BAS 048 Iconography. Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Once when I was leading a walking tour, an observant student from Glendive, Montana, asked me about the significance of the Star of David in the stained glass in the 1890 City Hall (24 East Broadway). My answer was that it was not religious, but simply a popular geometric design. But the question spurred an inquiry into some iconic designs in historic Butte buildings.

Our buildings have a vast array of icons, from simple and complex artistic designs to emblems identifying a business, a building, or the year one or the other was established. The hexagram in the City Hall’s central upper window reflects a very long heritage. Most religions, including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity have used the symbol, although today it is most closely connected to the Jewish tradition. Heraldry in the Middle Ages employed it. It was even a symbol for the German Brewer’s Guild, and taverns in Nuremburg and elsewhere used it as a mark indicating that they had the legal right to tap beer. Today, some find occult and satanic significance to the hexagram.

Among many other icons, Freemasons used the two interlocking triangles of the hexagram as a symbol for “the mingling of apparent opposites in nature, darkness and light, error and truth, ignorance and wisdom, evil and good, throughout human life.” It is possible that a Masonic connection to the builders of the Butte City Hall led to the hexagram in the stained glass, but the simpler explanation is that it is a straightforward, symmetrical, ancient, and popular geometric design that worked well with the Romanesque architectural style of the building.

Most Butte folks have probably noticed the swastikas in the tile work at the Dodge Brothers Auto Dealership, built in 1912 at the corner of Park and Idaho Streets. The swastika is another ancient design motif, dating to around 3000 B.C. in the Indus Valley Civilization. Apart from modern usage, it is probably most familiar to us today in Sanskrit traditions, where the symbol means “to be good,” or good luck, or auspicious. In Chinese, it means “myriad” or eternity. Early Greek coins used the swastika, and Celtic bronze shields dating to about 300 B.C. are covered with them. Native American civilizations, from the Ohio River Valley to the Navajo and Panama employ swastika designs.

In the 1870s archaeological investigations at Troy, by Heinrich Schliemann, captured peoples’ imaginations, and the presence of swastikas there led to a resurgence of their use as design elements in Europe and America that usually symbolized good luck or success, if they symbolized anything. Schliemann’s work also led to the use of the swastika by German Nazis, ultimately stigmatizing the symbol in much of today’s world.

Because the swastikas at the Dodge Brothers building are combined with many other designs, including rampant lions, flowers, and simple geometric patterns, the likely explanation there is also likely pretty mundane: popular, pretty designs that the tile artist used for decorative effect, and little more. They certainly carry no connection to mid-20th century nazi symbols.

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.