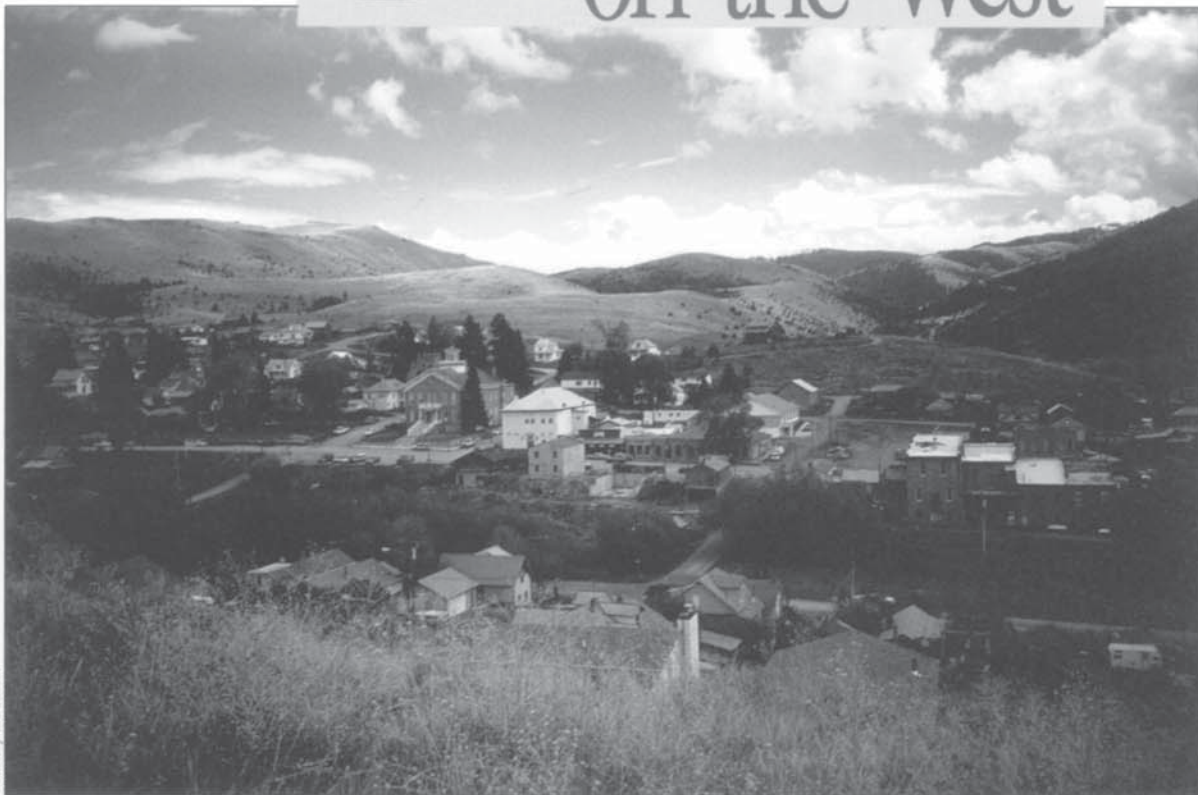


M Essays on the West



Courtesy the author

Virginia City (above, 1999) preserves Montana's 1860s gold rush heritage in various ways, including first-generation buildings that still line its main streets nearly a century and a half later.

MORE THAN THE Preserving the Gold Rush and Its Outcome

by Ellen Baumler

Veteran prospector James H. Morley followed the lure of gold to Montana in 1862, working placer claims at the rich strikes of Grasshopper, Alder Gulch, and Last Chance. When the last of these stampedes had ended, Morley vividly recalled the excitement. "Truth and the marvelous go hand in hand," he wrote, "when Young America finds a good gold gulch."¹

Nearly a century and a half later, Montana's gold rush is remembered at all three of these places, but it is best preserved at Virginia

City where first generation buildings from the far-removed 1860s are still central to the town's main street. Virginia City, however, is more than one of the best preserved gold rush towns in the American West. According to National Trust for Historic Preservation president Richard Moe, Virginia City's place in history is no less important to the settlement of the western frontier than Williamsburg was to Colonial America.²

Mining camps like Virginia City were not like other towns that grew

for less transitory reasons. To survive, a mining camp had to have something to hang onto after the gold played out. For a decade, Virginia City held the designation as territorial capital. If it could have retained the capital, if mining had remained more lucrative, if the tracks of the railroad had come its way, and if it had attracted other industries, the town's story would probably have been different.

Virginia City struggled to survive after the glory was gone, however, but never quite went the way of many other Montana mining

camps such as Elkhorn, Granite, Garnet, and Coolidge—all of which became ghost towns. On the brink of abandonment after dredging operations shut down in the 1930s, Virginia City got a second chance in the 1940s with the help of Charles and Sue Bovey of Great Falls, Montana. The town became the focus of a large-scale project launching one of the first preservation efforts in the West.³ Virginia City was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1961 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. After another struggle, the state of Montana purchased much of the town in 1997. These processes deepen Virginia City's national significance.

Today Virginia City provides a unique opportunity not only to observe a gold rush town in its stages of growth from settlement to camp to town, but also to track its later fortunes. The built environment offers the documentation. Primitive cabins of notched and

GLORY at Virginia City

peeled or hewn logs mark the earliest settlement phase; milled lumber marks the camp phase. Substantial buildings of stone (and later, brick) and decorative architectural details adapted from local materials signal the town phase. Most discussions of Virginia City focus upon the "frozen in time"

1. James H. Morley, diary, November 12, 1864, p. 191, SC 533, Montana Historical Society Archives (hereafter MHS), Helena, Montana (hereafter Morley diary).

