

Capitol – 125th Anniversary – From Wyoming State Archives

March 1, 2013

Today we start our series on the history of the Wyoming State Capitol Building. In order to appreciate the current Capitol Building, we need go back to the very beginning. Back before there was a Capitol Building...

Following the creation of Wyoming Territory in 1869, the newly minted government met in rented spaces scattered throughout downtown Cheyenne. The settlement itself had been platted in 1867 by Gen. Grenville Dodge as a node on the Union Pacific Railroad line that would soon be part of the first Transcontinental Railroad. The community earned its moniker of the “Magic City of the Plains” for the speed at which it grew. By the time the Territory was established, the city was a relative metropolis on the plains.

In 1886, flush with cattle baron money, the Territorial Legislature voted to fund the construction of a capitol building to the tune of \$150,000 (the equivalent of \$3.8 million today). The hope was that this move would further the cause of statehood. It was also becoming difficult to find appropriate facilities for the ever growing government. The decision had been made to divide the state institutions, and thus the money, between several towns. Laramie was chosen as the site of the University, Evanston the State Hospital, and Cheyenne remained the capital because no one could agree on where it should be moved. To this day Cheyenne remains the “temporary” capital, despite several attempts to settle the question.

Following the Legislative allocation, Governor F.E. Warren appointed 5 men to the new Capitol Building Commission on March 10th, two days before the end of the Legislative Session. All five were prominent businessmen in Laramie County.

Erasmus Nagle was chosen chairman, a paid position guaranteeing him \$150 a month. He had arrived in Cheyenne in 1868 and partnered with Morton E. Post together opening a grocery store in the infant town. By 1886, he had bought out Post, as well as two of his competitors, creating the Union Mercantile Co., one of the regions’ most successful wholesale grocers.

Charles N. Potter was elected Secretary of the Commission, also a paid position. By 1886, he had partnered with fellow lawyer E.P. Johnson, who had brought him West, later Judge Riner, and would within the year team up with Willis VanDevanter. Potter went on to serve on the Wyoming Supreme Court for nearly 30 years.

Morton E. Post, Nagle’s former business partner, was also appointed to the Commission. Post had also been a partner to Gov. Warren in a livestock venture, Post & Warren Livestock Co., in the not so distant past. In fact, Post was known at the time as the “Sheep King of Wyoming.”

Nickolas J. O’Brien, born in Ireland, veteran of the Indian Wars and former Laramie County Sheriff, was also a member of the Commission. O’Brien was just finishing his term as Territorial Representative from Laramie County when he was appointed.

Nathaniel R. Davis rounded out the Commission. Davis was prominent stockman in Laramie County and a member of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, as were Post and Warren.

These 5 men were tasked with overseeing the design and construction of the Capitol Building, keeping the project on time and within budget. Their personalities and connections would influence the process along the way.

(Letter from the Territorial Council (similar to Senate) to Governor F.E. Warren confirming the Capitol Building Commission, March 10, 1886. From Gov. Warren's first term gubernatorial papers)

COUNCIL CHAMBER

Legislative Assembly, Wyoming Territory.

Cheyenne, Wyo. Mar 10 1886

To his Excellency
Francis E. Warren
Governor of Wyoming

Sir:

I am instructed to inform you that the Council, this day, confirmed the following appointments, named by you to be members of the "Capitol Building Commission"

Charles N. Potter, Morton E. Pratt,
Nathaniel R. Davis and Erasmus Nagle.

Also that the Council refused to confirm Alexander H. Reel as a member of said Commission

I am very Respectfully
Wm Hooford
Chief Clerk

March 4, 2013

The Commission Picks a Site...

