

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

HOW IDAHO GOT ITS NAME

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When a name was needed early in 1860 for a new territory in the Pike's Peak mining country, a lobbyist for the miners thought up the word "Idaho." He explained that the name meant "gem of the mountains." Congress was persuaded to designate the proposed territory "Idaho," and one of the mining towns there was named "Idaho Springs." Then, just before final consideration of the matter, the United States Senate changed the territorial name to "Colorado," because "Idaho" was not an Indian word.

In the meantime, use of the name "Idaho" had spread from Washington, D. C. to the Pacific Northwest. A Columbia River steamboat, named the Idaho by Joseph S. Ruckel (a friend of the Colorado lobbyists), was launched June 9, 1860, for service between the Cascades and The Dalles. Later that year gold was found in the Nez Perce country. By 1862 the new Clearwater and Salmon River discoveries were known as the Idaho mines, after the steamboat used in the gold rush up the lower Columbia. "Idaho" had the advantage of being an excellent name, and that is why it gained popularity.

Only two years after completing action on Colorado, Congress had to create a new territory for the Idaho mines. The Idaho and Colorado name confusion forgotten, Congress chose "Idaho" as the name for the new territory established March 4, 1863. Strangely enough, Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts sponsored the final choice of name in both cases: he got the 1861 territory redesignated "Colorado" (instead of "Idaho") because "Idaho" was not an Indian word. Two years later, he prevailed upon the Senate to use the name "Idaho" after all.

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