BAS 262 Sandstone and Dolomite Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

While molten rock was solidifying to become the Butte Granite 76 million years ago, sandy rivers flowing near what is now Columbus, Montana, watered dinosaurs and primitive mammals. And some of those river sands found their way to Butte—with a little help from an Italian-born quarryman.

Brick and granite dominate Butte’s construction materials, but a few other natural stones are present as well. The entry arches and window sill courses at the 1906 Carpenter’s Union Hall (156 W. Granite) are made of gray Montana Sandstone, quarried near Columbus between 1890 and 1910. Carved decorative vertical lines dominate the façade, but they do not conceal the original cross-bedding—angular trends in the fine-grained sandstone layers that reflect the currents in those 76-million-year-old rivers.

The quarry just north of Columbus also provided the stone for much of the Montana State Capitol in Helena. Michael Jacobs (born Jacobucci) came to Montana from Italy as a stone carver and mason and eventually became a manager at the quarry about 1901. Jacobs became rich on this popular sandstone, finishing his 3,500-square-foot mansion in Columbus about 1907 and serving as the town’s mayor in 1913-14.

A second unusual natural stone found on Butte buildings is dolomite, a rock like limestone but containing magnesium. The added magnesium makes it a bit harder and less susceptible to dissolution by the natural acids found in rainwater. In Butte, the most significant architectural use of dolomite is in the cornices, lintels, sills, and nameplate of the 1908 O’Rourke Building (103 W. Quartz, due east of the jail).

The creamy pink stone on the O’Rourke building may be Tyndall Stone, a dolomite quarried near Winnipeg, Manitoba—but the O’Rourke is a bit early for Tyndall Stone, and the rock here does not display the fossils the Canadian material is famous for. Wherever it is from, this dolomite adds a unique style and appearance to what was once a high-class apartment building.

The O’Rourke is really two buildings. The smaller structure to the north was constructed in 1892 by John O'Rourke, the owner of the Red Boot & Shoe Company, 36 No. Main St., Butte. The larger and more substantial front building was built in 1908 by his widow Mary O'Rourke. The apartments were high-end residential units that were occupied until the 1980s when Butte’s population had declined to the point that the count of apartments city-wide simply did not support the housing need, and the O’Rourke was vacant for the next 30 years and more. In 2020, a developer is actively rehabilitating the buildings.

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.