

Cowan House
1021 Main Street
Corvallis
Ravalli County
Montana

HABS No. MT-73

HABS
MONT,
41-CORV,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Building Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION

Historic American Buildings Survey
Architectural Data Form

HAB:
MONT
41-60
1-

STATE Montana	COUNTY Ravalli	TOWN OR VICINITY Corvallis
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HISTORIC NAME OF STRUCTURE (INCLUDE SOURCE FOR NAME) Cowan House	HAB'S NO. MT-73
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SECONDARY OR COMMON NAMES OF STRUCTURE

COMPLETE ADDRESS (DESCRIBE LOCATION FOR RURAL SITES)
1021 Main Street, Lots 8-12, Block 8 of Original Townsite

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE SOURCE) Circa 1878-1882 (Missoula County Tax Assessment Records)	ARCHITECT(S) (INCLUDE SOURCE) Unknown
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SIGNIFICANCE (ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL, INCLUDE ORIGINAL USE OF STRUCTURE)
See attached.

STYLE (IF APPROPRIATE) Hall and parlor (vernacular)

MATERIAL OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS)
Wood plank construction (lap-sided)

SHAPE AND DIMENSIONS OF STRUCTURE (SKETCHED FLOOR PLANS ON SEPARATE PAGES ARE
L-shaped (48 x 60 feet)

EXTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE
See attached.

INTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE (DESCRIBE FLOOR PLANS, IF NOT SKETCHED)
Numerous alterations have occurred on the interior of the Cowan house. Wall
partitions have been both added and taken out over the years and the walls have
been covered repeatedly with a variety of wall coverings (sheetrock and paneling).

MAJOR ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS WITH DATES
Review of Sanborn Insurance Company maps indicate that the rear addition was added
sometime before 1909. The rear addition appears on both the 1909 and 1927 Sanborn
maps, as do both the garage and the small wood frame outbuilding. No earlier Sanborn
maps are available for this property. Until the 1930s a small barn and chicken house
stood on the lot to the west and across the alley from the Cowan house.

PRESENT CONDITION AND USE
See attached.

OTHER INFORMATION AS APPROPRIATE

SOURCES OF INFORMATION (INCLUDE LISTING ON NATIONAL REGISTER, STATE REGISTERS, ETC.)
See attached bibliography.

COMPILER, AFFILIATION Brian L. Shovers, Historian and Paul Anderson, Photographer - GCM Services, Inc., P. O. Box 3047, Butte, MT 59702	DATE 3-7-88
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SIGNIFICANCE (ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL) (continued)

The one-story wood frame house located along Main Street in Corvallis, Montana is historically significant because of its association with James H. Cowan, an early pioneer of the Bitterroot Valley and an early resident of Corvallis. Cowan, a prosperous landowner and farmer, built the house at 1012 Main Street and lived there until his death in 1905. Cowan remained a prominent and prosperous citizen of Corvallis throughout his life in Montana. The house, a hall and parlor style dwelling, constitutes a good example of plank construction, and might be considered one of the few remaining residences of early Corvallis.

One of Corvallis' earliest residents and one of its most successful farmers and businessmen, James H. Cowan, owned 160 acres of farm land along Main Street as early as 1871, only seven years after the area's initial settlement by a band of Missouri pioneers led by Elijah Chaffin.¹ When Elijah Chaffin and his wife Margaret arrived in the Bitterroot Valley in 1864 the only other major white settlement in the valley was Fort Owen, a trading post operated by Major John Owen north of Corvallis near present day Stevensville, located on the site of the original St. Mary's Mission established by Jesuit Father Pierre Oesmet in 1841. In 1850 the Jesuits sold the mission to John Owen who transformed the log structure into a fort and trading post during the 1850s.² With increased white settlement of the Bitterroot Valley, particularly the area around Willow Creek (present day Corvallis), Fort Owen declined in importance as a trading center and commerce shifted to places like Corvallis.

