

GEOLOGIC UNITS OF THE FRONT RANGE URBAN CORRIDOR—A RECORD OF HISTORY

The geographic distribution of the geologic units of the Front Range Urban Corridor reflect their ages and histories. The oldest rocks forming the mountains and the youngest units occurring as an extensive surficial cover above the bedrock in the eastern parts of the Corridor and adjacent to major streams. Consolidated rocks younger than those of the mountains form the hogbacks and foothills that border the mountain front.

The history of events recorded by these units spans perhaps two billion years. For the oldest rocks of the mountains may be that old. The ancient gneisses, schists, and quartzites were intruded three times by molten rock material (magma) that solidified into granitic rock at 1.7 billion, 1.4 billion, and 1 billion years ago. These old crystalline rocks fall more than a billion years old, which form the mountain of the Front Range Urban Corridor. They were broken long ago by planes of movement or faults along which the rocks in many places were greatly sheared or crushed in wide zones.

Ancient mountains that were formed during the creation of these ancient rocks were worn down to an essential flat surface by 500 million years (m.y.) ago; however, the record of events between a billion and 300 m.y. is missing in the Denver area. Near Colorado Springs the record takes us back to about 500 m.y. and indicates that for most of the time until 300 m.y. the region lay beneath the sea.

Between 300 m.y. ago and 67 m.y. ago, this region experienced two more invasions of the sea, the last one perhaps lasting about 50-60 million years. A great pile of sedimentary rocks about 10,000 feet thick accumulated during that period, most of it laid down on the floor of that last sea.

About 67 m.y. ago, the present mountains began to be uplifted, bending the sedimentary rocks at their flanks sharply so that on the crest were carried upward. The crest areas were eroded as they rose, and the eroded debris was carried to the flanks of the mountains where it was deposited to form a great plain that soon was covered by vegetation. Volcanoes erupted along breaks or faults that formed at the mountain front, and these volcanic materials were added to the growing pile of sediments. The mountains continued to rise intermittently; the ancient core rocks were unroofed by erosion, and the sediments continued to be deposited eastward until about 7 m.y. ago. Then, because of tilt of the entire region, including the Great Plains, the streams east of the mountains began to cut down through the pile of sediments that they deposited, and to excavate and carry away great volumes of material. The South Platte River at Denver now probably is 1,500-2,000 feet below the level of the former sea that had piled up its sediments.

During the Great Ice Age of the last two or three million years, a series of successively lower land surfaces or pediments were formed until finally the valleys were entrenched and the streams confined. During the peak of the last glacial period, the swollen streams cut their valleys more actively, but, as the climate became drier and the stream volumes were reduced, the streams on the plains were able to transport their loads and the valleys were partially refilled with sediment. Each successively younger stage of valley cutting tended to be deeper than the earlier one, with one exception, and the deposits of the last glacial and early interglacial streams were left as terrace remnants along the younger valleys. Winds whipping across these valleys carried sand and silt eastward and southward and dropped it over much of the greater Denver area to form a wide-spread thick cover of sand and loess that now conceals the bedrock of older sedimentary formations over much of the Denver area.

Because the preserved remnants of sediments deposited during the last few million years are progressively higher topographically with increasing age, height of a deposit above present stream level is a rough measure of age. Another measure of relative age of a deposit is the degree of development of the soil profile that has formed on its surface. Because stream sediments are not uniform, relative height above stream level may be different in different stream valleys and at different distances downstream in the same valley. And, because of climatic, lithologic, and tectonic differences, soil profile development will vary considerably with altitude, latitude, and position relative to the mountains. These important criteria for discriminating units of similar lithology and texture, but of different ages, therefore, must be used with judgment and caution.

The geologic units that constitute this record are described from youngest (top) to oldest (bottom).

DESCRIPTION OF MAP UNITS

Qp POST-PINEY CREEK AND PINEY CREEK ALLUVIUM (UPPER HOLOCENE)—Gravel, sand, silt, and clay of modern stream flood plains and slightly older low terraces less than 6.1 m above stream level. Deposits of Bear Creek, Clear Creek, and Boulder Creek, and South Platte River are coarse, cobbly gravel near the Mountain front; deposits are mainly sand. Sand, silt, and clay compose the deposits in small streams and tributaries. Thickness generally less than 6 m. Minor source of sound aggregate.

