

Post Office Block (Boise Basin Museum)  
Northwest corner of Wall and Montgomery Streets  
Idaho City  
Boise County  
Idaho

HABS No. ID-15

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. ID-15

## POST OFFICE BLOCK (BOISE BASIN MUSEUM)

Location: Northwest corner of Wall and Montgomery Streets,  
Idaho City, Boise County, Idaho.

Latitude: 43° 49' 43" Longitude: 115° 49' 58".

Present Owner: Boise Basin Museum.

Present Use: Museum.

Significance: The building replaced the original post office on Main Street that burned in the fire of May 17, 1867. Constructed of local low-fired brick, the building has a decorative cornice, and rectangular and rounded arches over heavy metal doors.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The Idaho World reported on June 5, 1867, "The new Post Office building...is rapidly progressing, and will be ready for occupation in a few days. The paper noted that the construction was completed on June 15, and the new Post Office opened on that day.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Post Office, now the Boise Basin Museum, stands on Lot A, Blocks 11 and 12 of the townsite of Idaho City Plat of 1915. Reference to the title of these lots is in the Deed Records at the Boise County Recorder and Auditor's Office, Idaho City, Idaho. The following is an incomplete chain of title.
  - 1871 Deed, August 16, 1871 recorded September 7, 1871 in Deed Record 13, pp. 37-38. M. Rosenthal and B. Rosenthal to James A. Pinney for \$1,180. "Commencing at the North Westerly corner of Montgomery and Wall..."
  - 1873 Deed, April 4, 1873 recorded in Deed Record 13, 338-339. James A. Pinney to J.K. Reid for \$408.
  - 1882 Deed, August 1, 1882 recorded in Deed Record 15, p. 324 Pinney to S.C. Silsby for \$1,000.

- 1945 Decree, February 27, 1945 recorded in Deed Record 51, pp. 49-50. James L. Horenberger and Lulu M. Myer, heirs to the estate of Mary S. Horenberger (Silsby's daughter): Lot 12, Block A "That the whole of said property was inherited by said Mary S. Horenberger and was the sole and separate property of said deceased; that upon the death of said Mary S. Horenberger, under and by virtue of the laws of the State of Idaho, the absolute fee simple, title and ownership of said real property devolved upon, succeeded to, became vested equally in said James L. Horenberger and Lulu M. Myer."
- 1945 Warranty Deed, September 7, 1945 recorded in Deed Record 51, p. 179. James L. Horenberger and Lulu Myer to Reginald John Mellor for \$400. Lot A, Block 12.
- 1947 Warranty Deed, May 1947 recorded in Deed Record 52, p. 43. Reginald John Mellor and C. Alice Mellor to Leonard and Maggie Hamilton for \$10.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: No record of contractors is found. However, James Pinney probably acted as a general contractor, a common practice at that time.
5. Original plan and construction: The building was built within a month after the fire of May 17, 1867 destroyed the old Post Office on Main Street. Local low-fired bricks were used in the construction of the building.
6. Alterations and additions: The Idaho World noted on June 29, 1867 that Pinney had "nicely sloped the sidewalk on the Wall Street side of his new Post Office Building..."(sic). On March 11, 1869 the paper reported:

"We observe that Postmaster Pinney has made quite an improvement in the arrangement of the compartment set aside for Post Office business in his bookstore building by extending the partition to the front of the building, which places the boxes all on a line, and as a consequence has the advantage of more light from the front windows. He has also arranged the west end of the building for a residence and will occupy it as such."

Mary Horenberger, S.C. Silsby's daughter, inherited the building and lived there until her death in 1934. In 1953, when a group of Idaho City residents purchased the building, it stood empty and decaying. Originally there was a kitchen, dining room and sitting room at the rear section. These were removed. In 1958 the building was converted to a museum, which opened in June of that year, and was substantially altered. Concrete was poured over the wooden floor. Tons of dirt were removed from the attic, and gravel was put in the basement. The metal shutters were removed from all the windows and doors

in the north section (store building). The openings were framed-in and/or bricked-in for replaced windows and doors. The double doors in the Post Office in the east and south facades were removed, and are stored inside the building. The doors were over 10' high with two rows of five fixed lights each row. The rear door in the Post Office was a single panel door with three rows of three lights each row, the size of each light being 9 1/2" x 16". This door is also stored inside the building. The boardwalks were replaced with concrete walks on the east, west, and south sides of the building. A small cornice was added on the south side of the front facade to join the original cornice. The horizontal siding on the east gable end replaced an earlier board and batten enclosure. A frame addition was constructed on the north side of the building to house public rest-rooms and a carport.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

