

Abraham Curry House
406 N. Nevada St.
Carson City
Nevada

HABS NO. NEV-13-13
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

12.

ABRAHAM CURRY HOUSE

HABS No. NEV-13-13

Location: 406 North Nevada Street, Carson City, Nevada

Present Owner: August Berning and D.E. Berning

Present Occupant: None

Present Use: Vacant

Statement of Significance: This house was built and lived in by the founder of Carson City, who was also the first Superintendent of the U.S. Mint at Carson. The house resembles much earlier prototypes and is largely in its original state.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: circa 1871. In the Storey, Ormsby, Washoe and Lyon Counties Directory for 1871-72, Curry's address is given as The Warm Spring Hotel. The 1873 Directory has him living at the NW corner of Telegraph and Nevada, the property herein considered. A panoramic photograph of Carson City dated 1869 reproduced both in the Second Biennial Report of The Nevada Historical Society 1909-1910 and Davis' The History of Nevada shows the house. The dating of this photograph is, however, questionable. Lastly it should be remembered that Curry did not acquire the property until December 1870, and the purchase price (\$600 for 8 lots) would not indicate that there was any substantial structure on the land at that time.
2. Architect: none known. It is highly likely that Curry, who constructed the United States Mint at Carson City and who is reputed to have said "There isn't a stone building in Carson City that I did not erect;" designed his own home. There is certainly no reason to think that he did not at least supervise its construction.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

The Abraham Curry House is built on lots 5 and 8 of Block 39 of Proctor and Green's Division of Carson City (Frank M. Proctor and B.F. Green were two of the four original purchasers in 1858 of the Eagle Ranch, upon which Carson

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City was platted. The property changed hands several times in the 1860's and was purchased by Curry in 1870. The following references tracing the title of these lots are found in the Ormsby County, Nevada, Deed Books:

- 1870 Deed, December 13, 1870 recorded in Book 14, page 133. A. Curry purchased lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in Block 39 from H.O. Beatty for \$600.00.
- 1871 Deed March 28, 1871, recorded in Book 14, page 192. A. Curry bought lot 9 of Block 39 from Moritz Fisher for \$175.00.
- 1875 Deed April 5, 1875, recorded in Book 16, page 291. Mary A. Curry sold to Jennie E. Turner lot no. 9 in Block 39 of Proctor and Green's Division, fronting on Nevada Street 35 feet and on Telegraph Street 90 feet, for \$200. (This is the lot on the southeast corner of the block).
- 1876 Deed September 30, 1876, recorded in Book 18, page 247. Frank Campbell bought from Maryette Curry and daughters, lots 1, 2, 3 and 4 of Block 39 of Proctor and Green's Division of Carson City for \$1,500.00 (This is the portion of the block to the north of the Curry House, upon which the Chartz House (HABS No. NEV-13-15) was built).
- 1890 Deed December 4, 1890, recorded in Book 25, page 333. Mary A. Curry, widow of A. Curry, deeded to Mariette Curry, her daughter, all of lots 5, 6, 7 and 8 in Block 39 of Proctor and Green's Division of Carson City for \$5.00.
- 1902 Deed August 2, 1902, recorded in Book 29, page 420. W.H. Cowan (Curry's grandson) bought from George W. Cowing, Ormsby County Treasurer and ex officio tax collector "lots 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10 in Block 39 (Stone Dwelling)" for \$31.92. (For fiscal year 1900, there was a delinquent tax on the property and it was consequently offered for sale).
- 1915 Deed December 18, 1915, recorded in Book 36, page 533. Lucy Ann Metrick of San Francisco deeded lot 9 of Block 39 to Mrs. W.H. Cowan for \$10.00. (This is the southeast corner lot of the property, see supra 1875).