The Salish Council, convened by Territorial Governor Issac Stevens in 1855 near Missoula, laid the ground work for the sanctioned invasion of the Bitterroot Valley and displacement of native peoples by white settlers such as the Chaffins.³ In 1870 the settlement of Chaffinville officially became known as Corvallis with the creation of the town's first post office. A Frenchman and early area resident named Herron, is credited with offering Corvallis--which literally means "heart of the valley" in French--as a name for the new town. Even in its infancy Corvallis claimed three mercantiles and a chartered chapter of the International Order of the Grand Templars, a signal of community resolve for permanence.⁴ By 1883 the fledgling town of Corvallis had grown into a settlement of thirty families, a hotel, a school for the town's eighty children and a Corvallis Christian Church.⁵ In those early days a prominent feature of the Corvallis streetscape was the modest home of James Cowan at the corner of Main and Second Streets.

The exact date of James Cowan's arrival in the Bitterroot Valley is unknown, but his obituary cites his appearance early in 1864, thirty-five years after his birth in Breckinridge County, Kentucky. Cowan's early life chronicles a series of adventures beginning with his 1853 journey to the gold camps of California from his home in Illinois and his survival of a shipwreck off the coast of San Diego in an aborted sea voyage home.⁶

Early Missoula County tax records verify Cowan's ownership of 160 acres of land (which included Lots 6-15 in Block 8 on the Corvallis Townsite Plat of 1879) in 1871, valued at \$300. Cowan's possessions included three horses, three mules, 50 cows, 59 calves, two pigs and a carriage, but no town lots or improvements on the land. In 1876 Cowan reported dividing his acreage

into 21 lots, valued at \$700, and \$830 in merchandise. Missoula County tax records listed the value of Cowan's merchandise each year after 1876, and by 1887 Cowan's land holdings and merchandise reached a total assessment value of over \$15,000. The year 1878 represented the first taxable improvements to one of Cowan's lots in Block 8 for a total of \$400, which increased to \$1,000 by 1887.⁷

According to a local informant and former resident of the house at the corner of Main and Second Streets (1021 Main St.), Amy Rockafellow, her father Russell Smithy purchased the Cowan house from Mrs. Abigale Cowan Wolfe in 1916. James Cowan died on December 8, 1905 at age 76, leaving the house to his widow, Abigale. The Smithy family resided in the house until it was sold in 1972.⁸

Near the end of his life Cowan listed his occupation as money lender and his property was assessed at a value of over \$27,000, making him one of Corvallis' wealthiest residents. It should also be noted that James Cowan contributed \$300 to the Corvallis Christian Church, one of Montana's oldest congregations and a prominent Corvallis landmark since the 1880s. James Cowan remained a prominent Corvallis resident until his death in 1905.⁹

The Cowan house is significant for its association with James H. Cowan and his role in the settlement of the Bitterroot Valley and the establishment of the town of Corvallis. James Cowan arrived at Willow Creek (the present site of Corvallis) shortly after the arrival of the town's first settlers, Elijah Chaffin and his family. By 1871 Cowan owned 160 acres of land within the original townsite of Corvallis and a large stable of livestock. Tax records for 1885 indicate that Cowan had become a successful merchant, James H. Cowan & Co. declaring \$3000 in merchandise. Two years later Cowan reported total assets of over \$15,000 making him one of the town's wealthiest residents. During his entire thirty year life in Corvallis Cowan made his home in the modest woodframe house at the corner of Main and Second Street, and during this time the town became firmly established and prospered. The small agricultural community, surrounded by productive fruit orchards and grazing land, boasted a rather large brick schoolhouse and several rather distinguished woodframe churches, and James H. Cowan clearly played a role in the town's growth and prosperity. Much of the initial white settlement of the Bitterroot Valley occurred during this period of time, from 1870 to 1910.

