BAS 193 Welch Quarry Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

James Welch established a granite quarry on the east side of the Continental Divide in 1899 to supply building stone to Butte and beyond. The granite there is more or less the same as the Butte Granite across hundreds of square miles, but it’s much less decomposed than some of the granite around Butte, and it’s already partly ready to quarry because of near-horizontal cracks.

The cracks are called exfoliation planes. They result from unloading of the overlying rock through erosion, so the removal of the weight allows the rock to crack, often somewhat parallel to the earth’s surface. Such cracks are quite common in granite around the world, but at the Welch Quarry they tend to be spaced about two or three feet apart, making them convenient for quarrying into useful sizes.

In its heyday around 1906 at least 20 workers lived at or near the quarry and the Northern Pacific railroad siding a mile down the Welch Spur line, a few miles east of Homestake. Telegraph operators Harry and Edith Day lived at the station near the spur intersection with two children, and James Welch was the postmaster for the office that opened about 1902.

Welch built a dam to create a water supply for his steam-driven saws and hoists. A fair amount of stone dressing was done at the site, and pieces of carved and smoothed granite are still scattered about the quarry. Not surprisingly, offices and workers’ homes had granite foundations and walls. The ruins of the two-story granite powerhouse still stand.

Granite blocks from the Welch Quarry provided most of the stones that paved Butte’s streets. The Federal Building on North Main Street, built in 1904, is faced with Welch granite, and the pedestals of the Marcus Daly statue in Butte and the Thomas Meagher statue in Helena are from there too. Steps for many prominent buildings, including the Silver Bow County Court House and some of the steps at the Copper King Mansion were quarried by Welch, along with the curbstones still visible at Broadway and Washington Streets near the Clark Chateau. Some brick buildings, such as the 1909 Mai Wah, incorporate Welch granite details as window and door sills, and the stonework at Mountain View Methodist Church was done by James Welch and his workers. The two-level basement beneath the alley behind the Electric Building on East Broadway, built to house the boilers of the Phoenix Electric Company in 1906, contains 30-foot-high foundations made with Welch granite. The supports for the railroad overpasses on Nevada Street are Welch granite blocks.

By 1911 concrete and asphalt were replacing granite as building and paving material, and the Welch operation declined and the post office closed, but production continued into the 1910s. When Butte’s last building boom in 1915-18 ended and the price of copper plummeted with the end of World War I, the Welch Quarry was also finished. It ceased operations sometime around 1920 and the railroad spur tracks were taken up in 1926.

James Welch maintained a residence in Butte as well as at the quarry, at 823 North Montana in 1900 and 736 Utah in 1910. The house on Montana Street is a beautiful stone building, still standing, and 736 Utah is also still there. Beginning in 1903 Welch was the first president of the Butte Tombstone Company, which continued in business until 1990. Welch died in 1922 at age 70.

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.