Once the money was allocated and a Capitol Building Commission appointed, the question then became where precisely to erect the building. A call for donations or sale proposals for the site was published in the Cheyenne papers. The Capitol Building Commission quickly narrowed the options down to 2 spots, both bordering the City Park: 2 blocks to the northwest or one block to the southeast. On April 9, 1886, two blocks (141 & 142) straddling Hill Street in nearly the center of the plated town but on the edge of settlement were selected. The newspaper agreed with the decision, stating that the four extra blocks distance to downtown wouldn't matter in a few years time and that there would be a street car running by that time anyway.

The land was acquired for a total of \$13100, \$100 over budget. Two of the six parcels were sold by women: Mary Sipple and Harriet Argesheimer. Both women received better deals than the men for their comparable sized property, but Ms. Sipple still lost \$1000 in her speculative investment, having purchased her lots five months earlier for \$3500. Mrs. Argesheimer, on the other hand, made \$1600 on her three year investment and must have driven a hard bargain, because her sale was responsible for the \$100 overage.



Though the blocks were mostly empty, there were several structures that would need to be condemned to prepare the site for the new construction. Mrs. Argesheimer's moved her 5 room house across 25th Street (the house was later removed to build the Herschler Building), and the White's moved their home, too. Commissioner Nagle purchased one of the barns on the site from the Commission for \$500.

The cellars and wells were filled and the whole area re-graded. The portion of Hill Streets between 24th and 25th and alleys on the two blocks were condemned and the City of Cheyenne and the Union Pacific Railroad were reimbursed \$5 each for the "damage" (i.e. removal) done while re-grading. The City soon renamed Hill Street as Capitol Avenue, in honor of the new building. All was in readiness for construction. Now all the Commission needed was an architect and some plans.

(1882 Birdseye View of Cheyenne, 1974 reprint)

March 5, 2013

With land in hand, the Commission solicited building plans from several Eastern firms. The decision had been made not to make a public call for plans due to the tight time schedule of 18 months for construction stipulated by the Legislature. Plans were submitted by 5 firms, though most were incomplete, so the field was easily narrowed to two: David W. Gibbs of Toledo, Ohio and Elijah E. Meyer of Detroit, Michigan.

Meyers was a well established architect with a proven track record when it came to capitol building contracts. His plans had been used by Michigan and both the Colorado and Texas capitol were under construction in 1886.

Gibbs had designed several county courthouses in his home state of Ohio, so he was familiar with government buildings, but this would be his first capitol.

Unfortunately, Meyer would not allow his plans to leave his hands without payment unless he was guaranteed the contract. The Capitol Building Commission was at a loss. They wanted to choose the best design for the building and didn't want to give either men an unfair advantage. After much deliberation, the Commission awarded Gibbs the architect's contract, provided he was willing to tweak his plans to fit the "vision of the Commission," which he was.

But the drama did not stop with Gibbs' acceptance. Meyer wrote an irate letter to the Commission soon after construction began accusing Gibbs of copying his work. He stated that he had visited the site and viewed the plans out of professional curiosity and noticed mark similarities between his own work and Gibbs' drawings. Gibbs, of course, countered that he had not copied Meyer and that they were his original works. The Commission sided with Gibbs and construction continued.

Thankfully, choosing a contractor was less eventful. The contract was awarded to A. Feick & Bro., of Sandusky, Ohio, who had submitted the second lowest bid for all wooden and the lowest for all steel construction. It had become apparent that the budget did not allow for all steel, fire proof construction, so a compromise was made whereby the dome and tower would be steel and the rest would be wooden.

Ground was broken on September 9, 1886 and construction began.



March 6, 2013

Construction began on the Wyoming State Capitol building in September 1886 and continued through the winter, slowed by weather conditions and supply shortages.

The plans had been drawn so that the central part of the building could be completed and moved into before work was started on the wings. To facilitate this expansion, the brick on the East and West walls were to be left exposed. Doorways were set into them and then bricked in so that when the time came, the excess brick could be easily removed without damaging the structure.

Contractors A. Feick & Bro., run by Adam Feick and his brother George, sent George's son, John, out to oversee the work done by their sub-contractor Robert C. Greenlee of Denver.

