BAS 267 The Copper Block Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Silver Bow County’s population more than doubled during the 1890s, from 23,000 in 1890 to 47,000 in 1900. The decade was a nearly continuous building boom despite the economic downturn following the silver crisis of 1893.

The Copper Block, built in 1892 as the Nadeau Block, was later known as the Empire Hotel. It stood at the corner of Wyoming and Galena Streets and was probably not constructed as a brothel, but its location near the heart of the red-light district led to its significant role in the seedy side of Butte.

The 3-story building was erected by Joseph Nadeau. According to historian Ellen Baumler, Joseph Nadeau and his brother Arthur arrived in Butte from Canada in 1878, when Butte had barely 3,000 inhabitants, and their first business was a hotel and restaurant at 13 West Broadway. But within a decade they were expanding rapidly into various real estate investments, including the Dumas Brothel, built in 1890. The Nadeaus came to own at least five red-light district properties. The Copper Block itself is labeled “female boarding all floors” on the 1900 Sanborn map, the euphemism for a brothel.

The Nadeau family was enriched by their real estate projects, and the Nadeau Investment Company ultimately had properties in California and Kansas as well as Montana and Canada. One son attended Harvard, and the entire family embarked on a world tour in 1908. Joseph Nadeau died in 1925.

By the 1980s, the Copper Block was vacant, and Seattle developer Allan Comp planned to spend $1.2 million to refurbish the building into an upscale restaurant and hotel. He received a $10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to bring nationally and locally known architects, artists and historians together in 1987 to brainstorm ways to make the refurbishment happen, but ultimately the project proved to be financially unfeasible. By 1990, the Copper Block had reverted to the city/county for delinquent taxes.

The building was demolished in 1990 at a cost of $53,623, and the intergrown nature of Butte’s architecture resulted in partial demolition of an adjacent structure as well. A parking lot with a historic plaque and silhouettes commemorating the ladies marks the Copper Block site. Rick Griffith, a member of the Urban Revitalization Board that had sought to preserve the building, said, “Of all the buildings we’ve torn down, that one breaks my heart the most,” according to the Montana Standard article of January 25, 1990, by John McNay and Eric Williams.

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.

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Photo: Joseph Nadeau, from Sanders, 1915, A History of Montana