Qca COLLUVIUM (UPPER HOLOCENE)—Generally unconsolidated material deposited on slopes by gravity and sheetwash. Thickness generally more than 1.5 m. Includes talus.

Qla LANDSLIDE DEPOSITS HOLOCENE TO MIDDLE PLEISTOCENE—Slumps, debris flows, earthflows, rockfall avalanche deposits, and similar large masses of locally derived debris moved downslope by gravity.

Qsa WINDBLOWN SAND (LOWER HOLOCENE TO UPPER PLEISTOCENE)—Fine to medium sand derived mainly from alluvium of major streams and distributed east and southeast of source area by wind.

Qb BROADWAY ALLUVIUM (UPPER PLEISTOCENE)—Gravel, sand, silt, and clay forming alluvial terraces deposited on a 6 to 12.2 m above present stream level. Includes pre-Piney Creek alluvium of Scott (1962, 1963a). Deposits of major streams west of South Platte River are more coarse-grained near the mountains. Deposits of streams east of South Platte River are mostly sand. Commonly less than 7.6 m thick. Source of sound aggregate.

Ql LOESS (UPPER PLEISTOCENE)—Silt with lesser amounts of clay and sand deposited by wind, generally downward from areas of windblown sand.

Qoa LOUISVARS ALLUVIUM (UPPER PLEISTOCENE)—Gravel, sand, silt, and clay forming terraces as much as 20 m above present streams. Base of deposit locally as much as 9 m below present stream level. Unaltered much of Piney Creek and Broadway Alluviums in channels of major streams. Contains some calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) in upper part and is iron-stained in upper 3.6 to 4.5 m. Major source of commercial sand and gravel.

QUATERNARY

Qn SLOUGH ALLUVIUM (PLEISTOCENE)—Bouldery cobbly gravel near mountain front, decreases in grain size eastward away from mountains. Much calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) in upper part when not removed by erosion. Many unroofed stones. Locally contains bed of volcanic ash about 6 m in diameter. Boulders chiefly granite. Smaller-sized material consists of surfaces 24 to 36 m above present streams.

Qv VERDOS ALLUVIUM (PLEISTOCENE)—Bouldery cobbly gravel near mountain front, decreases in grain size eastward away from mountains. Much calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) in upper part when not removed by erosion. Contains many unroofed stones. Locally contains bed of volcanic ash about 6 m in diameter. Boulders chiefly granite. Smaller-sized material consists of surfaces 61 to 76 m above present streams.

Qrl ROCKY FLATS ALLUVIUM (PLEISTOCENE)—Bouldery cobbly gravel near mountain front, decreases in grain size eastward away from mountains. Very bouldery at Rocky Flats area north of Boulder Creek. Much calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) in upper part when not removed by erosion. Contains many unroofed stones. Commonly about 1.5 m thick but contains some thicker channels. Forms gently sloping surfaces about 107 m above present streams.

Qm NUSSBAUM ALLUVIUM (PLEISTOCENE)—Bouldery cobbly gravel; near mountain front at levels higher than Rocky Flats Alluvium. Contains much calcium carbonate (CaCO₃). 2.5 m thick.

Tertiary

Tg HIGH-LEVEL GRAVEL DEPOSITS (PLOCENE TO OLOGCENE)—Rounded to subangular pebbles, cobbles, and boulders as much as 6 m in diameter in sandy matrix. Boulders chiefly granite. Smaller-sized material consists of granite, gneiss, schist, amphibolite, and other Precambrian rocks. Caps spurs and ridges about 300 m above present streams.

Tcr CASTLE ROCK CONGLOMERATE (LOWER OLOGCENE)—Indurated bouldery cobbly gravel composed mostly of Precambrian rocks, including hornblende, biotite, and chloritose in varying amounts. Commonly consists of interbedded hornblende gneiss, amphibolite, and other granites, including calc-silicate gneiss. Amounts of amphibolite and hornblende in unit not uniform but always sufficient to give an unusually dark appearance.

Tpm GREEN MOUNTAIN CONGLOMERATE (PALEOCENE)—Conglomerate, sandstone, siltstone, and claystone forming upper part of Green Mountain. Thickness about 198 m. Contains pollen and plant fossils of Paleocene age to lower 157 m (Scott, 1972).