2. Carolyn Dufurrena, "The Fight to Save Virginia City," *Colonial Williamsburg*, 19 (Winter 1996-1997), 29.

reminders of that brief, tumultuous period of vigorous placer gold mining between 1863 and 1865. During this short time span, Virginia City rose from settlement to town to become the territory's first overland transportation hub, first cultural center, and territorial capital. This is ultimately its attraction. But the reminders of later periods interspersed among gold rush and early territorial landmarks are no less important. Substantial civic buildings constructed after the capital moved to Helena, adaptive reuses of older buildings, and reconstructions of original buildings are also integral to Virginia City's unique patchwork. Collectively, the built environment symbolizes the town's long and sometimes painful journey from gold rush boomtown to territorial capital and from near-ghost town to tourist attraction.

Before the rush to Alder Gulch, events that paved the way unfolded west of the Continental Divide. Gold discoveries in 1860 along the Salmon River in present-day Idaho brought thousands of miners to the general region, which was then part of Washington Territory. Further discoveries at Florence, Idaho, in 1861 attracted some ten thousand additional prospectors. The region could hardly support them all, so thousands of disappointed miners were poised and ready to act upon other rumored strikes.⁴ The following year on July 28, 1862, John White and company were en route to the Salmon River mines when they made a rich discovery at Grasshopper Creek. Within a week, miners came from all directions and Bannack, Montana's first boomtown, grew from that rush. As

3. National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Montana Towns Saved," *Preservation*, 49 (May-June 1997), 102.

4. S. Lyman Tyler, ed., *The Montana Gold Rush Diary of Kate Dunlap* (Denver, 1969), A-11.

summer waned, Bannack's crude log cabins sheltered some five hundred residents.

Congress created the Territory of Idaho to include the rich, newly created Idaho mining districts the following spring of 1863. The vast region encompassed the east and west boundaries of present-day Montana, all of Idaho, and parts of Wyoming. A special voters poll in 1863 recorded the total population of the Territory of Idaho at 32,342 with 11,043 people counted in Montana.⁵ The Alder Gulch discovery in May 1863 drew miners from all directions and stole much of Bannack's population as well, which by this time had grown to about 1,000. Small communities appeared for miles along Alder Gulch and the crude road connecting them was soon "bordered with dwellings, on both sides all along."⁶ Among the settlements of "Fourteen-mile City" scattered along the gulch, Virginia City became the largest and most permanent.

The first two hundred stampedeers who followed the trampled brush from Bannack to Alder Gulch had an immediate impact on the landscape. In a matter of hours, miners swarmed among the dense alder thickets hastily cutting wood, clearing brush, and constructing cabins, tents, and makeshift brush shelters to mark the first claims. In less than a week, "the new community was busy upheaving, sluicing, drifting, and cradling the inexhaustible bed of auriferous gravel."⁷ By winter 1864, fifty dollars bought a ticket on one of A. J. Oliver's regular coaches to Salt Lake City.⁸ As

5. Gene F. Williams, ed., *Idaho Territorial Voters Poll Lists, 1863* (Boise, Idaho, 1996), 6.

6. Morley diary, November 12, 1864, p. 191.

7. Nathaniel P. Langford, *Vigilante Days and Ways* (1890; Helena, Mont., 1996), 127.



MHS Museum, Helena

Bare hillsides in A. E. Mathews's 1868 sketch of Virginia City reflect the impact that gold stampedeers had on the landscape, while the crowded valley speaks to the community's growth between 1864 and 1868.

Virginia City became a key location and transportation hub, Congress created the Territory of Montana the following May 1864. A few weeks later, four prospectors made a third great strike at Last Chance Gulch and the settlement that grew there was soon christened Helena.⁹

Bannack, Virginia City, and Helena each had a turn as Montana's territorial capital, but even though the three settlements had much in common, each was destined for a very different future. Today Bannack, a state park and National Historic Landmark, is a ghost town whose empty buildings speak to the transience of placer discoveries.

A brief two weeks after the initial rush, the Virginia City townsite was platted like a proper eastern city with straight streets and square corners despite the rough, uneven terrain.¹⁰ Miners paid little attention to the plan and

built their cabins wherever it pleased them, scattering their tiny log dwellings over hillsides stripped of vegetation. Some of these settlement-phase cabins form the core of later homes and shops and a few are scattered along Virginia City's residential streets. More than a thousand buildings once crowded the original townsite. Although a scant 237 remain within the townsite today, 63 of these date to the 1860s and a remarkable 51 of that number were built during the height of the gold rush from 1863 to 1865.¹¹

Many of Virginia City's oldest log buildings cluster at the west end of Wallace Street, cloaked in slightly later facades that mask their humble beginnings. The Kramer Building, the Goldberg Store, and the Sauerbier Blacksmith Shop especially illustrate the important transition from primitive log

dwellings of the settlement phase to frame buildings of the camp phase. The Kramer

Building is one of the town's oldest structures, built as a dwelling just after the initial stampede in June of 1863. V-notched logs and a lack of sawn lumber help to date its core log cabin as one of Virginia City's first buildings. Its roof is a study in frontier roofing methods with the layers still partly visible. Poles laid tightly together and covered with mud, a technique "in universal use," according to miner James Morley, form the bottom layer. Sawn boards were later placed on top of the poles and finally, corrugated tin and shingles of a much later period form the top layers.¹² Inside, muslin stretched smooth and tacked down over the hastily constructed rough log walls gives the illusion of plaster. This attempt at interior decorating reveals a level of civilization very early at Virginia City that was apparently lacking at Bannack.¹³

8. Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (1976; Seattle, 1991), 78.

9. The four were immediately dubbed the Four Georgians for reasons forgotten; they were not all from Georgia. The late Richard Roeder, in conversations with the author in November 1995, speculated that they were so-named because they were practicing the "Georgian method" of placer mining.

10. John Ellingsen, John De Haas, Tony Dalich, and Ken Sievert, *If These Walls Could Talk: The History of the Buildings of Virginia City* rev. ed. (n.p., 1978), 1.

11. Compiled from site survey report, Paul D. Friedman, Dames and Moore, Denver, Colorado, "Architectural, Historical, and Archaeological Inventory of the Virginia City National Historic Landmark, Madison County, Montana," August 9, 1990, pp. 13-26. The Dames and Moore document (hereafter D & M document) is part of an unpublished technical survey report prepared as part of an inventory of the historic resources of the Virginia City National Historic Landmark. The inventory is on file at the State Historic Preservation Office, Helena, Montana (hereafter SHPO) and at the National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C.

