

Courthouse of Beaverhead County, 1876-1881
Main street of Bannack
Bannack, Beaverhead County
Montana

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
San Francisco, California

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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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COURTHOUSE OF BEAVERHEAD COUNTY, 1876-1881

Bannack, Beaverhead County, Montana

LOCATION: Main Street of Bannack.

OWNER: State Parks Division, Montana Highway Commission,
Helena, Montana.

OCCUPANT: None.

USE: None.

BRIEF STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This two story brick building was erected in 1876 to serve as a Courthouse for Beaverhead County fourteen years after the discovery of gold along Grasshopper Creek in 1862. The Nez Perce War of 1877 brought Chief Joseph to the edge of the town of Bannack. The Courthouse was fortified and served both as a military headquarters and a refuge for women and children in case of attack. In 1881, the county seat was moved to Dillon, Montana.

I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original Owner: Built by Beaverhead County, the building served as the county seat until 1881.
2. Date of Erection: Completed on December 1, 1876. Cost: \$14,000.
3. Architect: Unknown.

4. Builder: Steele and Tasker
5. Original Plans: Unknown, if in existence.
6. Notes on Alterations and Additions: After the county seat was moved to Dillon in 1881, the building was remodeled into the Meade Hotel. An "L" shaped addition was constructed to the rear (north) of the courthouse.
7. Important Old Views: Only an early overall photograph (date unknown) of the entire town which is included in this Photo-Data Book.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

1. Gold was discovered along Grasshopper Creek in 1862. This started the gold rush to Montana.
2. Bannack was designated as the County Seat of the newly formed Beaverhead County by the Territory of Idaho in 1863. It served as the Capitol of the newly-formed Territory of Montana in 1864-5; then the Capitol was moved to Virginia City, site of a larger gold strike.
3. Following the pattern of Virginia City, county seat of Madison County, a contract was let to build a courthouse. One of the partners in the contracting firm, Daniel A. Steele, had just finished building the Madison County Courthouse.
4. On August 9, 1877, General Gibbon surprised the Indian encampment of Chief Joseph at the Big Hole Basin. Slipping away from Gibbon, the Indians made their way toward Bannack.
5. Sunday, August 12, 1877, Brother William W. Van Orsdel, a Methodist circuit rider, preached a sermon on the courthouse square in the face of the expected Indian attack. The courthouse, being the only major masonry building in town, was fortified to serve as both military headquarters and a refuge for women and children. The approach of General Howard prevented Chief Joseph from attacking the town.
6. Population in Bannack was estimated at over 5,000 in 1863.

In 1879, it was estimated to be 700, and in 1880 the census showed 232. The 1920 census indicated a population of only 59 people.

7. The town was designated as a State Monument in 1954.

8. The town of Bannack was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1962 by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service.

C. References:

1. Leeson, M.A., History of Montana, 1739-1885, Chicago - Warner, Beers & Company, 1885.

2. Inventory of the County Archives, No. 1, Beaverhead County, Montana, prepared by the Inventory of Public Archives, Historical Records Survey, Division of Professional and Service Projects, W.P.A., 1939, Bozeman, Montana.

3. Commissioners Journal, Book B, p. 237, County Clerk and Recorders Office, Dillon, Montana.

4. Caxton, Bruce, The American Heritage of Great Historical Places, New York - Simon & Schuster, 1957.

5. Miller, Joaquin, An Illustrated History of the State of Montana, Chicago & New York - Lewis Publishing Company, 1894.

6. The Montana Almanac, 1957 ed., Missoula - Montana State University.

7. Great Falls Tribune, Sunday Edition, November 11, 1951, Montana Parade section.

8. Stout, Tom, Montana, Its Story and Biography, Chicago & New York - American Historical Society, Vol. I, 1921.

II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The two story brick courthouse

with its gabled front facade and simple rectangular plan can best be related to the Greek Revival style, yet it possesses aspects dating back to the Federal period. The permanence of the structure, built among the frame buildings, proclaimed a faith in Government among the people of the mining camp.

2. Condition of Structure: Fair to good.

B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions: 33'-2" x 60'-5", having a porch (not original) across the front.

2. Foundations: Native stone.

3. Wall Construction: 16" brick bearing walls.

4. Chimneys: Brick; some removed because of earthquake damage in 1959.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and Doors: Main (south) entrance has 4-paneled wood doors with a transom of four lights above. Doorway has a brick arch that is covered by plaster. Wood paneling frames the door jambs. Two doors, single paneled with 6 lights, gave access from the second floor front room to the original roof of the porch. This doorway has a transom of four lights, similar to that of the main entrance, capped with a brick arch.

b. Windows: 4/4 double-hung wood sash with exterior wood moulding and cut stone sills. A small rectangular attic window of two lights has a brick arch, and is located in the front gable end just under the eaves.

6. Roof:

a. Gable roof covered with corrugated tin. Original roof probably split wood shakes.

b. Framing: Huge trusses, constructed of eight 2 x 16s for the top cords and eight 2 x 15s for the bottom cord,

are set 15'-0" o.c. Tie rods of 4" x 8" connect the top cords to the bottom cord. Purlins of 2" x 10"s (two on each side) support rafters of 2 x 6s. Sheathing is of 1 x 4s and 1 x 6s.

c. Cornice, Eaves: Boxed-in eaves are formed by extension of the ceiling joists over top of the exterior walls and meeting the roof rafters.

C. Technical Description of Interiors:

1. Floor plans: The original building was rectangular in plan with two stories, an unfinished attic and a basement crawl space. The "L" shaped addition was not measured. The front room has a staircase leading to the second floor set in the southeast corner of the main room. A large vault faces into the main room on the west end of the room from the north wall, indicating that half of the main room was probably partitioned off and used as an office. The vault extending into the room space to the north has another vault, this to its side, forming a total wall to wall division of the rooms. This vault was probably the county records vault. A central hall from the front room leads directly to the rear door which now opens into another hall of the addition. One long room containing the records vault is divided by a wood-capped archway running east and west about 2/3rds of the way. On the east side of the hall there are two rooms. The rear room is also partially divided by a square wood-capped passageway.

2. Staircase: The main staircase begins curving upward then straightens out along the east wall. The carved wood newel post and baluster are either of walnut or mahogany having a deep stain finish, and are similar to those in the Madison County Courthouse. The front window opening into the staircase which falls below some of the stair treads is handled by a stepped down window apron, thus not breaking up the exterior window treatment.

3. Flooring: Oak in the main room; soft wood elsewhere.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: Plaster.

5. Doorways and Doors: Original interior doors are four-paneled wood doors. The second floor doors have a transom of 2 lights above them.

6. Trim: Wood trim with mouldings. Windows and doors have identical trim.

7. Hardware: Cast iron.

D. Site:

1. General Setting and Orientation: The Courthouse faces south onto the main street of Bannack, set back about 33 feet from the road.

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DATE:

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