BAS 042 Synagogue. Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte’s ethnic diversity is well represented in the synagogue at Washington and Galena Streets. The Congregation B’nai Israel temple was dedicated on February 26, 1904, but the Butte Jewish community dates to 1875. Butte’s first mayor, Henry Jacobs, was Jewish. Jacobs immigrated to the U.S. from Germany in the 1850s, fought for the South in the Civil War, made his way north in the late 1860s, and was elected mayor in 1879 after Butte City was incorporated.

After the Jewish community split into one reform and two orthodox groups, the temple was built for use by the reform congregation that was established in Butte in 1892. The orthodox congregations continued for a few years but were ultimately disbanded. The three-story masonry building features a corner bell tower with an onion dome roof, an ornately corbelled front gable with rosette window beneath, and semicircular brick arches. This is the oldest synagogue in Montana still in use as a synagogue (the one in Helena is slightly older, but no longer serves as a house of worship) and this is one of only a few synagogues in the United States still in use that has the Moorish (onion-dome) architecture. Prior to its construction in 1903-04, the group worshiped in the Carpenter’s Union Hall and at the Mountain View Methodist Church.

The land was provided to the Jewish community in 1885 by the Northern Pacific Railway, but construction of the temple didn’t begin until 1897.

Stained glass windows commemorate Elias and Mina Oppenheimer, German immigrants who arrived in Butte in 1896, from Salt Lake City, when Mina was 49 years old. Their sons Joseph and Henry were partners with George Symons in Symons’ Dry Goods, a store that eventually became one of Butte’s most important department stores. Symons’ first store opened in 1897 at 54 West Park, with 15 employees and occupying 8,000 square feet, but five years later it had expanded to multiple adjacent buildings and 50,000 square feet of showroom space. The store and a dozen other businesses were destroyed by a fire September 25, 1905. The Phoenix Block, rising from the ashes of that fire, was built by the Symons Company in 1906 and still stands today.

The three stained glass windows in the north side of the synagogue are dedicated to Mrs. Frances A. Symons. She was the mother of four sons, Isaac, William, Harry, and George, founders of the Symons company. Frances died in Salt Lake City in 1891 and is buried there. She never lived in Butte.

The Symons and Oppenheimer clans occupied many homes in Butte, including several on North Washington not far from the synagogue and the Symons’ family home at 815 West Park Street.

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.