BAS 026 The first jail

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

The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps provide a wealth of information for historical research, often telling us the size and layout of buildings, the nature of their construction, what kind of business was there, and much more.

We see that in 1884, there was a mine at the intersection of West Mercury and Jackson Streets. Silver Bow Mining Company’s Stephens Mine had a 2-story hoist engine room with a steam pump and a fifty-foot 1½-inch hose. Two boilers generated 80 horsepower, and an attached carpenter shop was apparently reached by a ladder from Jackson Street. Jackson Street was effectively the west edge of town and is labeled “Arbitrary” on the map. A nearby blacksmith’s operation stood near the center of the present-day intersection, with the mine complex and shaft in Mercury Street, along the south side, just west of Jackson. The mine buildings totaled about 70’x70’ and there was also an 80-foot-long wood pile located at what is now the northwest corner of the Jackson-Mercury intersection.

The mine was still active in 1888 but the structures there burned down in 1890 and the mine was apparently never reopened.

The Silver Bow Mining Company was involved in a far-reaching law suit which effectively ruled that mining or subsurface claims trump surface ownership. It is not clear whether the mine at Mercury and Jackson figured in the case, but it was a suit between surface owners in the Butte Townsite and the Silver Bow Mining Company as reported in Tom Stout’s 1921 book, Montana, its story and biography.

Another tidbit from this neighborhood (such as it was) is the location of the “Old Jail” in the middle of the block along Jackson between West Park and West Galena. The large building on the west side of the street measured about 50’x25’ and had a fenced jail yard, two small outbuildings, and a stable. The “new” jail in 1884 would be the one located in the city hall that had just been erected that year. That building was Ming’s Chinese restaurant, Jail House Coffee and other restaurants in recent years. The jail in the basement of the second city hall (24 E. Broadway) was the third jail, built and in use in 1890.

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.