12. Montana Historical and Architectural Inventory Form (hereafter MHAI), site 154-9. The MHAI inventories are a major component of the D & M document described in footnote 12.

13. Harriet Sanders, in W. F. Sanders and Robert W. Taylor, *Biscuits and Badmen: The Sanders Story in Their Own Words* (Butte, Mont., 1983), 26, recalled how she delighted in Virginia City's accommodations over Bannack's, especially the smooth muslin-covered walls.

14. MHAI, site 154-10.

15. *Progressive Men of the State of Montana* (New York [c. 1902]), 217.

16. *Biscuits and Badmen*, 26-27. The Planter's House no longer stands.

Next to the Kramer Building, the Goldberg Store was also built of V-notched round logs just a few months later. The latter, however, was one of the first Virginia City buildings to incorporate sawn lumber in its original construction. A comparison of these buildings illustrates Virginia City's rapid progression from temporary settlement to more permanent camp.¹⁴ Although the first sawn lumber may have come from Bannack, there were several sawmills operating locally by December 1863. One of these, run by Anton Holter at Ramshorn Gulch eighteen miles away, produced two types of lumber: one kind for buildings and another kind for miner's sluices and flumes.¹⁵

Planed boards were in use by late 1863, and the Planter's House on Jackson Street reputedly sported the first in the territory, marking a new level of sophistication in construction. Planing made a great difference in a finished appearance, not only outside, but inside as well. Without planed

lumber, interiors were very primitive and it was difficult to display wares and serve customers. When they could obtain it, some early saloonkeepers used carpet to cover their rough log counters and bars. When they moved on, they burned the carpet to collect substantial sums of gold dust trapped in the pile.¹⁶

Like the Goldberg Store and the Kramer Building across the street, the core of the Sauerbier Blacksmith Shop is log. The small, primitive, settlement-phase dwelling was soon incorporated into a frame structure and converted to a hurdy-gurdy house. Historic photographs show that by the late 1860s, the dance hall had become a blacksmith shop. The Goldberg Store and the Kramer Building were also converted to commercial use, and typical of mining camp architecture, each one had a false front addition. These and other early buildings with log cores on Wallace Street reflect changes in use and remodeling of their facades as settlement matured to camp.

Once milled lumber was available, the gabled log dwellings received their frame false fronts, which lent a much grander, larger-than-life appearance to the primitive cabins. False fronts crowded together along business streets gave frontier mining camps a visual sense of security, reinforcing the logical notion of main street as a tangible link to civilization.

Brothers James and William Kiskadden constructed Virginia City's first stone building during the summer of the discovery, hauling rubble stone to the building site on Wallace Street. The bottom half of the building is rubble stone with a wood false front above the stone. Originally stucco (but scored to look like quarried stone) covered the facade, a simple method employed to dress up rustic surfaces. The tall, imposing false front offered ample room for advertising the Kiskaddens' grocery business. Title information on the building illustrates Virginia City's early boom-and-bust economy. The Kiskaddens sold the building and two lots in 1864 for



White Pine Lumber Yard (above), 1866, formerly Anton Holter's lumber yard

Construction features such as milled-lumber siding, false fronts, and stucco-covered facades testify to Virginia City's settlement phase, which quickly followed the miners' first primitive cabins, tents, and makeshift shelters.



Sauerbier Blacksmith Shop (left), 1944



Kiskadden Building (above), 1997

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Courtesy the author

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



Courtesy the author

Thomas Dimsdale, one of the territory's first newspapermen, was also an early educator who taught twenty students in one of Montana's first private schools. Dimsdale held classes in his cabin (left, 1997) in 1864, charging each pupil two dollars a week.

\$8,000. The property sold again in 1865 for \$6,000. In 1871, it sold for \$550 to blacksmith George Thexton, who converted it to the Star Livery. Thexton remodeled the storefront by removing a ground floor central door to create a larger opening for wagons. He reused the door in the hayloft above, where it remains today.¹⁷

In addition to false fronts added to existing log buildings, new buildings were also constructed with false fronts during the camp phase. One such modest building was the scene of five executions. On January 14, 1864, Virginia City vigilantes hanged five men suspected of violence under the direction of Bannack's sheriff, Henry Plummer. The center support beam of the unfinished building served as gallows for Frank Parish, Boone Helm, Haze Lyons, Club Foot George Lane, and Jack Gallagher.¹⁸ The already-infamous Hangman's Building, as it has been known ever since, was

soon finished and purchased by R. R. Hale to house a drugstore. But the building is also significant for the simple gable-front construction of log covered with beveled siding and its prominent false front.

By summer 1864, Virginia City had a population of about 2,000, and creation of the Territory of Montana had a direct impact on area residents. Virginia City became the seat of Madison County and vigilante rule and the miner's court were replaced by official organized government. Madison County built a substantial jail of square notched logs for \$4,674, which served the community until 1876. It then stood empty until the turn of the century when blacksmith Charles Sauerbier converted the sturdy building into a very serviceable residence.¹⁹

In a small log cabin dug into the hillside on the east end of Cover Street, Professor Thomas Dimsdale organized a private school in fall 1863. In 1864, he advertised in the Territory's first newspaper of consequence, the *Montana Post*:

"There are other children in the streets we see learning what is not taught at Prof. D's school room, whose parents ought to know where they belong and what is best for their welfare."²⁰

Harriet Sanders was one parent concerned about the influence mining camp characters might have on her two young sons. Her husband, Wilbur F. Sanders, thus had a fine home built for his family three-fourths of a mile outside of town in spring 1864.²¹ The Carpenter Gothic cottage is a rare, early example of refined construction with its planed boards, plastered walls, and smooth floors. By 1867 Virginia City had quieted down considerably and Sanders moved the house into town where it stands today on Idaho Street.²²

Modest frame dwellings were fairly commonplace by summer 1864. Two of these early homes perch atop a terrace at the east end of town. One was the longtime family home of Dr. Flora McKay McNulty, and another served as the "Territorial Governor's Mansion"

17. MHAI, site 154-14.

18. Ibid., site 156-2. Among the many discussions of Plummer and his road agents, see Merrill G. Burlingame, "Montana's Righteous Hangmen: A Reconsideration," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 28 (October 1978), 36-49; and Lew L. Callaway, *Montana's Righteous Hangmen: The Vigilantes in Action* (Norman, 1982). For the other side of the argument, see R. E. Mather and F. E. Boswell, *Hanging the Sheriff: A Biography of Henry Plummer* (Salt Lake City, 1987).