- 1919 Deed November 4, 1919 recorded in Book 37, page 152. Julia E. Cowan (Mrs. W.H. Cowan) of Reno deeded the property to A. Berning.
- 1926-72 During the past 46 years the title to the property has changed hands several times among members of the Berning family. Deeds concerning these changes are found in the following: 1926 (Book 413 page 101), 1937 (Book 43, page 458), 1938 (Book 43, pages 456, 457), 1939 (Book 46, pages 152, 153). The last inhabitants of the house were Pierre and Edith (Berning) Marconnot. Since Mrs. Marconnot's death in 1971, the house has been vacant. Title is currently in the hands of August Berning Jr. and Duane E. Berning, Jr. (Official Records Book 116, page 129).
4. Original plans, constructions, etc.: none known. The building is constructed of stone from the Nevada State Prison Quarry.
5. Alterations and additions: Originally the house had an octagonal cupola centered on the ridge of the roof. The cupola was of one stage, each face being glazed, and was capped with a projecting cornice and a truncated, pyramidal roof. The cupola, Georgian in style, served as a skylight for the dining room of the house, which was otherwise without exterior light.

There was also a front porch of five-bays which ran in front of the projecting front pavillion and returned against the walls of the main block. Porch supports were panelled, square pillars with caps supporting a cornice which appears to have been a reduced version of that on the house itself, except that there was no freize.

Both the cupola and the porch were removed during the Berning ownership.

The rear wing, which is of stone construction on its south and west walls, and frame on the north, is said to have been constructed after the main house to serve as the school-room for a private shcool conducted by Maryette Curry, Abraham's daughter. The wing shows in the early panoramic view of Carson City (see C. 1.) and was undoubtedly an extremely early addition. It was later converted into a kitchen and service area.

The Marconnots, who most recently occupied the house, made it into two apartments, but did not effect any major structural changes in so doing.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Abraham, Abram, or Abe, Curry was born in Ithaca, New York in 1815. Little is known of his early career, but by 1858 he was in Western Utah. In company with three other men, he came to Genoa in that year from California, intending to establish a general store there. Finding the price of land in Genoa too high, the four men - A. Curry, B.F. Green, Frank M. Prococtr and J.J. Musser - rode a few miles north to Eagle Valley, then owned by John Mankin, who operated the Eagle Ranch. They asked Mankin the price, which was the same as a small lot in Genoa, and bought it from him for even less than his first asking.

Although there were four "proprietors" of the Eagle Ranch, from all accounts it seems that Curry is the one to whom credit should be given for making the ranch into a town. It was he who in September 1858 proposed to have a town site surveyed and platted. This was soon done, and an equal division of town lots made between the four. At first, the partners are said to have sold the lots for \$50.00 or to have given them away to any who would build on them.

Curry, however, became sole owner of that portion of the property known as the Warm Springs, just to the east of the townsite. Green sold his one-quarter share for a pony and Proctor and Musser gave Curry their interests in this parcel.

On this tract, Curry established both a sandstone quarry and built a stone hotel, one hundred feet long, thirty-two feet wide and two stories high. It was to this hotel which Curry invited the first Territorial Legislature in October 1861. (Governor Nye had issued a proclamation in the summer that the newly elected legislators would assemble in Carson City on October 1, 1861).

This first Territorial Legislature held a forty-nine day session, and on the last day, November 29, 1861, declared Carson City the county seat of Ormsby County. The County Commissioners at first met in rented quarters but on October 14, 1862, they purchased the "Great Basin Hotel", another of Curry's enterprises, for \$42,500.00, and converted it into a courthouse.

Among the several offices created by the first Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nevada in 1861 was that of Warden of the Prison. On January 1, 1862, Governor Nye appointed Curry to fill this position. Curry leased his property at

Warm Springs for the prison. On the property was the stone quarry, where the prisoners could be put to work, and which provided the building material for many of the city's early buildings. In 1862, the quarry was described as covering some sixty acres.

Curry served as Warden of the State Prison for several years, and in 1864 the Territory of Nevada paid him \$80,000 for the prison and twenty acres of land, including the stone quarry. During this same year Curry and an associate were granted the right to build, and charge a toll on, a macadamized road from Carson to Empire City.

