The Leonard Hotel

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson

Let’s get one thing straight from the top: the Leonard Hotel was not built by Marcus Daly to block the view of his nemesis, William Clark. When the Leonard was erected in 1906, Daly had been in his grave in New York City for six years, and while Clark still owned the mansion next door, he was spending most of his time in Washington, D.C., in his role as the junior Senator from Montana.

The Leonard is a product of its time and Butte’s demographics. In 1906, the War of the Copper Kings was all but over, and investor money that had been held back for fear of various legal problems was freed up. The burgeoning population led to the construction in 1906-07 of the Metals Bank, the Napton, the Carpenters’ Union Hall, the phone company building (today’s Water Company), the new Baptist Church and St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, the Silver Bow Club, the Thornton Hotel Addition, the St. Francis Block next to today’s uptown post office, the Phoenix Block, and the Marcus Daly Statue, then on North Main Street, all appeared in that two-year period along with the 125-room Leonard Hotel.

The Leonard served a growing need for lodgings for both miners and the expanding middle class, barbers, grocers, clerks, nurses, and the many other entrepreneurs – often single men and women – who supported the mining industry. With high-class rooms, it was considered very respectable housing, and in 1910, the Leonard Cafe advertised that it was “the best place in Butte to dine.” A good meal cost 50 cents.

In 1900 the site of the Leonard was a little one-story dwelling, about 30x25 feet in size, with a stable on the alley to the north. The home had been there since before 1884 – older than Clark’s mansion to the west, but probably younger than Mayor Jacobs’ 1879 house to the east.

Irene Scheidecker, who owned the Leonard from 2003-2008, said that her research turned up no connection to the Leonard Mine in Meaderville, which was named for Leonard Lewisohn, the New York investor who co-founded the Boston & Montana Copper Company. Architect William O’Brien, who designed the Leonard, had a carpenter named Simon Leonard, and Nathan Leonard (of Leonard Field) was President of the Montana School of Mines and lived at the Leonard in the 1910s, but those seem unlikely candidates for the name’s origin.

The first proprietors and probably first owners of the hotel were two prominent Butte physicians, Louis Bernheim and William L. Renick – William Leonard Renick. It’s reasonable that the hotel bears Renick’s middle name. Both doctors were quite well-to-do, so their investment in a huge hotel in 1906 is no surprise. Bernheim was also vice president (1907) and president (1908) of the Miners Savings Bank and Trust. Both men lived in the Leonard for a time, but by 1911 Renick was living in a small mansion at 727 West Park, and Bernheim had moved to Los Angeles. When he died there unexpectedly at age 57 in 1925, he was still part owner of the Leonard as well as the Chequamegon Café building on Main Street.

The new hotel was constructed asymmetrically – you can see it if you stand on the sidewalk in front and look up. It isn’t parallel with the street, but is aligned with the border of an old mining claim, making the eastern bay set back relative to the western bay. The Leonard is just one of many business blocks in Butte that isn’t quite square.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.

This episode appeared in slightly different form in the Montana Standard newspaper.