19. MHAI, site 193-25.

20. Virginia City *Montana Post*, December 17, 1864.

21. Sanders and Taylor, *Biscuits and Badmen*, 27.

22. Ibid., 26; MHAI, site 199-2.

23. Duane Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier* (1967; reprint Lincoln, 1974), 7; J. L. Campbell, *Idaho: Six Months in the New Gold*

Diggings: The Emigrant's Guide Overland (New York, 1864).

24. Virginia City *Montana Post*, January 7, 1865. See also Warren J. Brier, *The Frightful Punishment: Con Orem and Montana's Great Glove Fights of the 1860s* (Missoula, Mont., 1969) for a historical account of the fight.

25. MHAI, sites 191-6, 196-7, 196-8; D & M document, 29.

of Benjamin Potts from 1870 to 1875.

By fall 1864, Virginia City had entered the town phase. Newcomers from far-flung places crossed the plains armed with J. L. Campbell's newly published emigrant's guide, *Idaho: Six Months in the New Gold Diggings*, but the creation of the Territory of Montana made this detailed manual already outdated. The appearance of schools, theaters, churches, fraternal organizations, and clubs reflecting the urbanization of the mining camp and its eclectic population further distanced Virginia City from Campbell's experiences less than a year previous.²³

The *Montana Post* began regular publication in fall 1864. Virginia City quickly earned a reputation as the "Social City" for its cultivated residents, its log theater that hosted local amateurs and traveling troupes, and the fine buildings that were beginning to adorn Wallace Street. In contrast, there were more than seventy licensed liquor dealers and plenty of less cultured entertainment, including high-stakes

gambling; fancy ladies; cock, bull and dog fighting; and "scientific boxing." One of the longest bare knuckle fights in history took place in January 1865 at Virginia City. Editor Thomas Dimsdale recorded each of the 185 brutal rounds in detail on the front page of the *Montana Post*.²⁴

As Virginia City evolved into the town phase, its buildings became more permanent and aesthetically pleasing. Joseph Griffith and William Thompson opened a quarry to build the

Creighton Stone Block, Virginia City's first building of quarried stone in summer 1864.²⁵ The beautiful three-part Renaissance Revival-style block featured a series of nine semicircular arches, each with a pair of French doors. Another quarried-stone building suggestive of the Greek Revival style housed the Allen and Millard Bank, the first such institution in the territory authorized to write drafts on a New York bank. Two more buildings of note constructed at this time were Content's Corner



Three 1860s residences—still standing and still privately owned—share Gothic Revival features ranging from a Queen Anne porch (above) to gingerbread-trimmed eaves (center and below).



Sanders House (top), 1989
 McNulty House (center), 1989
 Potts House (left), 1989

(Photos this page, Montana State Historic Preservation Office, Helena)

and Stonewall Hall, which are among the state's most significant landmarks for their associations with early territorial government.

Solomon Content's \$4,000 commercial building was by far the town's most impressive business space. Completed in fall 1864, classy stucco scored to look like stone covered the two-story rubble stone walls. Gothic-style windows with traceried transoms graced both stories. The other landmark, Stonewall Hall, was a substantial stone building that added further permanency to Virginia City's early streetscape. On its second floor, the Virginia City Lyceum offered young men the use of a small library and reading room for a monthly membership fee of \$5.²⁶ When Virginia City became the territorial capital and the seat of government in February 1865, the territorial legislature frequently met on the second floor of Stonewall Hall during the next decade while the second floor of Content's Corner housed the various territorial offices.

The striking facade of Content's Corner may well have served as impetus at about this time for other shopkeepers to dress up their plain false fronts with stylish ornamenta-

tion and French doors.²⁷ The addition of Greek, Renaissance, or Gothic Revival-style details in the form of pilasters, pediments, dentils, medallions, and arches crafted in wood mirrored similar decorative elements fashioned of more substantial masonry in big cities back East and in Europe.²⁸ The Greek and Renaissance Revival styles, in decline by the end of the Civil War, and the newer Gothic Revival style were translated thus into vernacular expressions in Virginia City and elsewhere on the western frontier.²⁹

Virginia City's first generation buildings of the gold rush period constructed before the advent of good roads and reliable transportation share another feature that identifies them as products of the early frontier. French doors with small, multilight panes underscore the difficulties of transporting precious commodities like window glass to remote places. Only small panes, typically 8 x 10 inches and packed in sawdust at a dollar apiece, could survive the arduous journey overland by ox team from Salt Lake City or up the Missouri by steamboat and then overland from Fort Benton.³⁰ In other gold rush towns that grew into perma-

nent settlements, the first early cabins and false-fronted buildings were almost always torn down or updated with larger commercial storefronts as they were in Helena.³¹ Many buildings of the gold rush in Virginia City escaped later nineteenth-century remodeling; their small panes of glass are another element that document rapid growth and decline.

Virginia City's new status as capital called for civic improvements. In 1865, these included the chartering of a gas company with Samuel Hauser as one of the four stockholders and incorporation of a water system by Anton Holter and partners.³² Remnants of the spring-fed wooden water pipes, fashioned with augers and tools made by the blacksmith George Thexton, were still in use in the late twentieth century. James K. P. Miller noted at this time that the buildings were mostly on one street, and mining activity had been so intense that it looked as if an "enormous Hog had been uprooting the soil."³³

With the gold rush excitement over and Virginia City designated the seat of Madison County, one of Montana's first established counties, it then had need of an official courthouse. The frame false-

fronted building, now known as the Bonanza Inn, dates to 1866. Its post-gold rush construction generally precludes it in discussions of Virginia City's earliest resources. It is significant,

Content's Corner (left, 1997) reflects the time-honored tendency to remodel, update, and add on. Renovation in the 1890s included replacing graceful Gothic-style windows with modern plate glass and covering scored stucco with brick.



