

THE FUNCTIONAL EVOLUTION OF CHEYENNE,
WYOMING, AS THE CAPITAL OF THE
WESTERN LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1860s when cattle were first driven to market at Cheyenne, Wyoming, the city has been affiliated with the plains cattle industry. Stockmen and their activities have been so closely associated with Cheyenne that the city came to be known as "Cowman's Capital." This study examines Cheyenne's functional evolution as a center of the old West cattle industry.

The northern High Plains region was highly conducive to livestock raising during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Construction of the Union Pacific Railroad prompted men to drive cattle north from Texas to be fattened on the nutritious grasses of the northern plains. Cattle were then shipped eastward by rail where they brought high prices from midwestern and eastern buyers. Because western lands were originally available for grazing without cost, early stockmen made enormous profits in the cattle industry. Many ranchers were so successful that they dominated the industry and became known as the cattle kings.

Findings reveal that Cheyenne evolved through three functional stages as a capital of the cattle industry: a shipping and marketing stage, a commercial and administrative stage, and a symbolic stage. Although it is difficult to place precise dates on these periods, it is evident that the city passed through them in sequence. During the late 1860s and early 1870s, Cheyenne acted as the principal cattle shipping site along the Union Pacific Railroad. By the late 1870s, however, the marketing and shipping role was superseded by commercial and administrative functions as the city became a center of cattle-based wealth and political

influence. The killing winter of 1886-87 initiated a decline in the commercial and administrative phase that continued into the twentieth century. The spirit of the old West in the city was rekindled in 1897 with the origin of the Cheyenne Frontier Days celebration. Cheyenne's subsequent association with the cattle industry has largely been symbolic in nature, with the annual Frontier Days event and the use of old West names and logos as the most evident linkages.