James A. Pinney built his Post Office and Bookstore in June of 1867, after the devastating fire of May 17, 1867 destroyed the original Post Office on Main Street. Pinney, Idaho City's second Postmaster, had a long career as a merchant, theater builder and politician. He came to Idaho City in 1863 or 1864 and began as a merchant. His Post Office and Bookstore sold books, magazines, stationery, musical instruments, knives, guns, toys, fruit and had an active library. He moved to Boise in the winter of 1872-73 and opened a new store there. Pinney built the beautiful but short-lived Columbia Theater (designed by J.C. Paulsen, a German architect in practice in Helena, Montana), and later the Pinney (which was torn down in the 1960s and replaced by a parking lot). Elected Mayor of Boise in 1880, he served two terms, 1880-1884 and 1888-1892.

When Pinney moved into the building on June 15, 1867, the building also housed Yale and Company--who sold books and musical instruments--, Blake and Company, a news depot, and the Office of the Idaho Lemhi Express.

By 1873, the fortunes of Idaho City declined, and Pinney, like many residents during this decade, decided to sell the properties and move to Boise. James K. Reid bought the north section and operated a meat market there for a short time. Reid sold out to John Garrecht in November of 1873. S.C. Silsby, Pinney's assistant, continued to manage the bookstore and run the post office. He was appointed as a postmaster in 1878 and became the owner of the block in 1882. The Idaho World newspaper was temporarily housed in the north section in 1883.

Silsby's daughter, Mary Hornberger, a long-time County Treasurer, inherited the property at her father's death in 1882, and resided there for many years. She died in 1934, but the building remained in her family until 1945, when her husband and daughter sold it. The City of Idaho bought the property in 1953.

In an article on Idaho City from Intermountain Observer, author Alan Minskoff tells the description of the block and short history of the founding of the Boise Basin Museum:

"The Boise Basin Museum, itself a fine old building with an interesting brick facade, houses a collection of antiques and memorabilia from the gold rush days. Some of the more interesting objects from the gold rush era are a set of planing tools handmade in Idaho City in the 1870's, the hood worn by the hangman at the hanging of Herman St. Clair, the original cages from the old post office, and a miniature five stamp gold mill.

A community effort, the idea for the museum got started back in the early 1950's. A group of citizens...decided that Idaho City ought to have a museum. By 1958, the Idaho City Historic Foundation incorporated, and the museum opened in June. Gov. Robert E. Smylie officiated at the inauguration of the first Gold Rush Days..." [Alan Minskoff, "Little Old Town with a lived-in look", Intermountain Observer, May 19, 1973, p. 14].

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

- a. A photocopy of old photo shows the building before the 1958 restoration, taken circa 1953. Original negative at Idaho Historical Society, Boise, Idaho. Included in the HABS collection.
- b. Photocopy of lithograph showing the block used as a post office and newspaper office, circa late 19th century. Owner of lithograph: Idaho Historical Society, Boise, Idaho. Included in the HABS field records.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, County Recorder and Auditor's Office, Idaho City, Idaho.

Interviews: John Brogan, Francis Mohr, Francis Adams, April 10, 1973, Idaho City.

Harry Palmer, July 15, 1973, Idaho City.

Dorine Goertzen, June 4, 1974, Boise.

Marie MacDonald, July 11, 1974.

Mary Myer Steinberg (S.C. Silsby's great-granddaughter), July 18, 1974, Idaho City.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Adams, Francis. Idaho City, Queen City of the Gold Camps. Idaho City: Idaho World, 1953.

Byrd, Annie Laurie. Boise, the Peace Valley. Caldwell: Caxton, 1934.

Idaho World. Newspaper articles, 1867. Idaho City, Idaho.