John was not initially impressed by Cheyenne. In his frequent letters home, he described to his wife how hard the wind blew and how lonesome and desolate the area was. On February 14th, 1887, only two weeks after arriving, he wrote his wife that "we have some very queer weather in the country. In the morning it is bitter cold from 10 to 2 o'clock. In the afternoon, the sun shines so hot that we are looking for shade and from 2 o'clock the wind will blow so hard that you would think the world was coming to an end."

Sub-contractor Greenlee had difficulties of his own. In numerous letters to the Feicks he complains about meddling townsfolk, slanderous newspaper editors, uncooperative suppliers and unending weather delays. At one point, he begged to be let out of his contract and then sued Feick & Bro. for money he claimed was owed to him.

(WSA Sub Neg 12024, interior of the Capitol Building just after completion of the central portion. Note the walled in archway behind the stairs. This would be opened when the 1st addition was complete.)



March 7, 2013

I know today's post is not strictly about the Capitol, but it is hard not to mention Capitol Building Commission President Erasmus Nagle's mansion on the corner of 17th and House when talking about the construction of the Wyoming State Capitol Building. This building's close connection is due to Nagle's use (some said misuse) of his extensive Commission connections. Nagle enlisted the services of both the architect, David W. Gibbs, and the contractors, A. Feick & Co., to whom he provided his own plans for the mansion and 'oversaw' the work himself. John Feick wrote several times to family about how Nagle was "bothering the life out me" about the progress of his house.

Ground was broken in December 1886 and work continued in tandem with the Capitol. Many of the same suppliers and workmen were used on both job sites. Nagle, never one to waste a good deal, purchased the Rawlins sandstone that was rejected for the Capitol for the shipping charges alone. The stone had been declared unfit by the contractors and Commission due to its poor quality and an abundance of hairline cracks, but this did not deter Nagle.

Nagle and his wife held an large open house to celebrate and show off the completed mansion in July 1888. No expense had been spared in the interior finishes and the house boasted the latest in electric lights, sewer and forced air heating. The barn Nagle had purchased from the Commission and moved from the Capitol grounds may also have been placed on the property, or that of his first house next door.

Sadly, Erasmus would only enjoy the fruits of his labors for 2 years before his death in January 1890. His widow and son sold the home to then Senator F.E. Warren in 1910 and moved to California. After Warren's death, his widow donated the house to the YWCA, where it served as their headquarters until it was sold back into private hands in 1985. In 1997, the building was purchased by the current owner, remodeled and opened it as the Nagle Warren Mansion Bed and Breakfast.

The prophecy of the Capitol builders was fulfilled in the 1960s when crumbling stone threatened the structure. A layer of stucco was applied to the sandstone save it from collapse.

(Sub Neg 12979, photo by J.E. Stimson)



March 8, 2013

Money was an issue during the construction of both the central and 1st additions of the Wyoming Capitol Building. The original legislation funding the construction was passed early in 1886, at the height of the Cattle Baron period. Money abounded in the Territory and future prospects were rosy. Shortly after construction began that Fall, Wyoming's fortunes and those of the open range cattlemen, turned south. The severe winter of 1886-87 was disastrous to stockmen, bankrupting many of the wealthiest and plunging the West into a depression.

The Legislature provided funding for construction of both the Capitol Building and a building for the University of Wyoming (now called Old Main) by way of bonds issued for \$1,000 each (the equivalent of more than \$25,000 today). Payment of interest would be made annually and repayment would begin after 15 years.

