

*THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS*

# ROOM 306: FRANK FITCHUE

## EARLY PIONEER FOILS BANK ROBBERY AND STANDS UP TO NOTORIOUS DURANGO GANG

Born the oldest son of freed slaves in St. Louis, MO, in 1855, Frank Fitchue and his family make their way west to Kansas shortly after the end of the Civil War. By 1870 Fitchue comes to Durango on his own where he finds work first as a porter at the Strater Hotel and then later as a porter/night watchman at the newly formed First National Bank of Durango. He lives in the basement of the bank where one wall of his bedroom contains the back of the bank's large, ornate metal safe.

He is an impressive man even for the times – he is literate, described in Marion Jarvis' "History of the Strater Hotel" as a "learned Negro." He has a responsible job, is a trustee of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and he is an astute businessman, buying and selling real estate in Durango as well as owning several gold and silver mines in the area.

### The Robbery

In November 1883 Fitchue is approached by Cellas Hawkins, described in the Southwest Newspaper as "a Negro who worked at Philpot's Saloon." Hawkins and four other members of a "notorious gang" try to induce Fitchue to help them rob the bank. Knowing Fitchue works and lives in the bank, the gang wants him to stay away from home on the night they plan to break into the safe from inside his bedroom, threatening him if he doesn't comply.

Showing incredible courage by standing up to a gang of men who are terrorizing the townspeople of Durango, he contacts A.P. Camp (who will later become president of the bank) to warn him about the robbery and the gang's plan to set fire to nearby buildings as a diversion. Mr. Camp, along with Sheriff Barney Watson and the town marshal, ask Fitchue to help set a trap by

going back to Cellas Hawkins and his gang, telling them he will leave the back door of the bank open for them.



Frank Fitchue  
*Photo Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College*

