Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson. 557 words 3:45

“A man of sterling character and a citizen of the highest motives; of a bright mind and tireless energy.”

Thus was John H. Curtis remembered in the Butte Miner when he died from Bright’s disease at age 68, July 8, 1906. Born in County Cork, Ireland, he came with his parents to the United States at age 5. They settled in Missouri, where Curtis trained as a lawyer, but the onerous Drake “iron-clad” oath prevented him, as a Confederate supporter, from working there. He joined his brother Charles in Helena in 1866 and within a few years was a successful grocer.

Curtis’s ramblings in the 1860s included an encounter with road agents on the road from Diamond City north of Townsend, when he and his partner Ed Sparks had canteens full of gold dust worth $12,000 between them. They escaped, so they said, thanks to the strength of their horses.

Curtis moved to Butte August 20, 1880, arriving in a booming town of about 3,500 residents on its way to 23,000 by 1890. He came with a fortune – $40,000, by his own account – and no debt. In 1901, he recalled “I liked the look of the town from the first, and in the first 24 hours I was here [in Butte] I invested $5,000 in the town’s real estate.”

His real estate success was nothing short of phenomenal. While Butte was his center of operations, he also owned property in Lewis and Clark, Jefferson, and Madison Counties. Today, the 1892 Curtis Music Hall, home to Gamer’s Restaurant, is perhaps his most visible legacy, designed by architect Henry Patterson. But he’s also considered to be the founder of Butte’s first hospital.

Curtis was part of the movement to build the first frame Catholic church in Butte (on the site of today’s St. Patrick’s). His connections to the Catholic community led him to urge Father Palladini of Helena to establish a hospital – but Palladini wrote that “Butte wouldn’t last long enough to make a hospital worth while.” When Curtis approached Sister Josephine of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, she sent two sisters to Butte immediately. Curtis purchased the lots for the construction of the Sisters Hospital at the northwest corner of West Silver and Idaho Streets in the early 1880s, and by 1888 this had become St. James Hospital. That 1888 3-story hospital was only about 70 feet square, but it had an ornate Mansard roof. Several additions had nearly doubled its size by 1891, and by 1900 it had nearly doubled again.

The Curtis family home at 334 South Washington Street at the corner of Porphyry is no longer standing, but the little office at 35 West Granite, where his sons continued his real estate business until 1960, still stands. The building there today replaced the original office in 1939, as the first frame building had burned in 1929.

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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