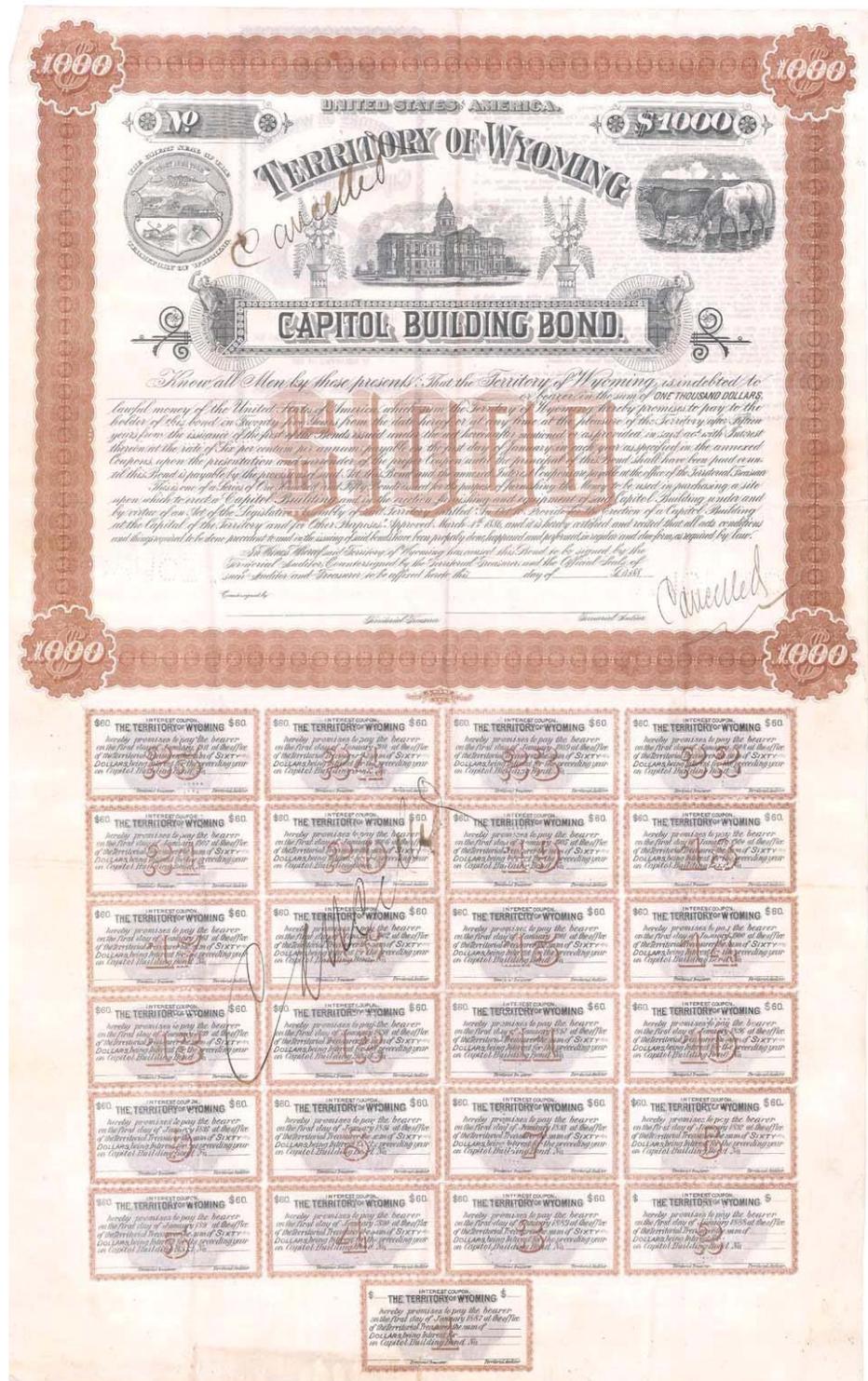
The bonds were a huge success and raised nearly \$158,000, which was a huge help to the Territory in covering the \$275,000 allocated for both phases of construction.

Despite the continued economic hardship, the 1888 legislature voted to fund the first addition to the building, which would add chambers for the House and Council (Senate). The Supreme Court would then move into the House's former chambers on the second floor, now occupied by the Legislative Services Office.