Courtesy the author

The difficulty of transporting glass before the advent of good roads prompted design features like the multipaned display windows and French doors in the false-fronted building at right (1989), which housed a saloon in the 1860s.

however, as a slightly later example of the building style employed in the town's infancy and still utilized in this important county edifice. The courthouse likely served some function in territorial government as well as county administration because territorial offices and legislative meeting places were somewhat scattered about Virginia City.³⁴ The oldest standing frame courthouse in Montana, it served Madison County during nearly the entire period of territorial government in Virginia City, from 1866 to 1875.

Even though Virginia City marked a milestone with the installation of telegraph lines from Creighton's Stone Block to Salt Lake City in 1866, not all visitors appreciated its progress. The Earl of Dunraven was not impressed



Montana State Historic Preservation Office, Helena

with Virginia City's "straggling shanties" and found it appalling that anyone could be so deluded as to compare it with a proper city.³⁵ Yet opinion depended upon perspective and circumstance. Ellen Fletcher described the business streets as small but stylish and "city-like" and to David Bailey, who had not seen a decent building in months, "the place looked good."³⁶ Still, accommodations were primitive and hard to come by, especially when the legislature was in town. Poorly constructed buildings, impossible to heat, and lack of space made two or three strangers to a bed a common sleeping arrangement.³⁷

Virginia City reached another milestone in urban evolution in 1867 when the Masons built the most impressive, expensive stone building in the territory at a cost of \$35,000. Fraternal organizations played an important role in frontier settlement and the Masons especially may have played a key role in the organization of the vigilantes.³⁸ Furniture, brought in by ox team, is still in use in the second-floor lodge rooms. The following year, Virginia City applied for a federal townsite patent and the official plat map was redrawn to reflect the dreams of city fathers. The map included sketches of the proposed

26. Virginia City *Montana Post*, January 14, 1865; MHAI, site 192-6.

27. Ellingsen, et al., *If These Walls Could Talk*, 12.

28. Kingston Heath, "False-Front Architecture on Montana's Urban Frontier" in Thomas Carter, ed., *Images of an American Land: Vernacular Architecture in the Western United States* (Albuquerque, N. Mex., 1997), 31.

29. Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York, 1992), 184.

30. Granville Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier as Seen in the Journals and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart, Gold Miner, Trader, Merchant, Rancher and Politician*, in *Early Western Journals*, ed. Paul C. Phillips, 2 vols. (Cleveland, Ohio, 1925), 1:263.

31. In Helena, for example, a few of the earliest commercial buildings date from the

1870s, but sport 1880s-1890s postrailroad facades.

32. Michael A. Leeson, *History of Montana, 1739-1885* (Chicago, Ill., 1885), 777; and Frances E. Albright, "A Child in Virginia City," in *Way Out West: Recollections and Tales*, ed. H. G. Merriam (Norman, 1969), 188.

33. Andrew Rolle, ed., *The Road to Virginia City: The Diary of James Knox Polk Miller* (1960; reprint, Norman, 1989), 75.

34. MHAI, site 196-7. According to Virginia City record 58, May 8, 1868, genealogy room, MHS Library, the Madison County Courthouse housed the "Executive Office." Similarly, the old Lewis and Clark County Courthouse in Helena and the current one that replaced it in 1886 served symbolically at least as the official capitol, housing some territorial offices and functions even though legislative meeting

places were scattered around town as they were in Virginia City. It is possible that the old Madison County Courthouse served a similar purpose.

35. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps*, 48-49.

36. Ellen Fletcher, letters, man. file 36, Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman, Montana (hereafter MSU Libraries); D. J. Bailey, "Diary and Reminiscences of David Bailey: His Journey to Montana 1865," man. file 423, MSU Libraries. Both quoted in D & M document, 29, 32.

37. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps*, 64, n 23. See also [from notes of Mrs. Granville Stuart], "When Virginia City Was the Capital of Montana Territory," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 3 (January 1953), 79.

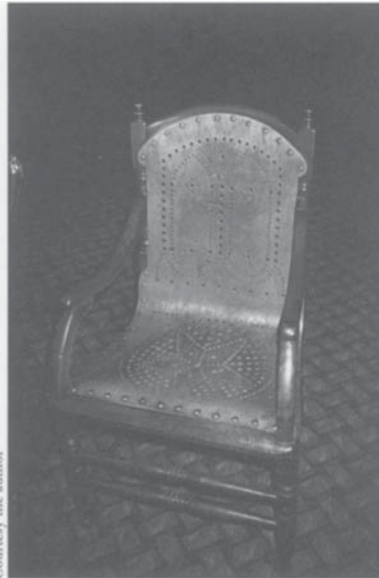
38. MHAI, site 156-2; Malone, Roeder, and Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, 80.

