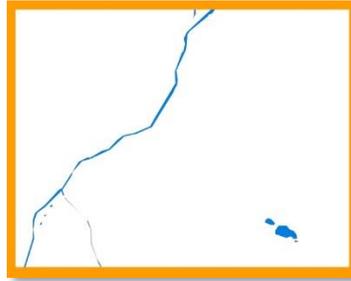


## “Do you know where your water comes from?” *D. Richardson*



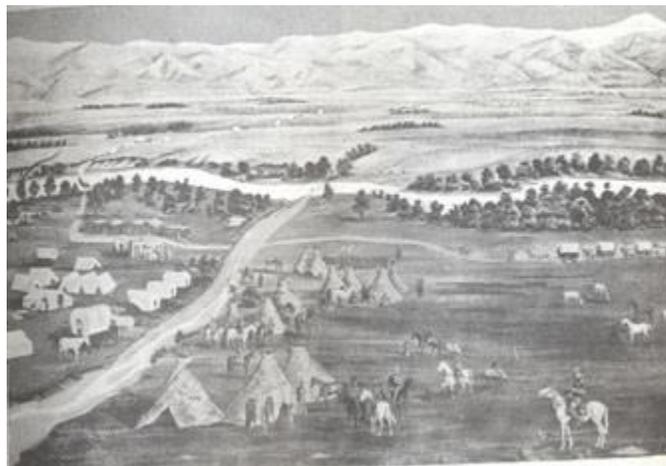
This minimalist flag addresses the history of Denver rivers usage and impact on our future water supply.

### *Flag Design/Purpose*

This design represents a Google Maps terrain view of Denver’s South Platte River, Cherry Creek, and corner lakes at the Denver Zoo. The four marigold borders represent Federal Blvd (west), Colorado Blvd (east), 52<sup>nd</sup> Ave (north), and Colfax Ave (south). The intent of this design is to express how few sections of Denver County have public and drinking water access (all provided by runoff from the Rockies). However, the water that is available specifically from South Platte serves about 4.5 million Coloradoans and will have to serve a growing number of Coloradoans as the population rises while our annual average snowpack runoff levels drop.

### *The South Platte’s Original Inhabitants*

It should be noted that the first and original inhabitants and users of the Platte River in Colorado were the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Apache, and Utes.



One of the earliest depictions of Auraria showing the Cherry Creek dividing prospectors looking for gold and the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians who used the region as a campsite.  
Courtesy of Jerome Smiley, History of Denver, Rebecca Hunt Collection. DPL.

Unfortunately, due to sparse archaeological records before settlers arrived and native displacement, there’s not much information on indigenous uses for the Platte in the greater Denver area. But we do

know that the Auraria location of the South Platte reflected on the flag was inhabited by one dominant tribe: the Arapaho. And they named this river Niiníniicíhéhé.

Upon the discovery of gold in 1858 in Cherry Creek, settlements exploded in the Denver area along the Platte/Cherry Creek confluence at Auraria. Indigenous peoples were forced out to Sand Creek in southeastern Colorado. Denver became a major immigration route, and by the 1860's farmers who moved to the area began digging irrigation ditches and canals, drawing water away from the Platte. Front Range cities began to pop up. By 1876, surface water along the Front Range became so overused statehood legislators drafted the Colorado Doctrine. This was essentially a "first in time, first in right" use where (excluding federal land) landowners could claim water rights based on whoever had the earliest settlements in a given area. And this brings us to how the Platte is used today.

### *Current & Future Water use of the Platte in Denver*

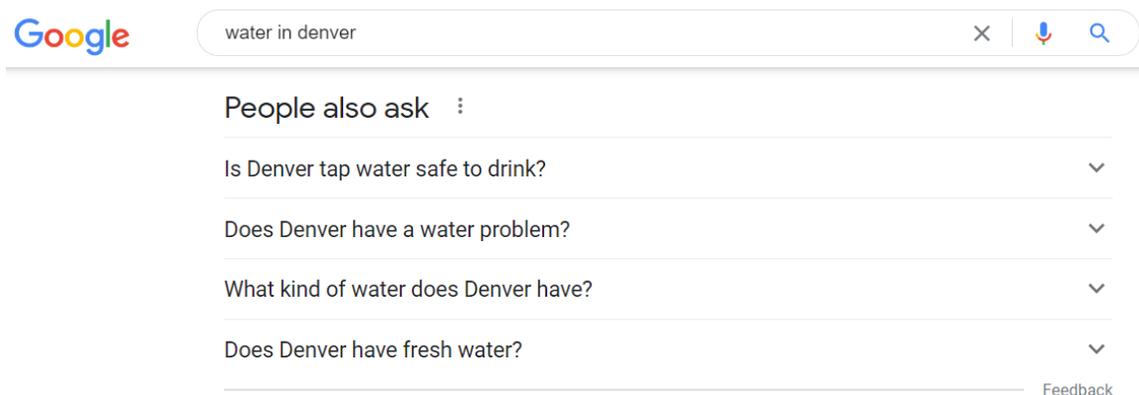
If you reside in the Denver metro area, you are probably one of 1.5 million residents that get potable water from the South Platte with the help of Denver Water Department. While the ability to serve this population size from runoff and Denver basin groundwater sources is amazing, there are facts to ponder as our population grows:

Denver Water relies on about 2% of the water used in the state to support around 25% of Colorado's population.

The EPA currently lists Denver as an 'impaired' waterway due to the ongoing presence of E Coli.

Denver Water collects enough snowmelt, including from the South Platte, at 94 billion gallons of water, enough to fill 157 Mile High (Empower Field) Stadiums.

But it may raise some questions for engineers, urban planners, and residents to think about, like is the practice of collecting runoff sustainable for Denver's future population? Will we have to drill more for groundwater use from the Denver basin as snowmelt decreases in the decades to come? How do we fight ongoing contamination? Questions like these even come up just in Google users' searches on this topic:



And then we have to look to what developers are doing in the future. In 2015, Elitch Gardens was purchased by a real estate developer (Revesco Properties) to convert the 65 acres into a condominium project called River Mile over the next 25 years.



As Elitch's was Platte-adjacent, it does bring up questions of how the developers will re-engineer the direction and flow of the Platte River as they plan to foot the bill for and changes along the Platte.

And then there are some interesting future changes I cannot speculate on, but will change our waterways based on ongoing research, agreements, and other events that end up in our newsfeed each week from the past 4 months that can severely impact our drinking water:

<https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/colorado-will-lose-half-its-snow-by-2080-and-look-more-like-arizona-federal-scientists-conclude>

<https://denver.cbslocal.com/2022/03/09/nebraska-water-threat-south-platte-river/>

Overall, this has mainly been a quick piece to get flag viewers to think about where our water use comes from and what the future holds for Denver's rivers and water basins.

#### *Citations*

\*Credit to Ren Cannon from Denver Public Library for providing source material in the South Platte River's history.

<https://clas.ucdenver.edu/historical-dialogues/Early%20Auraria%3A%20Native%20Peoples>

<https://www.denverwater.org/tap/where-does-your-water-come#:~:text=Denver%20Water's%20South%20System%20captures,West%20Slope%20of%20the%20state>

<https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2014-12/documents/cowqs-no38-2006.pdf>

<https://www.5280.com/2020/01/inside-one-of-the-largest-redevelopments-in-denvers-history/>