BAS 233 Butte Public Library Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte’s first high school stood between East Granite and East Broadway near Arizona. In 1885, Butte had 15 schools in the city (most of them small), with 16 teachers and 956 students. Most 1885 classes were held at the original school at Broadway and Arizona, but that was a temporary situation while “plans are being perfected to build a grand system of school buildings in different parts of the city.”

Another large school, Central, in the block surrounded by Broadway, Dakota (then called Academy), Park, and Montana Streets, also served Butte in 1885. Its teachers initially taught first through fifth grade, while upper-level classes were conducted at the high school on East Broadway.

Central School came down in 1893 and in 1894 that block was devoted in part to the new Butte Free Public Library at the southeast corner of Broadway and Academy. Charles Larrabee give $10,000 to start the library, and Butte’s citizens contributed $12,000 more; the city erected the building at a cost of $100,000 to the design of Butte’s most prominent architect, Henry Patterson.

Charles William Larrabee changed his name to Charles Xavier Larrabee apparently in resentment for his deserting, alcoholic father William. He followed his younger brother Samuel Edward Larabie (who changed the spelling of his last name from LARRABEE to LARABIE) from New York and Wisconsin to Deer Lodge, Montana, in 1875, where they organized the Larabie Brothers Bank, which ultimately became the Donnell, Clark, and Larabie Bank, William A. Clark’s start in banking.

Charles invested in several mines in Butte, including the Mountain Boy and the Anaconda, but it was his stubborn tenacity in holding on to the Mountain View at the top of the Butte Hill that gave him his fortune. The merger of Larrabee’s Mountain View Mining Company with the Boston-based Montana Copper Company in 1887 created the Boston & Montana, ultimately the second largest copper producer in Montana after the Anaconda, which took it over in 1901.

Larrabee walked away with at least $1.5 million (more than $40 million today) from the merger and later sale of stock in the Boston & Montana Company, and he promptly left Butte for Oregon and Washington State. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union asked him, as a rich former resident of Butte, to support the creation of the Library. His $10,000 donation equates to something like $270,000 today.

By 1896 the library had 20,000 volumes and was adding 2,000 more annually; in 1948 100,000 volumes were on the shelves. The library sustained damage from embers blown from the devastating “million dollar fire” that destroyed Symons’ Stores a block east on Park Street on September 24, 1905, and it was severely damaged by fire March 27, 1960: part of the roof collapsed.

Despite the severity of the destruction, architect Walter Hinick devised a reconstruction plan within the $155,000 insurance budget. The third floor, corner turret, and front arches had to be removed, but the remaining structure was kept pretty much intact. The core of the old library remains under a modern façade in a building occupied by Western Montana Mental Health today.

The library moved to its present location in the old telephone company building at Broadway and Idaho about 1991. When the Montana Theater was demolished in 1988, the telephone company built a new building on the site and the public library moved into the phone company’s old location next door.

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.