State Capitol, an Episcopal Church, and the Masonic Temple. In reality, only the temple was constructed.³⁹

Virginia City continued to lose population while Helena prospered. Gold from placer mining in Alder Gulch became more difficult to recover and began to give way to quartz mining, a much more expensive enterprise because it required heavy equipment and financial backing. During the 1870s, quartz mining in Montana in general suffered from a lack of investors, poor transportation, and limited technology.⁴⁰ Virginia City reflects this trend. Elections were held in 1867, 1869, and 1874 to determine the permanent territorial capital. Virginia City won in the first election, but, as its population continued to dwindle, two more elections fraught with irregularities were finally decided by the Montana Supreme Court. The court ruled in favor of Helena, in part because the community was located along a projected rail route.⁴¹

Although Virginia City's plans to build a state capitol were crushed, the town instead settled on a new county courthouse, placing its confidence in the fact that it was still the county seat. Loren B. Olds produced the blueprints for the present Madison County Courthouse, accepted on April 24, 1875, scarcely two weeks after the territorial government

entourage left Virginia City for Helena. Olds also designed the brick Virginia City school (now City Hall) to house the territory's first high school at about the same time.⁴² These brick buildings of the mid-1870s are of primary signifi-



Courtesy the author

Fancy furniture still in use today, including the chair (above) photographed in 1998, reflected the community status of the Masons, who erected their Virginia City temple in 1867.

cance to the architectural melange that chronicles Virginia City's post-gold rush history. The appearance of architect-designed buildings in Virginia City, usually the sign of community stability,

marks a short-lived burst of optimism and the final stage of real growth. The Gothic Revival-style Methodist Church was also built at this time. Like the Kiskaddens' business block more than a decade before, the rubble stone walls of this beautiful church were covered in stucco scored to look like stone.⁴³

The Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth (Kansas) arrived in Virginia City in 1876 at the request of Father F. J. Kelleher to open a hospital for miners. They bought and renovated the old false-fronted frame courthouse, which then stood conveniently near the Catholic Church. Sisters Louisa Carney and Mary Leo Dempsey and novice Sister Irene McGrath at first kept the wards of St. Mary's Hospital full. County patients paid \$10 weekly and private patients \$12, "with extra room." As mining activity declined, patients became fewer and the sisters' wards grew empty. The hard-working sisters who were "never meant to be ornamental" closed the hospital in 1879, their work in the town finished. This closure symbolized the end of the placer miners' presence and finalized a chapter in Virginia City's history.⁴⁴

Not all placer miners, however, had abandoned the area. A few years before, in 1870, when Virginia City had dropped from its peak of about 5,000 inhabitants to

39. Ellingsen, et al., *If These Walls Could Talk*, 36, notes that the temple drawing was so poor that a photograph, still in place today, was pasted over it.

40. D & M document, 56.

41. Malone, Roeder, and Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, 109-10.

42. MHAL, sites 191-1, 188-1; D & M document, 78-79. Olds also designed the Beaverhead County Courthouse (later the Meade Hotel) at about this same time and likely had a hand a decade before in the design of the Masonic Temple. Virginia City *Madisonian*, April 10, 1875, December 11, 1914.

43. MHAL, site 198-7.

44. See Sister Julia Gilmore, *We Came North: Centennial Story of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth* (St. Meinrad, Ind., 1961), 46-48; and Sisters of Charity, *History of the Sisters of Charity* (Kansas City, Mo., 1898), 475-76. The Boveys renovated this important landmark in the 1950s to accommodate tourists and employees.

45. Bureau of Census, *Census of 1870, Montana Territory, Madison County*, book 8, bound copy of original at MHS Library.

46. Marion T. Eltonhead, "Montana as a Territory," SC 664, MHS Archives; D & M document, 41. On the Chinese in Montana, see Robert Swartout, Jr., "From Kwangtung to the Big Sky: The Chinese Experience in Frontier Montana," in *The Montana Heritage: An Anthology of*

Historical Essays, ed. Harry Fritz and Robert Swartout, Jr. (Helena, Mont., 1992), 61-79; and Albright, "A Child in Virginia City," 190-91.

47. MHAL, site 193-7.

48. MHAL, site 194-3.

49. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of Population, 1900, Montana*, Madison County, microfilm 251, roll 913, enumeration district 52, ward 1, sheet 8, identified four women who declared their profession as "sporting lady." Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census, Montana, 1910*, Madison County microfilm 377, roll 834, enumeration district 47, sheet 14B, identified six prostitutes and two heads of households who list "madam" as their occupations.

867, nearly a third of its population was Chinese. This ethnic group numbered nearly 280, was almost entirely male, and colored Virginia City with an exotic presence.⁴⁵ Ostracized and discriminated against, the Chinese were confined by city ordinance to the west end of Wallace Street where they lived in neat cabins and raised vegetables on the sod roofs. This group reworked abandoned claims and was the last living reminder of placer mining at Alder Gulch. Marion Eltonhead observed in 1880 that the once-famous gulch was deserted and lonely except for a few Chinese in their blue “nightie-like blouses” who patiently rocked water and dust back and forth to find the gold others might have missed.⁴⁶ By 1900, there were fewer than twenty Chinese residents, although there was a Chinese presence in Virginia City until about 1920.

Residential architecture of the 1870s and 1880s mirrors the mix reflected in commercial buildings, but with a preference for the Gothic Revival and the vernacular Carpenter Gothic. Virginia City’s several neighborhood streets are therefore a charming mix of modest log and frame dwellings and stylish

larger homes. Some still have their original gingerbread while others display layers of Victorian-era and later-period remodeling.

The advent of rail lines to Montana in the 1880s brought a general revival of hard-rock mining even in the vicinity of Virginia City, by now clearly out of the direct path of the tracks. The business of S. R. Buford, whose wholesale grocery was the supply point for most of southwestern Montana during the 1870s and early 1880s, illustrates the impact of these two events. With the advent of the railroad to Butte in 1881, Buford lost status as a major regional supplier.⁴⁷

Gold dredging began at Alder Gulch in the 1890s with the steam-powered *Maggie Gibson* and continued off and on under the Conrey Placer Mining Company until 1922. During this period, Virginia City housed and fed the crews, reaping the benefits of dredging activities. Several houses of ill repute even seem to have done a brisk business. One of these had located at the far west end of Wallace Street during the 1890s in a vacant 1865 dwelling known as the Green Front.⁴⁸ By 1900 through at least 1910, two madams operated

