by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

There is something about claiming to be the largest something, if not the first something. Every state in the nation claims to have the largest or first something and that makes the “something” very special. Marketing something as largest or first is rife with exaggerated and invented claims. Anyway, it’s free speech and there are no penalties for duping the public for fun and profit. In many cases, the promoters honestly believe the claim is true without doing the homework to determine its veracity. You never know what you might find. Truth in advertising seldom gets in the way of a good story.

In this case, is the Virginia City (Comstock) Historic District the largest historic district in the nation as widely advertised? With its colorful silver and gold mining history dating back to 1849, the greater Virginia City area was designated a National Historical Landmark on July 4, 1961. Five years later, the National Park Service listed Virginia City on the National Register of Historic Places as a national historical district. According to the National Register database, the Virginia City Historic District, which includes Gold Hill, Silver City, and downtown Dayton, in Storey and Lyon counties, has 382 contributing buildings and is 14, 750 acres in size.

It's unlikely the claimants for the Virginia City Historic District's size as number one in the nation based their claim on the number of historic buildings. For example, the Lancaster Historic District in Pennsylvania's Amish country has 13,411 contributing buildings making it the largest of its kind in the nation. That doesn't stop some people from advertising on websites that the Charleston Historic District in South Carolina (1,465 contributing buildings) or the Savannah Historic District in Georgia (1,100 contributing buildings) is America's largest historic district. When it comes to contributing buildings making up the size of an historic district, the Boulder City Historic District in Clark County is Nevada's largest with 408 buildings.

The claim for the Virginia City Historic District as largest in the country is based on acreage. Responding to a query, the National Park Service's National Register Database Manager noted that while the Virginia City Historic District is impressive in size it fell far short of the largest National Register historic district in the nation. He pointed out that the national historic district composed of the King Ranch in Texas is 1.2 million acres in size (it is also the largest national historical landmark in the U.S.). Closer to Nevada, for example, we find the Central Whidbey Island Historic District in Island County, Washington (174,000 acres); the Silver City Historic District in Owyhee County, Idaho (102,400 acres); the Chesterfield Historic District in Caribou County, Idaho (21,600 acres); and the Delamar Historic District in Owyhee County, Idaho (16,000 acres).

In the end, the Virginia City Historic District does not even come close to being the largest national historic district in size, nor is it the largest national landmark. However, for some, stealing someone else's thunder or legacy is no big deal. It is sometimes heard, "It's all for a good cause, and whom does it hurt, anyway?" Of course, if I didn't do the research, who would know or care about the erroneous claim. You make the call.

Photographs of Virginia City courtesy of the Nevada State Library and Archives.

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