BAS 164 McDermott-Finlen Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

In September 1884, the city of Butte didn’t quite end eastward at the corner of Broadway and Wyoming Streets, but almost. Broadway did not extend past Arizona street, although there were various mines and mills out that way, and in the block where the Finlen stands today you’d find several single-story detached log cabins lined with cloth for insulation, together with a woodshed, and a hay barn.

Four years later, in 1888, East Park Street was growing noticeably but East Broadway between Wyoming and Arizona was still a scattering of small houses, though most of the log cabins had been replaced by frame structures. Butte’s rapid growth, from about 4,000 in 1880 to at least 23,000 in 1890 led to the construction in 1889 of a new three-story hotel, the McDermott, on the southeast corner of Broadway and Wyoming. The McDermott was a high-end hotel, hosting Theodore Roosevelt, Marcus Daly, and others.

Wealthy mining pioneer Miles Finlen purchased and renamed the McDermott about 1895. Finlen was born in Ireland in 1845 and came to America in the wake of the Irish potato famine in 1847. By way of Canada, Bay City, Michigan, and Virginia City, Nevada (where his son James was born in 1873), Miles came to Butte in 1886, where he operated the Buffalo, Ramsdell-Parrott, and Minnie Healy mines. By the early 1900s, Miles had relocated to New York to focus on horse racing, with a stable derived from his friend Marcus Daly.

His son James Finlen took over the operation of the hotel after his father left Butte. James also acquired the Parchen-D’Acheul Drug Company in 1900, merging it with the Newbro Drug Company the following year. It operated under the Newbro name for many years. He was also involved in one of Montana’s earliest oil discoveries, at Kintla Lake on the west side of what is now Glacier National Park, as well as timber operations in Flathead County.

James used his fortune (and a partnership with other Butte investors, including A.J. Davis and Louis Dreibelbis) to dramatically expand the old three-story Finlen in 1923. He employed Great Falls architects Shanley and Baker and Missoula builder Albert Broadland to erect a grand French Second-Empire style building modeled after the Hotel Astor in New York, at a cost of $750,000 in dollars of the day. Construction took less than a year, from March to December 1923.

The second tower, planned for the eastern part of the building, was never completed because of the economic downturn in Butte following World War II, which led to a long population decline until the 1990s when Butte’s population more or less leveled off at today’s 35,000 or so.

The new Finlen opened on January 1, 1924, and like its predecessor hosted notable visitors to Butte, including Senator John F. Kennedy, Charles Lindbergh, and Harry Truman. Rooms went for $2.50 a night in 1948.

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.