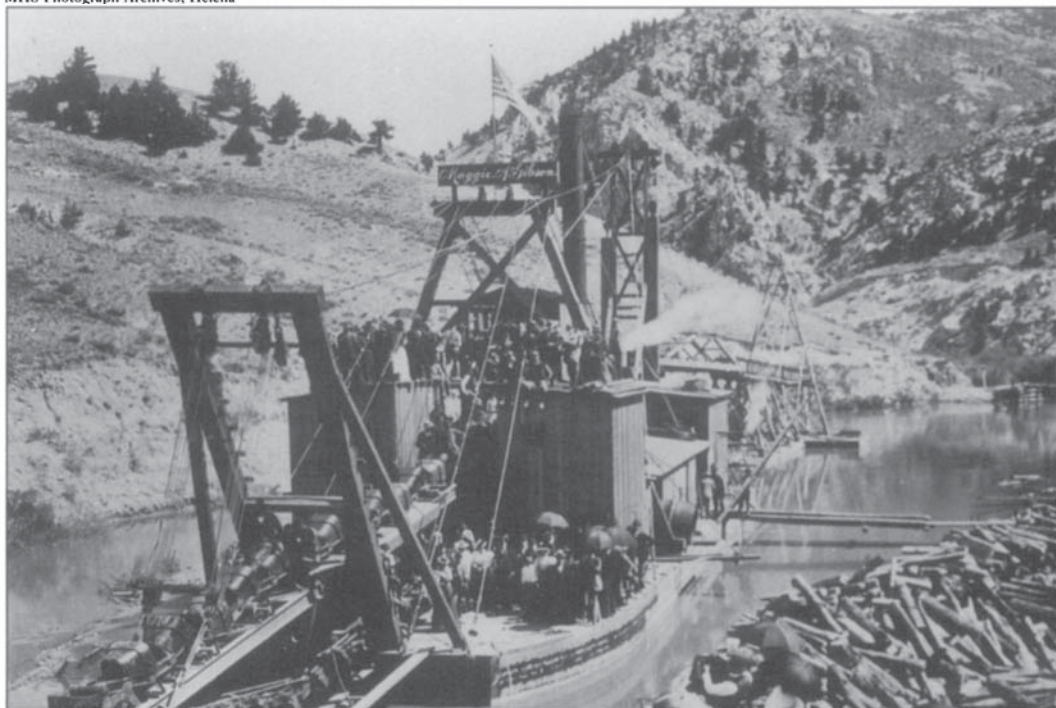
on Cover Street and a third did business in 1910 at the west end of Wallace Street, where Chinese merchants once operated their businesses. The Cover Street house (known locally as “The Brick”) and the Green Front house still stand.⁴⁹

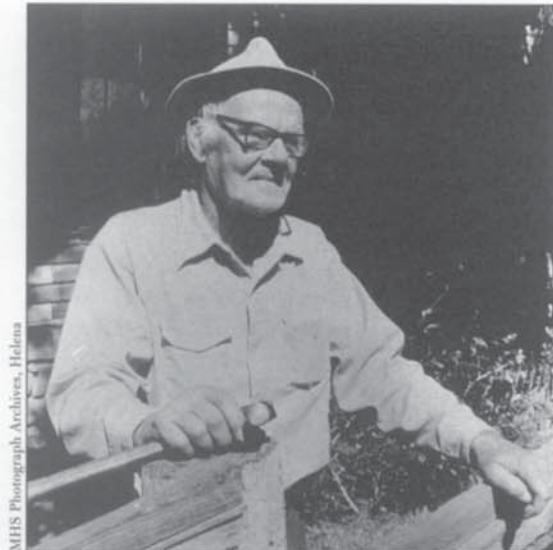
Virginia City’s built environment began to undergo changes in the 1890s. Content’s Corner suffered remodeling with installation of a “modern” glass storefront that replaced many of its beautiful Gothic windows. The stone facade of Stonewall Hall was refaced with brick and it, too, received a glass storefront. In 1914, it endured the ultimate degradation that heralded the supremacy of the automobile: conversion to a full-service garage. These architectural and aesthetic changes represent the post-heyday of Virginia City and the town’s attempt to adapt. A few later buildings that add significantly to the town’s streetscape include the architect-designed City Hall (1897) and the Episcopal Church (1902) as well as the Thompson-Hickman Museum and Library (1918), designed by New York architect Frank A. Colby.⁵⁰

A combination of circumstances contributed to the unusual preservation of Virginia City’s first

A celebration seems to be in progress on the decks of the *Maggie Gibson* (right), the first dredge to work Alder Gulch. Owned by the Chicago Mining and Development Company, the *Maggie Gibson* was dismantled and moved in late 1897 or early 1898 from Bannack to Alder Gulch where it produced gold from property leased from the Conrey Placer Mining Company until it was decommissioned in 1903.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena





MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

generation buildings. A dry climate, the absence of termites, a serendipitous lack of destructive large-scale fires during the historic period, and the absence of a major building boom all played parts in the safekeeping of this national treasure. But in 1937 a fire did destroy several 1864 buildings, one of the town's landmark hotels was torn down as a public hazard, and a historic corral was dismantled for salvage.⁵¹

Local dredging operations by Humphrey's Gold Corporation brought about a brief resurgence in the population during the 1930s. Then in 1942, the United States government declared gold mining a nonessential industry under the Gold Mine Closing Order.⁵² In fall 1944, Charles A. and Sue Ford Bovey of Great Falls visited the former gold rush town. Bovey, heir to the Minneapolis-based Royal Milling Company (later General Mills), was a newly elected Montana state representative. He and his wife, a third generation Montanan, became enamored with

50. MHAI, sites 189-1, 191-2, 192-6, 193-1, 199-4.

51. D & M document, 44.

52. Judy Grossman, "Gold Rush Lives in Montana," *Courier* (October, 1996), 180-81.

Virginia City and took up the crusade to save the town from further decay.

Over the next decade, the Boveys bought many of the town's dilapidated buildings. Some Charles Bovey reconstructed using vintage materials. Others he stabilized or restored and still others he built to resemble buildings that had long since disappeared. Some new buildings like Daylight Village near the 1860s Gilbert Brewery complex were constructed to house tourists. Others, like the old frame courthouse, were reconfigured to serve new functions. Inspired by the intact collections of multiperiod artifacts found in some of Virginia City's long-unused buildings, the Boveys began amassing collections of antiquated inventories and artifacts to add to those already in

53. MHAI, site 194-1.

54. *Ibid.*, site 154-15.

