BAS 095 Beaver Block

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

The Marchesseau and Valiton Block on the northeast corner of Granite and Main was better known as the Beaver Block for the huge copper and concrete beaver gracing its parapet. It was built in 1890 as a typical three-story business block that initially housed the Silver Bow National Bank, a grocery, and a shoe store on the ground floor, with offices above.

Henry Valiton was a native of Montbeliard, France, who came to America with his family in 1851 when he was nine years old. He headed west at age 18, working as a teamster, saloon keeper, and placer miner in Colorado, South Dakota, and Idaho before landing in Montana in 1866. He started his first livery business in Deer Lodge, but relocated to Butte in the 1870s to establish his own livery stable on West Park Street, at the bridge over Missoula Gulch (about where Clark Street is today).

Valiton rented fashionable covered carriages called barouches as well as simple wagons, sulkies, and saddle horses, and claimed to have the finest hearse in Montana. His stable had a granite floor, touted as the best in Butte. Valiton was elected mayor of Butte twice, in 1880 and 1890.

Sophronius Marchesseau was a native of St. John’s, Newfoundland, and a veteran of the California gold rush. His partnership with Valiton began about 1876 as a general mercantile business that evolved to specialize in groceries, with their store on the corner of Granite and Main. Their success was expressed in the much larger, ornate block they built there in 1890.

Dozens of businesses occupied the Beaver Block over its 70-year lifetime. The last occupant, the Beaver Bar, closed its doors in the wake of the 1959-60 strike that idled mine workers for 181 days and was a serious blow to Butte’s economy. Many mines, including the Anselmo, never reopened, and business after business shut down.

The Beaver Block had been vacant for eight years and was slated for demolition, which began October 7, 1968. The beaver had been removed and laid on the roof, to be donated to the World Museum of Mining, but a fire broke out in the early morning of October 10. The beaver was destroyed in the roof’s collapse, and the entire building lay in ruins within hours. No official cause was determined, but the Beaver Block fire was one of many labeled as suspicious.

Wells Fargo Bank occupies this corner today.

 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.