

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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While Carsonites have reluctantly relinquished the title of America's smallest state capital (population-wise our capital city lost that distinction almost 50 years ago to Montpelier, Vermont), one misperception seemingly has replaced another. It is sometimes heard around town that when Ormsby County and Carson City were consolidated in 1969 into one political unit, the new and bigger Carson City, at 155.7 sq. miles, had become the largest capital, if not the largest city, area-wise in the United States.

Such was not the case. In 1968, the city of Jacksonville, Florida, and Duval County consolidated into one government. With an area of some 885 sq. miles, Jacksonville is the largest city in the continental United States.

During the 1960s, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma's state capital, annexed many surrounding communities, briefly becoming the nation's largest capital. Oklahoma City was much larger than Carson City when the Silver State's capital became a consolidated government in 1969. Today, Oklahoma City, at 621.2 sq. miles, is the second-largest state capital in physical size.

When Alaska's state capital, Juneau, merged with the City of Douglas and the Juneau Borough in 1970, Jacksonville and Oklahoma City lost their respective "largest city" and "largest capital" titles. Today, Juneau is the largest city and the largest state capital in the United States. Its political boundaries include 3,255 sq. miles, making it larger than Rhode Island (1,545 sq. miles)

or Delaware (2,489 sq. miles).

Try as we might to promote our state capital's uniqueness, Carson City is neither the smallest capital in population (ranked 38th in population in the 2000 U.S. Census) nor the largest in physical size (currently ranked 9th in size). While other cities and state capitals continue to annex lands and grow ever larger, it is unlikely that Carson City will someday expand its boundaries at the expense of Douglas, Lyon, Storey, and/or Washoe counties. At the same time, much of the land in Carson City is federally-managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, the Washoe Tribe maintains two colonies, and a small portion of Lake Tahoe is within the capital's borders.

However, we can take great pride in the fact that Carson City has been Nevada's first and only capital since 1861 -- that is if the state legislature does not move the capital to Las Vegas. Dating back to their pre-statehood beginnings, only ten states have managed to keep their seat of government in only one place (the last time any capital was moved was in 1910 from Guthrie to Oklahoma City).

Photo: Nevada State Library and Archives

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