55. National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Montana Towns Saved," 103.

Charles and Sue Bovey began saving Virginia City in the 1940s, and their efforts, which constituted a labor of love, spanned four decades. Charles, pictured at left in September 1977, helped supervise various stabilizations and restorations of buildings as well as reconstruction and reconfiguration. The fire escape of the Fairweather Inn (below, 1999), an example of adaptive reuse, is actually a ladder salvaged from a dredge.



Courtesy the author

place. The ambitious undertaking spilled over into Virginia City's nearby sister gold camp of Nevada City. There the Boveys added scores of other endangered historic structures, moved from locations across the state, to the handful of Nevada City's original buildings left over from gold camp days.

By the 1950s, Virginia City had become one of the state's tourist attractions, and the project continued to grow through the next decade. In the 1960s, the railroad depot was moved from Harrison, Montana, to the west end of town.⁵⁵ The railroad tracks that today join Nevada City and Virginia City, placed there for the convenience and enjoyment of its visitors, are a strange reminder of the historic absence of this critical link that could have given the town a very different future.

The Fairweather Inn provides an excellent example of the different periods, changes, and functions that characterize many Virginia City buildings today. Beginning with an 1863 log core, the building evolved from a one-story gabled dwelling to a false-fronted restaurant and meat market. It was a

56. K. Ross Toole, *The Rape of the Great Plains: Northwest America, Cattle and Coal* (Boston, 1976), 237.


saloon in the 1880s with a wood-frame storefront featuring columns and large windows in imitation of cast iron. The business became a hotel in the 1890s. Humphrey's Gold Corporation built a dormitory annex to the east in 1935 to house its dredging crews. In 1946, Charles Bovey added a second story to the main building and a porch with material salvaged from the Goodrich Hotel in Bannack. Finally, a fire escape—actually a ladder salvaged from a dredge—was attached to the addition. These changes epitomize adaptive reuse, a practice that Charles Bovey did not initiate but rather continued, while the historic layers provide tangible details about Virginia City's past.⁵⁴

The deaths of Charles Bovey in 1978 and Sue Bovey in 1988 left Ford Bovey with his parents' tourist operation. Maintenance of the many facets of the business proved overwhelming and the Nevada City and Virginia City properties were offered for sale with first option to the state of Montana. While the Montana legislature debated the purchase, Virginia City appeared on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of America's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places in 1992, 1993, and 1994.⁵⁵ In 1997, the Montana legislature appropriated funds for the state to purchase the properties in both towns. Weighty questions now face Virginia City's residents and state caretakers.

Today many of the scattered placer gold camps that once made

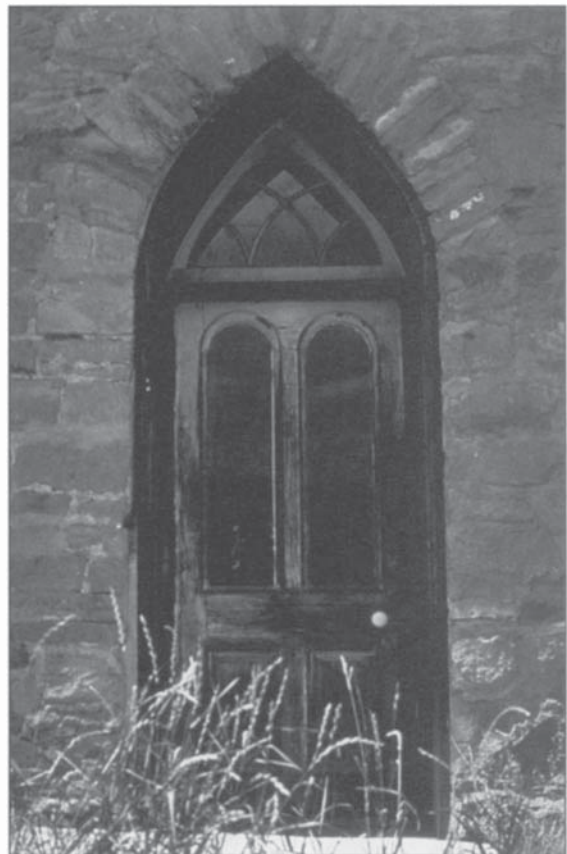
up "Fourteen-mile City" lie buried beneath rock piles left by the dredges. Scars upon the landscape are readily seen along the highway that winds through the area. Even so, historic vistas and pastoral landscapes are as yet unencumbered by modern motels and convenience stores. Tourists demand these services. Can the area attract and house a brisk tourist trade and still maintain its integrity? Virginia City's historical continuity poses another problem. Significant buildings that reflect several time periods like Stonewall Hall and Content's Corner could be restored to their 1860s appearances, or should they be stabilized with all their layers in "arrested decay" as testimony to the real passage of time? If the focus becomes restoration to one time period, what may be destroyed in the process? Indeed, as testimony to Charles and Sue Bovey's efforts, preservation itself has become a major theme at Virginia and Nevada cities.

Writing about Montana's heritage, historian K. Ross Toole reflected on the potential loss of our significant national historic resources asking, "When these last reaches have gone, where will America go to see

what it has been?"⁵⁶ The real layered history of this Montana gold rush town and our appreciation of it may be as endangered as its most fragile buildings. Careful consideration of all Virginia City's parts and periods—its later stone and brick as well as its earliest log and frame—must guide our preservation of the past into the future. What Virginia City will be tomorrow, and how it became what it is today, are as important as its gold rush beginnings. 

ELLEN BAUMLER earned her doctorate in English, classics, and history from the University of Kansas. She is coordinator of Montana's National Register of Historic Places sign program at the State Historic Preservation Office in Helena and is actively involved in the public interpretations of state properties at Virginia and Nevada cities.

Preservation of buildings, landscapes, and other features, including such architectural details as the Gothic doorway that led into the Montana *Post* print shop (right, completed in 1865 and photographed in 1997), allows the visitor to step into Montana's past and view Virginia City as if through the eyes of a gold rush contemporary.



Courtesy the author