The Cowan house is architecturally significant because it represents one of the only existing examples of a plank construction, hall and parlor type house erected during the early Victorian era in Corvallis. Because so few dwellings exist from the town's early settlement period, the architecture of this house is historically significant.

EXTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE (continued)

The dwelling, located at 1021 Main Street, is a one-story, plank construction, hall and parlor style Victorian-era house with lap siding. The building sits on an uncut rubble stone foundation. It has a gable roof constructed of a plank underlayment and cedar shingles that have been covered with asphalt shingles. A porch with a shed roof wraps around the front and south side of the original structure. An addition, covered by a gable roof oriented east and west, intersects the original building. There are two entries on the front of the house, and a side entry has been added to the south side of the building. There are four brick chimneys, two located within the gable of the original house and two within the long addition that intersects the original structure. The house has double-hung windows (6/6) which are not original, although the window openings appear unaltered. There is a square bay window on the southeast corner of the house. The shed roof that covers the porch is supported by chamfered square posts and a solid wooden rail encloses the porch perimeter. The addition at the rear of the house has an enclosed, hip-roofed porch attached.

The house has two outbuildings at the rear of the property. There is a small woodframe structure with an asphalt-shingled gable roof and dropped siding. The building is set on a cinder-block foundation. A brick chimney is in the center of the roof. Located just behind this building is a metal-sheathed woodframe garage with a metal-covered gable roof. A wooden and wire fence encircles the entire property.

The Cowan house sits on Main Street at the end of the town's primary commercial block. The exterior features of the Cowan house are typical of rural western Montana farmsteads distinguishing it from the Corvallis streetscape of small false-fronted store fronts and more contemporary woodframe vernacular architecture.

PRESENT CONDITION AND USE (continued)

The building maintains its integrity of setting, materials, feeling and form. Although more recent structures can be seen from the site, this historic house evokes an earlier streetscape, visually overpowering other renovated storefronts along Main Street and recreating the rural feeling of early Corvallis. Even though the materials composed to create the Cowan house have deteriorated through neglect over the past fifteen years, they have not lost their power to evoke the building's period of historical significance. The form remains representative of the hall and parlor folk form found throughout rural western Montana during the 1880s, mimicking an older form found in the rural Southeast from colonial times through the railroad period.

Minor alterations to the building facade include the installation of more recent double-hung window sash, an asphalt-shingled roof, and several room additions to the rear. The two outbuildings at the rear of the property probably do not date to the Cowan house's period of historical significance, but their materials and form do not detract from the integrity of the house. The original barn and chicken house, once located on the lots across the alley to the west, were removed in the 1930s, which detracts from the integrity of the original Cowan farmstead setting. The wood and wire fence that encircles the property does not date from the period of house construction, but does not significantly detract from the overall setting. The Cowan house continues to be used as a single-family residence.

FOOTNOTES

1. Glen Chaffin, The Last Horizon (Somerset, CA.: Pine Trail Press, 1971), p. 69-72.
2. Carroll Van West, A Travellers Companion to Montana History (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 1986), p. 148-150.
3. Michael Malone and Richard Roeder, Montana: A History of Two Centuries (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), p. 88-89.
4. Roberta Carkeek Cheney, Names on the Face of Montana: The Story of Montana's Place Names (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1983), p. 62.
5. M. A. Leeson, History of Montana, 1739-1885 (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Co., 1885), p. 889.
6. The Ravalli Republican, December 15, 1905, p. 1.
7. Assessment Roll for the County of Missoula for the years 1871-1887; 1871-72, p. 2; 1876, p. 110; 1877, p. 120; 1878, p. 133; 1887, p. 9.
8. Amy Rockafellow, personal interview, October 19, 1987, Corvallis, Montana.
9. The Western News, December 15, 1905; Polk City Directory, Missoula and Hamilton 1903-04 (Missoula: R. L. Polk & Co., 1904), p. 376.

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Holmberg, Marshall, personal interview, Corvallis, Montana, October 19, 1987.

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