As early as 1862, the United States Congress had recommended the passage of a bill authorizing the construction of a branch mint in Carson City. Due to many reasons, it was not until 1865 that a mint in Carson City was finally approved. In December of that year Abraham Curry was named by Secretary of the Treasury Hugh McCulloch as one of the three Commissioners to establish the Mint at Carson City. When on July 17, 1866, the plans, specifications, and authorization papers arrived in Carson City from Washington, they were addressed to A. Curry, "Superintendent of Construction." Curry was also elected County Surveyor of Ormsby County in 1866, a position he held for two years. In 1867, he was one of the charter members of the Carson Encampment No. 2 of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. The Mint (see HABS No. NEV-13-22) was completed by December, 1869, and when it began operation in January, 1870, it was A. Curry who had been promoted from Superintendent of Construction to Superintendent of the Mint. The document, dated April 15, 1869, and signed by President Grant, appointing Curry as Superintendent is still preserved and displayed in the building.

Curry served as Superintendent of the Mint until September 1870, when he resigned to campaign for the Republican nomination for Lieutenant-Governor, a race he lost.

Curry's next big project was the building of the mammoth shops for the Virginia and Truckee Railroad (HABS No. NEV-13-7) in Carson City. Construction began in December 1872 and was completed in July 1873. The grand ball, held on the Fourth of July 1873, by which Curry inaugurated the new shops, was his swan song. On October 19 of that year, at the age of 58, he died. His funeral was the largest held up to that time in Carson City and the Mint ceased operations for the day out of respect to its first superintendent. He is buried in Lone Mountain Cemetery, Carson City.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, his far-flung enterprises, Abe Curry, according to his widow, died with just one dollar in his pocket. In the years after his death, the neighbors helped pay the bills, provided firewood, etc. Maryette Curry taught a private school in the rear wing and boarders were taken in. Still, portions of the property were sold in 1875 and 76.

In 1902, there were delinquent taxes on the property, and W.H. Cowan paid them and obtained title to the property. Cowan was the son of Elvira Curry, Abe's daughter. The Cowans owned the property until 1919, when it passed out of the hands of the builder's family.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: The Nevada State Museum has an early view of the house, showing the porch and cupola. This is also reproduced on page 10 of "Mint Mark "CC" (see bibliography below), and is reproduced in the HABS records.

The house may also be seen in a panoramic photograph of Carson City, dated 1869, which is reproduced facing page 979 of The History of Nevada by Davis, and in the Second Biennial Report of the Nevada Historical Society, 1909-1910.

2. Bibliography:

Davis, Sam P. ed. The History of Nevada. Reno: The Elms Publishing Co., 1913.

Hickson, Howard. Mint Mark "CC". Carson City: Nevada State Museum, 1972.

Storey, Ormsby, Washoe, and Lyon Counties Directory, 1871-77, Sacramento: M.S. Crocker and Co.

Thompson, Thomas H. and Albert A. West. History of Nevada Berkeley, California: Howell-North, 1958. (Facsimile reprint of this volume which was originally printed in 1881.

Prepared by: S. Allen Chambers, Jr.
Architectural Historian
Historic American
Buildings Survey
November 1972

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Merit and Interest: A late nineteenth-century house resembling much earlier prototypes in the eastern states, substantially built, with details of Georgian derivation, largely in its original state; the home of an important historical figure.
2. Condition of fabric: Stone masonry is in good condition; woodwork is deteriorating. The house is unoccupied and has been for some time.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: approximately 36 ft. by 55 ft. (7 bays), excluding a narrow added wing 40 ft. long. One story. The original portion is rectangular with slight-projecting pavilions at the center of the two long walls. When considering the added wing, the whole becomes an L-shape.
2. Foundations: The foundations are low, built of sandstone, with a plain water table.
3. Walls: The east front is regular sandstone ashlar; the other sides are random ashlar. The color is dull yellow or light brown. This stone was quarried locally, at the site of the State Penitentiary. It was dressed variously with picks, plain chisels and tooth chisels; presumably this was done by prisoners. Margins are drafted only at corners. Plain lintels project about 1 1/2" beyond the face of the wall. Window sills are plain. Mortar joints are raised. The walls are generally in good condition; some mortar joints have been repointed in recent years.
4. Structural system: Exterior load-bearing masonry walls; wooden floor and roof system.
5. Porches, Stoops: A modern concrete stoop or terrace extends across the entire east front. Two granite steps which lead up to this terrace appear older, however, and may be contemporary with the original granite threshold of the entrance.

The north side of the west wing is taken up by a five-bay

wooden porch, which is visibly deteriorated. It has four columns which are square in plan and have moulded capitals.

