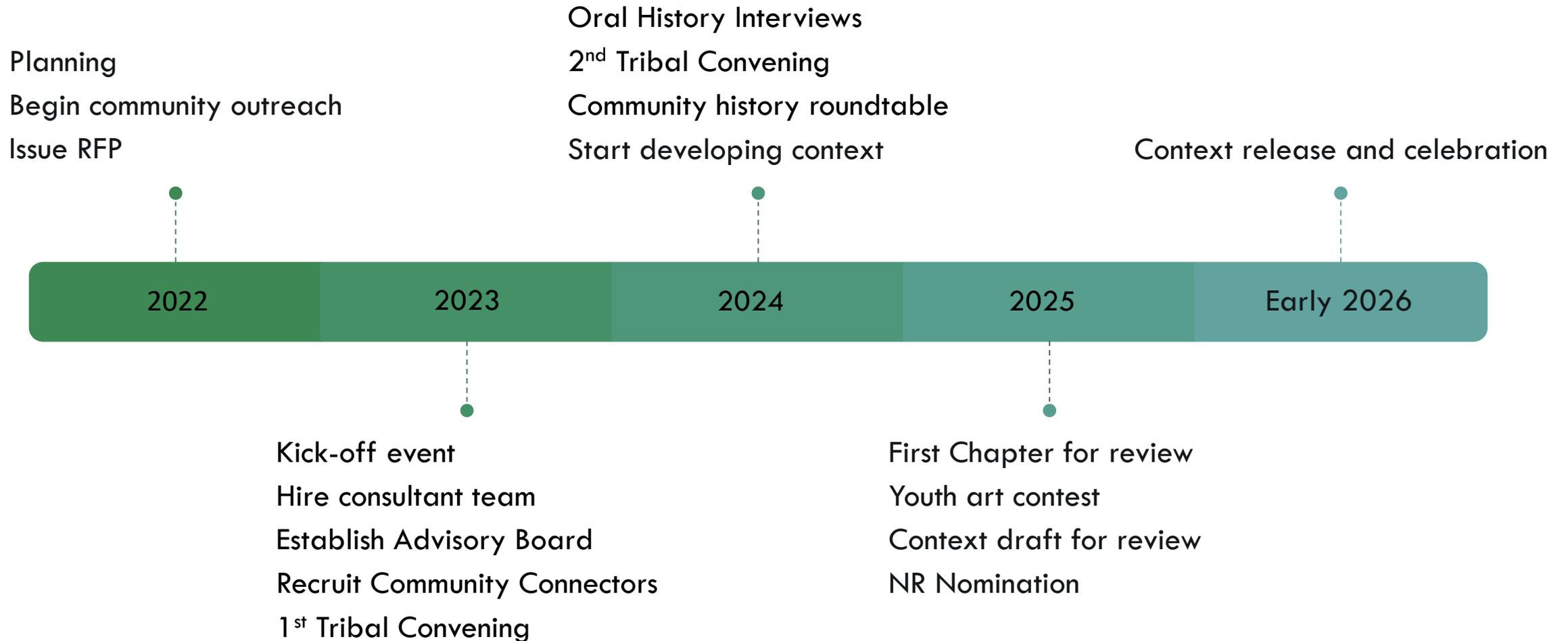
- Documentary
- Additional consultant time
- Tribal collaboration
- Community events
- Oral history compensation
- Recording equipment and transcription
- Denver March Powwow booths
- Photography
- Art contest
- Context layout



# FUNDING



# UPDATED TIMELINE



# WHAT WE HEARD



# DENVER BUILT ON ANCESTRAL, UNCEDED TRIBAL LAND

- This land was home to Indigenous peoples long before the city existed, and it was never formally surrendered or given up through treaty.
- Tribal Nations have deep, ongoing relationships to this land, even if they were later displaced from it.
- American Indian presence is foundational to Denver itself—and still part of the city today.



# TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE

The Sand Creek Massacre isn't just a historical event—it's a living trauma with ongoing impacts.