Triassic

Tka DAWSON AND ANAPHOSE FORMATIONS (PALEOCENE AND UPPER CRETACEOUS)—Arkosic sandstone, siltstone, claystone, and (or) minor amounts of conglomerate. Where unit underlies the Denver Formation, it is called the Anapohse Formation. Where Denver Formation intertongues and pinches out to the south and east, the unit is called the Dawson Formation. Forms most of bedrock in Denver. Thickness about 610 m thick (Scott and Wobas, 1973). A conglomerate at the base of the Anapohse Formation is an important aquifer in the Denver area.

Cretaceous

Tm WALL MOUNTAIN TUFF (LOWER OLOGCENE)—Light gray fine-grained siliceous volcanic rock (74 percent ash). Most of the rock composed of devitrified glass shards. Part of fine-crystalline ash flow sheet that originated more than 160 km to the southeast. Probably less than 15 m thick in this area. Age about 35 m.y. (Both Scott and Orndorff, 1969). Has been used for crushed-rock aggregate for roads and has been quarried for use as building stone.

Jurassic

Jpm GREEN MOUNTAIN CONGLOMERATE (PALEOCENE)—Conglomerate, sandstone, siltstone, and claystone forming upper part of Green Mountain. Thickness about 198 m. Contains pollen and plant fossils of Paleocene age to lower 157 m (Scott, 1972).

Permian

Pka DAWSON AND ANAPHOSE FORMATIONS (PALEOCENE AND UPPER CRETACEOUS)—Arkosic sandstone, siltstone, claystone, and (or) minor amounts of conglomerate. Where unit underlies the Denver Formation, it is called the Anapohse Formation. Where Denver Formation intertongues and pinches out to the south and east, the unit is called the Dawson Formation. Forms most of bedrock in Denver. Thickness about 610 m thick (Scott and Wobas, 1973). A conglomerate at the base of the Anapohse Formation is an important aquifer in the Denver area.

Pennsylvanian

Pka DENVER FORMATION (PALEOCENE AND UPPER CRETACEOUS)—Claystone, siltstone, sandstone, and conglomerate composed primarily of altered andesitic (volcanic) debris. Claystone and siltstone partly altered to montmorillonitic clay. Underlies most of Denver metropolitan area. Montmorillonitic clay swells when wet, and causes damage to buildings, roads, and other structures. Thickness 280 m.