6. Chimneys: There are five brick chimneys, all along the perimeter: one on the south wall near the east end, another on the south wall of the wing, one at the interior angle of the L, one at the center of the west wall, and one at the center of the north wall.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors - The entrance is at the south corner of the central pavilion on the east front. The opening is rectangular, being spanned by a sandstone lintel. Within the masonry opening there are a wooden casing, colonnettes and transom bar, so that the single door is framed by sidelights and transom light. The jambs and soffit of the casing are paneled, the doorway being deeply recessed. The door has two moulded panels: a large glazed one above and a smaller one, nearly square, below. Below each sidelight, which is divided into two panes by a muntin, there is a paneled wooden section resting on a plinth. The colonnettes have compound shafts; their capitals are now deteriorated to the point that one cannot discern whether or not they once contained ornamental mouldings or carving. The portion of the transom immediately above the door contains a diamond-shaped pane and four trapezoidal panes; at each end of the transom there is a single vertical pane.

The glass in the sidelights and transom appear to have been etched with an ornamental pattern.
 - b. Windows: Window openings are rectangular and have no trim other than that afforded by the lintels and sills. Small wooden casings are set well back in the jambs. Double-hung sash have four lights above four lights. They are noticeably deteriorated.
8. Roof
 - a. Shape: The original portion has a hip roof, covered with composition shingles which appear to have been recently applied. The wing has a shed roof, in poor condition. There are no dormers.

- b. Cornice: This is wooden. There is a plain frieze with a moulding at the lower and upper edges. The cornice proper has a block modillion course and terminates in a cyma recta. There are some signs that this woodwork is deteriorating.

The wing has no real cornice; in its place there is a simple board along the upper part of the wall.

C. Description of Interior:

Access was not allowed to the interior of the Curry House. The following description is based on information provided by Mr. Ronald Machado of Carson City, who resided in the Chartz House (HABS No. NEV-13-15) next door for several years and who is familiar with the Curry House.

Plan: The central pavillion of the original portion consists primarily of a hall, parlor and dining room; with a rear hall, kitchen, bath, and closet at the rear. These latter rooms are very small and represent later modifications of the original plan.

To the left of the hall is the master bedroom, behind which is a small sitting room. To the right of the parlor is a guest bedroom and behind it another, this latter guest bedroom is entered through the dining room.

In the rear ell are another kitchen, bath and washroom, or laundry. The two kitchens reflect the conversion made by the Marconnots into two apartments. The dining room and parlor are separated by very thick "buttress walls." These were necessary to carry the roof and cupola structure above. The dining room which has no exterior walls, had no natural light source. Originally the cupola, seen in the early photograph, provided natural illumination to this room.

Trim in the house is very plain, typical doors are five panelled. There are round plaster medallions or rosettes in the major rooms ceilings. The ceilings are 16 feet high, and the stone walls some 22 inches thick.

D. Site and Surroundings:

This is a level site at the northwest corner of Nevada and

Telegraph Streets. The house faces east toward Nevada Street. An old wooden picket fence encloses the yards; it has simple pedestals with moulded caps at intervals.

Prepared by: Harley J. McKee
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
Date of visit - August 19, 1972

PART III. Project Information

These records are part of the documentation made during the latter half of 1972 and the summer of 1973 in a project undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the Nevada State Park System to record structures in Carson City and nearby areas.

The project was under the general supervision of John Poppeliers, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey. Eric R. Cronkhite, Administrator, Nevada State Park System, and Mrs. Marshall Humphreys of the Nevada Landmarks Society assisted the HABS recorders in Nevada. Professor Harley J. McKee, Supervisory Architect, National Park Service, selected the subjects and provided architectural data for the sixteen Carson City structures which were recorded. Historical documentation for these buildings was prepared by S. Allen Chambers, Jr., Architectural Historian, Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Supervisor for the 1973 Nevada Summer Team, which produced the measured drawings, was Robert L. Hartwig of Harvard University. Student assistant architects were John T. M. Creery (University of Utah), Robert P. Mizell (University of Florida), and Jack W. Schafer (University of Cincinnati). Photographs were made by Aaron A. Gallup of Sacramento, California.