Need to acknowledge Denver's role in the Sand Creek Massacre—both before and after

- Policies set in Denver
- Depart from Denver
- Return and celebrate in Denver
- Distortion of story

Never forget memorial  
to the victims of Sand Creek  
Massacre.  
Post massacre the volunteer  
army paraded the streets in  
Denver to celebrate white  
supremacy & terrorism.  
The route is: 11th Street -  
Lawmer - 16th Street - Blake

# NATIVE HISTORY IN DENVER DIDN'T END— IT ADAPTED, ENDURED, AND CONTINUES

- Long before Denver became a city, this area was—and still is—part of a much larger Indigenous landscape defined by waterways like the South Platte, trade routes, seasonal movement, and cultural connections among many Tribal Nations.
- This history didn't end when the city was founded. American Indian people have continued to live in Denver, build community here, and adapt to the city





# COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

# WHAT NEXT? COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

## ***Collaboration***

- Maintain a government-to-government relationship with Tribes through both official and more informal methods
- Repeat convening event on a yearly basis

## ***Language***

- More incorporation of American Indian languages in Denver, included Native American place names on signage (street signs, park signs, directional signs).

## ***Traditional practices***

- Focus on stewardship and respect for the land by reintroducing Native plants in parks, incorporating traditional knowledge, establishing a land management partnership between the city and Tribal Nations, creating places for the Native American community to come to maintain and collect medicinal and culturally significant plants



# WHAT NEXT? COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

## ***Education***

- Include Native history in school curriculums at all levels
- Host Native storytelling events
- Collaborate with Tribes on a permanent exhibit that tells story of all 48 Tribes

## ***Recognition and Respect***

- Interpretive signage in parks and other city spaces that recenters American Indian history, particularly at Confluence Park, along the South Platte River, and at Red Rocks.
- Going beyond current land acknowledgement and making it a living land acknowledgement

## ***Community Resources***

- Provide a gathering place for Tribal representatives coming to Denver and to link Native community members with resources and support from their tribes, governments, and nonprofits

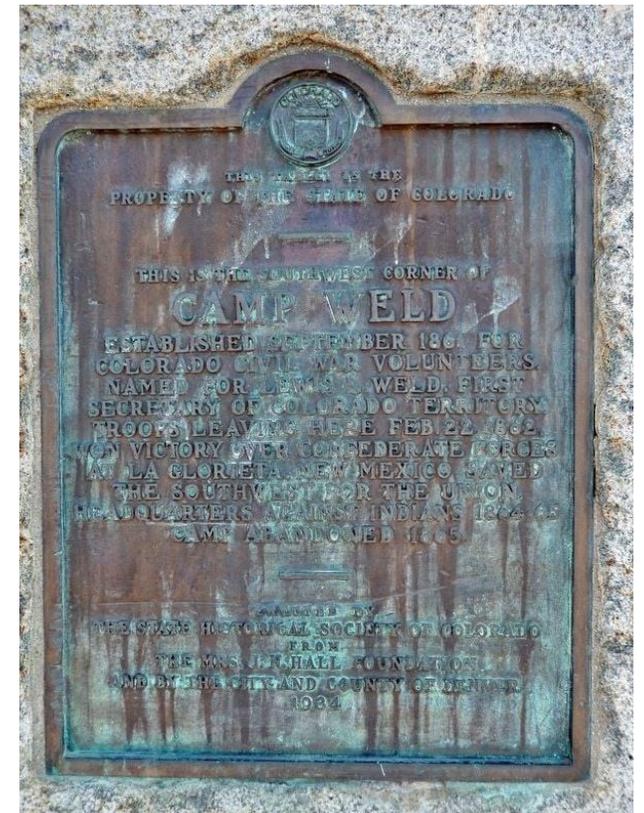
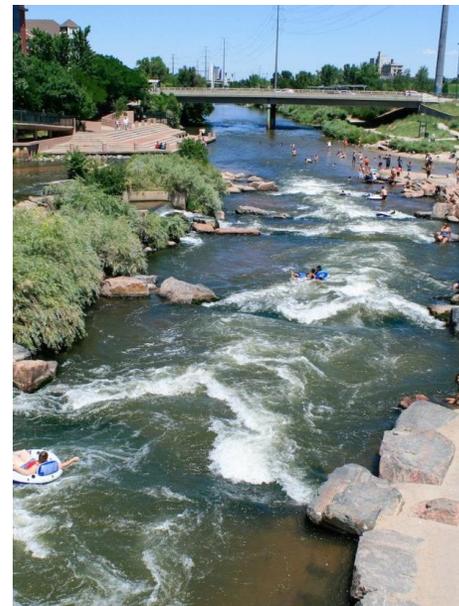


WHAT'S NEXT?



# *WE ARE THE LAND*

- We hope this project becomes a starting point—not an ending. That means deeper collaboration with Tribal communities, better representation of Native history in Denver, and potentially new Landmark Designations.





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**[www.denvergov.org/DenverInContext](http://www.denvergov.org/DenverInContext)**



**DENVER**

**THE MILE HIGH CITY**