BAS 256 Cast Iron Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

As an affluent boom town in the 1890s and early 1900s, Butte could afford the best when it came to building materials. Cast-iron store-front columns added strength, stability, and beauty to many uptown business blocks.

Cast iron is hard and brittle and made from molten iron poured into a mold. It is distinct from wrought iron, which is tough but malleable – able to be worked and hammered into complex forms. While cast iron is easier to produce, it contains more impurities and stands up to weathering less well than wrought iron, so it is often painted. Painted tin and wood columns often mimic cast iron so well that a magnet is needed to tell the difference.

Butte’s surviving cast-iron store fronts are mostly columns and decorative entrance pieces. At least four local iron foundries produced cast iron products. Tuttle and Co. began about 1881 and ultimately merged with the Anaconda Company as part of the ACM Foundry in Anaconda (today’s AFFCO). By 1884 Tuttle was associated with the Lexington Foundry that cast the iron at the building west of Insty-Prints on Park Street.

The most common labels on our columns are from the Montana Iron Works and Western Iron Works, both Butte foundries.

The Maley Block on Hamilton Street south of Granite sports a Western Iron Works logo. Montana Iron Works, with its traditional backwards “N” in the nameplate, built columns for the Galena Street Post Office, Hamilton Block, Quartz Street Fire Station (Archives), and the Imperial Block on East Park among many others. Another local iron company was the Butte Foundry (look for their name on old manhole covers). Iron at the two-story building at 120 N. Main came from the Stedman Foundry in Helena.

Butte’s wealth also allowed for imported cast iron from major eastern foundries. The Casey Block on Hamilton Street has columns from the Union Iron and Foundry Co. of St. Louis, and the 1901 Cohn Block on Broadway is graced by metal from the St. Paul Minnesota Foundry.

Mesker Brothers and Scherpe & Koken, both in St. Louis, Missouri, cast many of the columns for stores in Philipsburg and Virginia City, Montana, and if you “look down” at the logos on iron fronts in Butte, you might find these famous iron workers memorialized in metal—along with a memory of Butte’s long sustained boom period.

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.