BAS 116 Electric Building Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

NorthWestern Energy’s former headquarters at 40 East Broadway began its life in 1911 as the Electric Building, home of the Butte Electric & Power Company. A spectacular structure made of white reinforced concrete with a terra cotta facade, it sported six candelabra-like lights along its roofline, together with an electric flag.

It was designed by the prestigious architectural firm Link and Haire. Link, from Bavaria, was involved in various professional partnerships designing Largey Flats, the Masonic Temple, Mountain View Church, additions on the Montana State Capitol, Main Hall in Dillon, 18 county court houses including Silver Bow, and over 1000 other buildings across the state. Details on the Electric Building included terra cotta ornaments between the windows on the upper stories, as well as along the frieze beneath the cornice.

The ground floor included a transom-level rank of prism glass, with faceted tiles designed to bring extra light into the interior. The Hennessey Building still has its prism glass, similar to but thinner than the purple glass bricks that once took light into vaulted sidewalk spaces all over uptown Butte. The Electric Building had diamond-shaped stained glass ornaments set into the prism level, and a monumental entry at the eastern end on Broadway Street.

The sub-basement initially contained two large boilers that provided steam heat throughout much of the Uptown business district. The Phoenix heating plant was later expanded to six 500-horsepower boilers, each consuming more than a ton of coal every hour. With the discovery of huge gas fields in northern Montana in the early 1930s, Butte and most of the state converted to natural gas for heating because it cost half of what coal cost, and the Phoenix power plant was out of business.

The Phoenix Electric Light and Steam Heating Company began in the mid-1890s but was acquired by Butte Electric before 1910, together with their boilers underground behind the old City Hall. Butte Electric continued to use the Phoenix brand name in their new Electric Building, but the company itself only survived another year until it merged with three other regional electric utilities to form the Montana Power Company. As NorthWestern Energy, that company still has its headquarters in Butte.

The modern façade gives the appearance of a single building on East Broadway, but there are actually four buildings there. Adjacent to the Acoma was originally the Elwood Hotel, then a business block that had various stores over time, then the Beehive Building offices, then the Electric Building. The Frank Building was the westernmost part of NorthWestern Energy’s office complex but is not covered by the new façade.

NorthWestern Energy built a new corporate headquarters building at Park and Main, the heart of Butte, in 2015. The original Electric Building and adjacent buildings are vacant in 2019, owned by Butte-Silver Bow County, which is seeking buyers for the property.

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.