BAS 117 Lexington Mine Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Lexington is among the older claims in Butte, staked in 1865 by partners Heffner and McCann. But little happened at the site on the edge of Walkerville until the middle 1870s, when Butte’s silver rejuvenation began.

Like William Clark, Andrew Jackson Davis (1819-1890) began as a jack-of-all trades, from selling dry goods to real estate. Both bought up mines in the busted mining camp of Butte near its low point in the 1870s. Both established banks; Davis founded the predecessor to the First National Bank in Butte in 1877.

The popular, though likely apocryphal, story has it that Davis traded “a bob-tailed sorrel horse,” or a team of horses, or a white horse, for the Lexington claim, but however he acquired it, Davis’s Lex was one of Butte’s important silver mines by 1876. He also acquired the Hendrie (or Hendrix) 10-stamp mill at today’s Arizona and Granite Streets (Lexington Gardens).

The mine rapidly became hugely profitable, and in 1881 Davis sold it to a French consortium, the Société anonyme des mines de Lexington, led by Georges de la Bouglise and E. Renevey, for $1,000,000 and $2,000,000 in stock, plus a commitment to expand the operation.

The French company constructed a new 60-stamp mill west of the Lexington Mine, connected to the mine by a tramway close to 600 feet long, and in 1888 produced nearly 750,000 ounces of silver.

The silver crash in the 1890s hit the Walkerville silver mines hard. As late as 1897, the Lex was yielding a net profit of $4 per ton, but in 1902, it saw a net operating loss of $3 per ton. It shut down. Augustus Heinze leased the Lexington in 1905, and it sporadically produced silver and copper until Heinze’s business failed in 1913 and it was sold to Atlantic Mines, an affiliate of the Amalgamated (Anaconda), for just over $1 million, the same price paid in 1881. The Anaconda company focused on copper and zinc at the Lexington. It was shuttered off and on in the 1920s and 1930s, and finally closed permanently in 1957.

Today, remedial action by Arco has prepared the site for turn over to Butte-Silver Bow as an element of the National Historic Landmark district. Although the hoist engine room and headframe won’t be directly accessible, a new access road to a spectacular view point opened in 2019. The Lexington Strike Fence along Main Street, topped by electrified barbed wire, is the only surviving fence in Butte erected as protection for “scabs” who crossed picket lines to work inside the fence’s protection.

The Lexington was the deepest mine in Montana in 1889, at about 1500 feet. It ultimately reached 3260 feet. Because taxes were higher in Walkerville where the mine is located, the 400 level of the Lex was driven southwest to intersect the surface at the Syndicate Pit near the Anselmo, where Butte taxes were lower. At least that’s the often-repeated story, and I can’t find anything to refute it.

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.