BAS 130 Butte city charter Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

There isn’t much doubt that Butte was destined to become a city, but it did get off to a somewhat tenuous start.

Following the decline of the original gold camp to fewer than 100 people in 1874, Butte boomed rapidly with the silver rush of the late 1870s. By 1879, the population was perhaps 2,000 or 2,500 (the 1880 census says 3,364), and the need for organization as a city was becoming apparent.

The Montana Territorial Legislature had a body known as the Council, which evolved into the State Senate. Councilmember from Butte, Joseph Hyde, drew up an act to establish “a body politic and corporate, by the name and style of The City of Butte.”

But apparently the entire legislature didn’t quite see it that way, and someone must not have believed the local populace would support the idea of Butte incorporating. An amendment was introduced to grant the charter without the usual popular vote, but that amendment was eventually removed. Still, the Butte Charter Act was approved by the Territorial Legislature on February 10, 1879, by a 1-vote margin, 13 for and 12 against.

The act went to Butte voters on April 15, 1879. With 2,000 or more eligible voters, only 123 voted, approving the charter 72 to 51.

The Charter appointed commissioners to serve until the first municipal election, and included some names we recall today: W.A. Clark, Henry Jacobs, Emanuel Hirbour (who would construct the Hirbour Tower in 1901), and Dr. Charles Mussigbrod, along with Jere Roach, James Talbott, and James Matthews. They served less than a month; the Council election on May 12, 1879, chose Henry Jacobs as Butte’s first Mayor, but only Jere Roach of the original legislative appointees was elected. He served with Lee Mantle, J. Ross Clark (William’s brother), Simon Houswirth, and four others.

In his inaugural address to the first City Council in 1879, Mayor Jacobs’ opposition to big intrusive government was evident. He said, “The coming year … will no doubt be beset with dangers and troubles owing to the large influx of immigration. Too much care cannot be taken to avoid debt, excessive taxation, and the passage of useless and odious ordinances. It has been demonstrated by experience that the world is already too much governed.”

Jacobs, himself an immigrant Jew from Germany who fought for the South in the Civil War at the siege of Vicksburg, built his house at the corner of Montana and Granite Streets that same year, where it still stands.

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.