Cambrian

Yyp 1.04 billion years

Xyp 1.44 billion years

Xzc 1.72 billion years

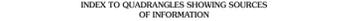
Xq 1.72 billion years

Xp 1.72 billion years

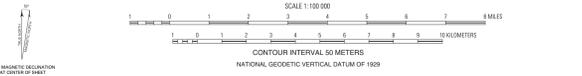
Xo 1.72 billion years

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1. Bryant, Bruce, 1974a, Reconnaissance geologic map of the Conifer quadrangle, Jefferson County, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-597.
2. 1974b, Reconnaissance geologic map of the Pine quadrangle, Jefferson County, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-598.
3. Bryant, B. H., Miller, R. D., and Scott, G. R., 1973, Geologic map of the Indian Hills quadrangle, Jefferson County, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Geol. Quad. Map GQ-1073.
4. Hedge, C. E., 1969, A petrographic and geochronologic study of migmatites and pegmatites in the central Front Range, Colorado: School of Mines unpub. Pp. 2, Dec. 1958 p.
5. Hedge, C. E., Potomac, Z. E., and Bradstock, W. A., 1967, Age of the major Precambrian regional metamorphism in the northern Front Range, Colorado: Geol. Soc. America Bull., v. 78, no. 4, p. 551-558.
6. Hoblit, R., and Larson, E., 1975, Paleontologic and geochronologic data bearing on the structural evolution of the northeastern margin of the Front Range, Colorado: Geol. Soc. Amer. Bull., v. 86, p. 237-242.
7. Hunt, C. B., 1954, Pleistocene and Recent deposits in the Denver area, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Bull., 996-C, p. 91-140.
8. Isett, G. A., Scott, G. R., and Orndorff, J. D., 1969, Oligocene flysch in the Denver Basin, Colorado. In Geological Survey Research 1969: U.S. Geol. Survey Prof. Paper 650-B, B12-B14.
9. Lindahl, R. M., 1972, Geologic map of the Arvada quadrangle, Adams, Denver, and Jefferson Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-548.
10. 1976, Geologic map of the Fort Logan quadrangle, Denver and Jefferson Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-831.
11. 1979, Geologic map of the Commerce City quadrangle, Adams and Denver Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-1009.
12. Matern, J. O., and Lindahl, R. M., 1972, Geologic map of the Parker quadrangle, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Inv. Map I-770-A.
13. 1974, Geologic map and engineering data for the Highlands Ranch quadrangle, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-656.
14. Machette, M. N., 1975, Geologic map of the Lafayette, Adams, Boulder, and Jefferson Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-656.
15. Mads, H. E., 1955, Surficial geology of the Louisville quadrangle, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Bull., 996-E, p. 217-259.
16. McGrew, E. E., and McDougall, J. T., U.S. Geol. Survey unpub. data.
17. McGrew, L. W., U.S. Geol. Survey unpub. data.
18. Peterson, W. L., 1964, Geology of the Platte Canyon quadrangle, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Bull., 1181-C, 23 p.
19. Richardson, G. B., 1915, Castle Rock, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Atlas, Folio 198.
20. Shroba, R. R., U.S. Geol. Survey unpublished data.
21. Schuchowits, D. D., 1972, Surficial geology of the Eastlake quadrangle, Adams County, Colorado: Colorado Sch. Mines U.S. thesis, no. 1165.
22. Scott, G. R., 1961, Preliminary geologic map of the Indian Hills quadrangle, Jefferson County, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Inv. Map I-333.
23. 1962, Geology of the Littleton quadrangle, Jefferson, Douglas, and Arapahoe Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Bull., 1121-L, 53 p.
24. 1963a, Quaternary geology and geomorphic history of the Kasler quadrangle, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Prof. Paper 421-A, p. 1-70.
25. 1963b, Bedrock geology of the Kasler quadrangle, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Prof. Paper 421-B, p. 71-125.
26. 1972, Geologic map of the Morrison quadrangle, Jefferson County, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Inv. Map I-790-A.
27. Scott, G. R., and Wobas, R. A., 1973, Reconnaissance geologic map of Colorado Springs and vicinity, U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Field Studies Map MF-482.
28. Sheridan, D. M., Maxwell, C. H., and Albee, A. L., 1967, Geology and uranium deposit of the Balcones district, Jefferson County, Colorado, with sections on Paleocene and younger sedimentary rocks, by Richard Van Horn, U.S. Geol. Survey Prof. Paper 520, 122 p.
29. Sheridan, D. M., Reed, J. C., Jr., and Bryant, B. H., 1972, Geologic map of the Evergreen quadrangle, Jefferson County Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Inv. Map I-786-A.
30. Shaly, William, U.S. Geol. Survey unpub. data.
31. Spencer, F. D., 1961, Bedrock geology of the Louisville quadrangle, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Geol. Quad. Map GQ-151.
32. Van Horn, Richard, 1957, Bedrock geology of the Golden quadrangle, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Geol. Quad. Map GQ-103.
33. 1972, Surficial and bedrock geology of the Golden quadrangle, Jefferson County, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Misc. Inv. Map I-761-A.
34. Wells, J. D., 1967, Geology of the Eldorado Springs quadrangle, Boulder and Jefferson Counties, Colorado: U.S. Geol. Survey Bull., 1221-D, 85 p.



Base from U.S. Geological Survey, Digital Line Graphs (DLGS and Hypsography), 1995. County boundaries from Colorado Department of Local Affairs, 2001. Major highways and roads from NTAD 2001, U.S. Department of Transportation. Universal Transverse Mercator projection, zone 13, 1927 North American Datum.



Geology compiled in 1973-1977. Spatial database by Theodore R. Brandt and Kyle E. Murray. Digital cartography by Theodore R. Brandt. Manuscript approved for publication January 21, 2003.

A SPATIAL DATABASE OF BEDDING ATTITUDES
Compiled by
Theodore R. Brandt, David W. Moore, and Kyle E. Murray
2003
to accompany
GEOLOGIC MAP OF THE GREATER DENVER AREA, FRONT RANGE URBAN CORRIDOR, COLORADO
By
Donald E. Trimble and Michael N. Machette