BAS 254 Painted Wood Grain Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Painting cheap wood to mimic the appearance of interesting grain patterns originated in the late 1700s. Painted wood grain, or “faux bois”, became an art form by late Victorian times and reached its peak during the Arts and Crafts movement in the early 20th Century.

The Industrial Revolution led to mass production of mantels, balustrades, wooden doors, and other building materials. For the developing middle class in Butte and elsewhere in the United States, such items were made from wood that was not all that attractive in and of itself, and that led to a desire to paint the surfaces.

Painted wood grain artists could emulate knots, tree-ring patterns, and even insect damage so accurately that their products could easily be mistaken for expensive imported wood, and of course that was the goal. I lived in my 1898 house for months before someone pointed out to me that my stairway balustrade and pocket doors were painted and not actual wood textures.

In Butte, painted wood grain can be found in homes representing diverse levels of class, but it was the middle class that had the wherewithal to decorate their houses in this manner. The Hub Addition (Montana Street to Alabama, and Woolman to Platinum) represents largely 1890s residential growth, and painted wood grain survives in several homes there. The first public school in the neighborhood, Lincoln Elementary, was built at the corner of Clark and Broadway Streets in 1892, anchoring the growth of the addition.

Joseph Lally was one of Butte’s most prominent painters, with a store selling wallpaper, paints, oil, varnishes, and brushes at 113 West Broadway in 1895, a narrow building that’s gone today. He also provided paper hanging services together with painting and decorating. He was one of 18 painters listed in the City Directory for 1895, subdivided into carriage painters, house and sign painters, roof painters, and sign painters alone.

Although a few artisans today continue painting wood grain for occasional historic preservation goals, the technique was largely discontinued and lost after clear finishes and stains were developed in the 1920s and 1930s to bring out otherwise obscure patterns in cheap wood.

Original painted wood grain on walls, doors, or furniture is important to the historical integrity of a house or object, and it may add significant monetary value to property as well. It provides the historical context for Butte’s developing middle class neighborhoods in the 1890s and early 1900s.

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.