BAS 260 Metals Bank Building Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The intersection of Park and Main Streets defines the heart of Butte. In late 1884 the southwestern corner was occupied by a 2-story block holding a saloon, gambling house, and dry goods store on the ground floor, offices above, and a beer hall in the basement, but a variety theater, to connect with the beer hall, was under construction. The Theatre Comique, with its own saloon and a kitchen beneath the sidewalk on Main Street, was a prominent aspect of the corner for the next dozen years.

About 1893 the corner building was occupied by the State Savings Bank, with Patrick Largey president. Largey, sometimes called Butte’s fourth copper kind for his wealth even though it was from banking more than mining, was shot and killed in his office in the State Savings Bank in January 1898, by Thomas Riley, a man who had lost his leg in the disastrous 1895 warehouse explosions in Butte that killed 58 people. Riley held a grudge against Largey, who has partial ownership in the warehouse where the explosions of illegally stored dynamite occurred.

The State Savings bank was strong enough that in 1906, with additional financial backing by the Daly Bank owned by Marcus Daly’s widow, a $325,000-dollar skyscraper was constructed on the site. It was one of the first skyscrapers in Montana, defined by its steel girder internal frame construction, and the second skyscraper in Butte after the 1901 Hirbour Tower a block north on Main Street.

Nationally known architect Cass Gilbert designed the building for the State Savings Bank, which was constructed by Montana architects Link and Haire. Gilbert went on to New York in 1910 where his 60-story Woolworth Building became the tallest building in the world when it was completed in 1913. He also designed the U.S. Supreme Court Building, and the Cass Gilbert Society has visited Butte because the Metals Bank is such a shining example of his early work.

One detail, the 32-ton bank vault door, wasn’t installed until September 1907. It was hauled up unpaved streets from the Northern Pacific depot on Front Street on a makeshift truck pulled by a team of 26 horses. That door survives in a restaurant today, part of a renovation in the late 2000s that also produced elegant loft apartments and condominiums on the upper floors.

The State Savings Bank was reorganized in 1920 as the Metals Bank and Trust, and when it acquired the assets of William A. Clark’s bank in 1928, it became the richest financial institution between Minneapolis and Seattle.

Appropriately, Butte’s copper wealth dominates the exterior of the Metals Bank building, including copper balconies, entry arches, window casements, and cornice. The elegance continues inside with African mahogany window framing and marble walls in the elevator lobby.

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.