BAS 077 Caplice Block Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Park and Main and Park and Montana Streets have pretty much always been the most important intersections in Uptown Butte. The southwest corner of Park and Montana has seen a long architectural evolution.

When the Caplice Block was finished on that corner in May 1882, it was “an ornament to Butte, and unquestionably the handsomest and largest structure in the territory,” according to the Butte Miner. Apart from some church steeples and mine structures, it was the tallest building in town, the first three-story building built in Butte and probably in the state.

Architect M.J. McConnell designed the block with an ornate French Second Empire roofline, similar to that on the Finlen Hotel today. The ground floor was one of John Caplice’s wholesale groceries, together with the Caplice Hall, “the best dancing room in the city.” It served as a theatrical performance venue as well. Upper floors were offices and lodgings including suites for families and sleeping rooms for single men and women.

Construction of the Caplice Block began in the summer of 1881, when Butte’s population probably didn’t exceed 4,000. It was finished enough that the hall was in use as early as Thanksgiving 1881, when the Bullion Club sponsored a fancy dance there.

John Caplice and his partner Alfred McCune were Utah businessmen who became active in Butte in the early 1880s. Caplice was born in Tipperary, Ireland in 1829 and was at Bannack in 1863. He partnered initially with his brother F.W. Caplice and John Brannigan, both of Butte, and investor Charles H. Smith of St. Louis. John Caplice died in 1903. The Caplice Company’s bookkeeper, John Hammer, went on to establish the primary brick manufacturing business in early Butte, Butte Sewer-Pipe & Tile.

In addition to the huge building at Park and Montana, Caplice and McCune had a general merchandise establishment on Main Street north of Daly Street in Walkerville, built before 1881 and still standing, together with several other stores around southwest Montana. They were involved in the initial construction of the Montana Central Railroad in 1886, and Caplice & McCune had their own freight depot near today’s corner of Utah and Front Streets. The MCRR reached Butte November 10, 1888, and became part of the Great Northern in 1889. McCune lived for the most part in Salt Lake City, where his 1900 home is considered to be one of the finest mansions in the West.

By 1900, the ground floor of the Caplice Block had become Sutton’s New Theater for Vaudeville performances. In 1916, the building had been modified significantly, with the ground floor subdivided into five stores, four opening on Park and one opening on Montana Street. The corner office was further subdivided, making five store fronts on Park Street. Sometime after 1957, the two upper floors were removed, but the highly modified first floor remains the original Caplice Block.

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.