

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM: 321 THOMAS H. WIGGLESWORTH

THE PATHFINDER OF THE SAN JUAN'S RAILROADS—SURVEYOR, ENGINEER AND CONSTRUCTION SUPERVISOR PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN DURANGO'S EARLY DEVELOPMENT.
JULY 31, 1835-MARCH 15, 1909

HIS LEGACY IN DURANGO

Thomas H. Wigglesworth began his railroad career at age 18 as an axe man working in Tennessee for his older brother. The fifth of ten children born in Palmyra, NY, he was an industrious and hard worker whose skills and knowledge quickly progressed as the railroads expanded across the country. With formal engineering training, surveying, and construction experience under his belt, he left his wife and young family behind and came to Antonito, Colorado, in 1878 where he began working for the Denver & Rio Grande Railway.

The discovery of gold and silver ore in the San Juan Mountains had created a great demand for railroad transportation. In as early as 1875, D&RG had identified the need for expansion to reach the rich mining camp of Silverton. Wigglesworth became the locating engineer to do survey work for the line through the Animas Canyon, requiring surveyors to be let down the canyon's

sheer walls on ropes and ladders. At some points vertical cliffs dropped nearly 600 feet straight to the Animas River below. Tracks had reached Durango in July, 1881, from the East but Silverton, the goal of the San Juan Extension as it was called, still lay nearly 45 miles north and east up the winding Animas River, and over 2,800 feet higher in elevation. Construction of the line was delayed several times due to weather, shortages of supplies, and delays in financing, but finally on July 13, 1882, the first regularly scheduled train traveled from Durango to Silverton.

The Durango-Silverton line, surveyed and constructed under the direction of Thomas Wigglesworth, was acclaimed from the beginning and continues to this day. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) named the Silverton Extension a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark in 1968, stating "Built in 1882 through one of the most rugged mountain areas of the nation, its complexity remains a testament...in the development of the western United States."



Thomas, his wife Ann Catherine, and their five children made their home for many years on a farm in the north Animas Valley called Waterfall Ranch. When he suffered a stroke and died in 1909 at his home the Durango newspaper stated, "He was a man decided in his views and pronounced in his likes and dislikes, a true friend, a worthy citizen — a man honest in all his dealings. It is sufficient to say that he was an engineer of recognized ability and untarnished integrity".

His legacy continues today; those who travel the scenic Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad have this amazing pioneer to thank.

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Crew members referred to him in later years as "Sunny Jim" because of his resemblance to Sunny Jim on the package of Force, a favorite breakfast food.
- "Chief Wig" was known as a man whose "dignity was always in presence, never mingled or kidded and was never grouchy or fault finding".
- Thomas and Ann Catherine named their first child Charles Stonewall in obvious admiration of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson.
- The Wigglesworths owned 400 acres in the Animas Valley, a few miles north of Durango, called Waterfall Ranch. The waterfall still flows and is visible from the west side of the train.
- Thomas and Ann Catherine's second child, Will, was Durango's City Manager at one time.