



Written in Water – The Life of Benjamin Harrison Eaton

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This is a book for those who appreciate Colorado history and learning about the significant players who shaped what our Colorado communities look like and stand for today. I would highly recommend the read as it highlights not only Eaton's well noted career and achievements, but many of his lesser known successes and failures as well.

I already respected and thought very highly of Mr. Eaton, but now he is on the top of my list as one of the most influential people of all time for what he accomplished in shaping this region. Reading this story was a little déjà vu for me as it surprised me how much some things never change and how true it is that history does repeat itself. It was also very interesting how Eaton's life lessons prepared him well for the life he would eventually lead.

With the passion Eaton had for Colorado you would have pegged him as a native, but he was born and raised in Ohio and came to Colorado initially intrigued by the Gold Rush in 1858. However, the construction of the Ohio and Erie Canal systems were valuable learning sources that he would draw upon later in his life. His days as a miner gave him firsthand experience with the river waters and early on he learned the need to bring water to where it was needed and surely a precursor to his eventual irrigation plan in Weld County.

The mining effort was not successful for Eaton and his faithful travel companion, Jim Hill, so they moved West to the San Luis Valley and were impressed by the irrigation and building structures in place. They would emulate much of what they saw later in Union Colony, for this system turned a barren desolate landscape into an oasis. They moved on to New Mexico lured by the promise of land and opportunity to farm and after a brief stint in the American Civil War serving under Kit Carson, moved back to Colorado where, after the fire of 1863 Denver was a burgeoning area. This and recognition of the rights to claim holders to land they held and the use of water located on their property led Eaton to follow the Cache la Poudre to the cactus covered prairie where he would finally stake his claim. At bargain prices, Eaton purchased 25,000 acres of subsidy lands from the Union Pacific Railroad and laid claim to Cache la Poudre River waters eventually creating a share leasing irrigation system. For a financial base, he raised hay for the cavalry horses at Fort Laramie and received \$175 per ton.

His water accomplishments only grew from there, his most notable being: the Millpower Canal (1871); Plumb, Larimer and Weld Canal (1877); Highline Canal (1880); the Windsor Reservoir (1882); and a thriving sugar beet industry because of the irrigation systems he initiated and developed (1901).

A life of politics grew out of his natural leadership skills and he proposed legislation to prevent the waste of water. A conservationist before his time. In 1874 conflict arose out of differences in thought on water diversion and formal irrigation legislation began to take shape to secure the livelihood and investment of those affected. "The long-term development of the country demanded an agricultural base larger than that now under cultivation." The reclamation of farm lands through irrigation continued to be Eaton's principle motive and inspiration and he looked to the day when large reservoirs would store the surplus water lost in the spring floods so that a dependable supply would be available the whole year through. Do I hear the words NISP in the future? In 1892 the Cache la Poudre Reservoir was organized which led to the water decree, "first in time, first in right." However, animosity and jealousy over water continued even after this decree as it often does even today.

Eaton was the tenth Governor of Colorado and in his oath of office "spoke of the importance of developing a strong agricultural base for the growing state and the important part irrigation must play in establishment of those flourishing farms." Because of his numerous accomplishments, his stained-glass portrait is one of sixteen that adorns the state's capitol dome.

Eaton's legacy and satisfaction came from having a hand in the cultivation of Northern Colorado's thriving fields and the elemental rituals of planting and harvest he developed. At the time of his death the world was astonished at his vision of turning a barren land into a fertile vast of wealth. Today his story still boasts of an amazing accomplishment!