BAS 276 The Original Court House Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Montana Territory was separated from Idaho Territory in 1864 and on February 2, 1865, Montana was subdivided by the first territorial legislature, sitting in Bannack, into its original nine counties. They were Beaverhead, Chouteau, Custer, Deer Lodge, Gallatin, Jefferson, Madison, Missoula, and Edgerton. All of the original counties have changed their borders at least somewhat, but they all exist with the original names except Edgerton, which is Lewis and Clark County.

Deer Lodge County’s first county seat was at the placer mining camp of Silver Bow, west of Butte, but the first election held in the county moved the county seat to Deer Lodge. Deer Lodge County eventually was subdivided into what are now mostly Granite, Powell, Deer Lodge, and Silver Bow Counties, with Silver Bow established February 16, 1881 and its seat at Butte. A county court house was needed.

Bids were announced in December 1883 and J.R. Roberts, architect, was chosen to manage the project. He subcontracted various local firms, such as Chaplin and McSperry for stonework and McConnell & McDavitt for the primary building construction. Sheet-metal cornices were produced by Mesker and Brothers Iron Works in St. Louis and shipped to Butte.

By June of 1884 the Beaux-Arts building was largely complete, and attorneys and organizations began advertising their offices and meetings in the “new court house.” The same month, the building had electric lights installed by electrician A.B. Grace, just 5 years after Thomas Edison’s electric light was invented. A Butte Miner newspaper reporter tested their illumination by hiking four blocks down Montana Street, to Stoner’s Stable, on a dark and rainy night, when he was still able to “plainly see a silver quarter lying in the road” from the lights of the new Court House.

In July, the new court house almost came to disaster, as the Miner reported in its column headed “Fourth of July notes” that “the fireworks in the evening were a success until a lot of them ignited on the roof of the court house and cut the fun short.” Apparently the damage was minor.

County Commissioners examined the new building and its attached jail in early September 1884, and declared it completed and authorized final payments September 6. The total cost was $140,250.11 and according to the Miner, the building was “a model of neatness and convenience. It has not its equal outside of a city of 50,000 inhabitants.” This was at a time when Butte had about 4,000 residents.

By 1908 Butte and Silver Bow County had far outgrown the original county court house, which simply could not serve the needs of 55,000 citizens. There was also a serious need for more courtrooms to serve the lawsuits connected with the Wars of the Copper Kings among the Anaconda Company, William Clark, Augustus Heinze, and others, so the original court house was demolished. The 1910 Silver Bow county court house still serves the combined city and county of Butte-Silver Bow.

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.