Elliott's History of Idaho, San Francisco: Elliott, 1884;  
reprinted, Fairfield, 1971.

Minskoff, Alan. "Little Old Town with a lived-in look,"  
Intermountain Observer, May 19, 1973.

Progressive Men of Southern Idaho. Chicago: A.W. Bowen, 1904.

Prepared by Alan Minskoff  
Historian  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer 1974

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The brick block of two buildings, under a single gable roof, was constructed with the latest of fire resistant construction techniques known in Idaho City at the time. A layer of earth over brick was placed on the attic floor, and all openings were shuttered with iron shutters.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This rectangular building is approximately 45' x 40'.
2. Foundations: The brick and stone foundations are in fair condition.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: The walls are constructed of local low-fired brick. The Post Office (south section) has been painted red, and the store (north section) has been left natural.
4. Structural system, framing: The entire block has exterior brick bearing walls. Wooden post and beam construction, running through the center, in an east-west direction, also support the block. The ceiling joists span from brick bearing wall to beam to brick party bearing wall and carry not only the ceiling load but the attic floor load. The attic floor consists of a layer of brick and three to four inches of earth fill. The truss system bears on the exterior north and south walls and the central party wall.
5. Covered walkway: There is a covered boardwalk on the entire east and south sides of the building, and a walkway along the Post Office section of the block.

6. Chimneys: One brick chimney in the central party wall projects through the peak of the gable roof.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways: The primary entrances into the block are on the east facade of the building. There were two doorways into both the Post Office and the store. The two openings into the Post Office still have the original metal shutters, but the double doors have been removed. The metal shutters have been removed from the two double doors in the store side of the block. The openings have been bricked-in and/or framed-in for a window in one opening and a door in the other opening. There had been a door in the west end of the store building, but the opening has been bricked-up to create a window opening. The doors in the west and south sides of the Post Office section of the block have been removed, but the original bi-folding metal shutters are still intact.
  - b. Windows and shutters: No original window is intact in the block. The window on the west side of the Post Office has been removed, but the bi-folding metal shutters are still in place. The window and metal shutters on the west side of the store building have been removed, and the opening has been filled with concrete. A new window on the north side of the building has been added.
8. Roof: The roof is a gable roof with shed roofs over the covered walks. The original pine, shake roofing material has been covered with galvanized, corrugated steel roofing.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The building is now entered through the southernmost opening in the east face of the building. The Post Office section of the block is now an open space for museum display. The back door opening leads out onto the covered walk on the west side of the building. Two openings have been cut through the brick party wall. One opening allows access from the northwest corner of the Post Office section through a small storage room in the store section, and into the back room of the store section. A doorway, from which the door has been removed, leads into the front space of the store. The other opening cut into the brick party wall allows access back into the Post Office section.
2. Flooring: The floor of the Post Office section is concrete. The floor of the store section is pine board flooring.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The Post Office walls are plastered with a local clay which has been covered with a finished coat of lime plaster and covered with an ivory colored paint. Store building brick walls are plastered and papered, and the frame walls are covered with muslin and papered. The ceilings in the entire block are covered with pine board and batten.

4. Doorways and doors: There are no existing interior doors. Two doorways in the store section of the building are cased with four inch boards.

5. Mechanical equipment:

a. Heating: The heating unit is a wood stove.

b. Lighting: The lighting is of incandescent type.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces east and is located on the northwest corner of Wall and Montgomery Streets. A city park surrounds the building on its west and north sides.

Prepared by William B. McCroskey  
Project Director  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer 1974

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Idaho City project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), in cooperation with the Idaho Bicentennial Commission in the summer of 1974. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by William B. McCroskey (University of Idaho), the project director; Alan Minskoff (University of Chicago), the project historian; Jack W. Schafer (University of Cincinnati), the project foreman, and the student assistant architects, Rae F. Noritake (University of Idaho), Laurence Ferar (University of Oregon), and Mark T. Wellen (Texas Tech University). William Klein, a HABS staff architect in the Washington office, edited the drawings in 1975. The written architectural and historical data was edited in April 1980 by Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington office. The documentary photographs were made by Duane Garrett in 1976.