

Aspen Backgrounder

Unlike many mountain ski resorts, Aspen has a long and fascinating history going back to 1879, when silver miners from the Leadville area came over what became known as Independence Pass, on July 4, looking for the next big mining opportunity. Initially known as Ute City, after the Ute Indians who used the area as a summer hunting ground, the young town was quickly renamed Aspen.

By 1889, Aspen had become a silver mining boomtown, producing millions of dollars worth of silver monthly—one of the richest mining areas in the United States. During that banner year, the Wheeler Opera House and Hotel Jerome, two of Aspen’s most iconic landmarks, were built and the population had grown to more than 10,000 citizens.

When the US government repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, Aspen’s silver mining-based economy crashed and by the early 1900s the population had dwindled to about 500 hardy individuals. The next 50 years were known as Aspen’s Quiet Years.

During World War II, the 10th Mountain Division trained in the mountains near Aspen and many of the young men came back to Aspen after the war with the intent to promote skiing on the area’s surrounding mountains. By 1950, Aspen hosted the first FIS World Alpine Championship races in the United States on Aspen Mountain, and the sport became firmly embedded in the town’s DNA. Aspen quickly became a popular place to ski, attracting celebrities like film actor Gary Cooper and skiing stars Stein Erickson and Dick Durrance.

After World War II, Aspen’s sentinel cultural event, the Goethe Bicentennial Convocation and Music Festival took place in the summer of 1949. And the rest, as they say, is history. From that single event came the founding of the Aspen Institute, the Aspen Music Festival and School, the International Design Conference in Aspen, providing a climate where abundant cultural offerings and non-profits have been nurtured and thrive.

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Today, Aspen is a year-round vacationer's paradise, offering unrivaled access to the area's spectacular surrounding wilderness, the White River National Forest, as well as the best of big city amenities infused with Aspen's small town charm. Its diverse mixture of unlimited skiing and boarding, outdoor activities, cultural events, sophisticated restaurants, eclectic shops and art galleries is unrivaled by any other Rocky Mountain resort town. Or any small town, for that matter.

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