BAS 163 East Park Street 1894 Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Signage in old photos are a great resource for history in Butte, and a photo of East Park Street from 1894 provides a wealth of information. I’ll try to paint you a word picture based on that photo, looking west from near Wyoming Street. In the distance at Park and Main the Owsley Block was completed in 1891-92, and was known as the Medical Arts Building when it burned in 1973. Its site is occupied today by NorthWestern Energy’s corporate headquarters.

In the foreground, The Butte Cash Grocery was located at Park and Wyoming from 1887 to 1896. The Key West House was not in business under that name in 1895, but of course the sign in our photo might still have graced the façade.

Courtenay, Case, & Gravelle Company (“Gents Furnishings”) which advertised on the east face along the top of the 5-story Owsley Block, was incorporated in 1891 and had its store in the big corner building at Park and Main. Joseph Gravelle had come to America from his native France in 1889. After the store closed in 1906 he moved to Waitsburg, Washington to open a store under his own name. Courtenay left the partnership in 1897, to be replaced by Ohioan Arthur Ervin; the store changed its name to accommodate that change in ownership. Joseph Case came to Butte in 1880 from his native San Francisco, to which he returned when the store closed. Ervin, the late-coming partner, also left Butte in the early 1900s.

Absolom F. Bray was a more permanent fixture in Butte. He was born Oct. 21, 1852, at Langdon Cross, Cornwall, England, and came to America in 1876. He established his first grocery in Butte about 1885, but failing heath drove him to California for a time. He returned to open the Butte Cash Grocery in 1886. It was originally located at the site of the Murray Bank, the northwest corner of Copper and Main, but he moved to Park and Wyoming the next year. In 1889, Bray was elected to the first Montana state legislature.

“He had a voice that could make a boatswain’s rumble sound like a whisper” according to A.F. Bray’s colleagues in the legislature.

Bray’s store was a typical retail grocery, but in 1896 he moved to the corner of Park and Arizona and focused on the wholesale trade as well as retail. He was doing $1,000,000 a year in revenue by 1901.

“Every nook and corner are crammed with the finest assortment of staple and fancy groceries that the markets of the world can furnish,” as the store was described in the magazine Western Resources in 1901.

A.F. Bray died September 5, 1906 in Butte. His son, A.F. Bray, Jr., born in Butte, became a prominent member of the legal profession, serving as the chief judge of the California Court of Appeals. Bray Jr. died in 1987 at age 97.

The Key West House (lodgings) and Bray’s Butte Cash Grocery building is occupied by Rediscoveries 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.