Governor Thomas Moonlight adamantly opposed the expenditure (this was one of his seven vetoes that session) but the Legislature overrode his veto. Moonlight had by this time, alienated much of the State and nearly all of the Legislature through his very vocal opposition of cattlemen and by vetoing the creation of several new counties.

One of the first actions the Second Capitol Building Commission took was to ask the Attorney General for an opinion about whether it was lawful for them to request vouchers to be issued for money that did not currently exist in the State accounts. The AG believed it to not be in violation of any statutes and so work commenced.

(Front of Capitol Building bond sample from Treasurer's Office files)



March 11, 2013

“A brighter morning never dawned over the “Magic City of the Plains” than that of yesterday” wrote the editor of the Democratic Leader reporting on the Capitol Building cornerstone celebration held May 18, 1887. That morning, Cheyenne had been abuzz with activity as final



preparations were made. Bunting, banners and flags flew from windows throughout downtown. Visitors poured into town as trains brought delegates and spectators from Laramie, Rawlins, Fort Collins and Greeley and every point in between.

By noon, the banks and stores began closing their doors and at 1:30, a parade officially kicked off the festivities. Beginning at 17th and Eddy, (now Pioneer Ave) it circled the downtown business district before heading north on Ferguson (now Carey Ave) to the Capitol Building. The 1.5 mile route was obviously not chosen for its directness, but probably to allow the most onlookers to view it.

The parade was nearly one mile long in its own right and included between 1,000 and 2,000 persons (depending upon which newspaper you read,) organized into eight “divisions”. It included members of the Cheyenne Bicycle Club, policemen, firemen, Territorial, county and municipal officials, 17th Cavalry Band and 300 troops from nearby Fort DA Russell and several benevolent, fraternal, veteran and civic societies, including the Masons, Woodmen, Knights of Pythias, Irish Benevolent Society, Cheyenne Mannerchor and GAR.

Once everyone had assembled on the Capitol Grounds, the official ceremony began. A platform had been constructed around the resting place of the cornerstone, at the top of what had been completed of the building, and here the dignitaries and official choir gathered. The ceremonies culminated in the sealing of the cornerstone by Sub-Contractor Robert C. Greenlee, followed by speeches by Sen. Joseph M. Carey and Governor Thomas Moonlight.

The cornerstone itself was hollowed out to hold a 16 inch x 12 inch x 7 inch copper box. This box, packed by Mrs. E.S.N. Morgan under her husband’s direction, contained various Territorial and Cheyenne City government publications, current newspapers, railroad timetables, fraternal and benevolent society documents and member lists, a couple photos, and a lists of the committees in charge of the cornerstone celebration. Unfortunately, it was realized after the ceremony that the names of architect and contractors had not been included. At the request of the Capitol Building Commission, their names were published in the papers with the list of materials in the box.

As the final strains of music faded, the feasting began. A 50-foot-long trench had been dug on the far west end of the capitol grounds with a temporary roof over it. In the pit, T.W. Ashford and his assistants literally smoked enough meat to feed an army: two steers (1,350 lbs between them), 10 sheep and 2 hogs. Wood plank counters were constructed between the pit and the Capitol Building to feed 400 people at a time. Besides the meat, bread, butter, “corner stone” pickles, lemonade and plenty of the city’s “clear sparkling water” rounded out the menu. Over 4,000 meals were served and “all went away

satisfied, " with the generous leftovers turned over to the Ladies Relief Association so that nothing would be wasted.

The festivities continued late into the night with a dance hosted by the Irish Benevolent Society and a special performance at the Opera House. The westbound trains didn't depart until just after midnight to carry visitors home. Everyone ruled the day a huge success and the most spectacular event in the Territory's 20 year history.

The cornerstone was opened in 1987 during the building's 100th anniversary and its contents replaced with contemporary materials before being resealed. The original materials are stored here at the Wyoming State Archives. The cornerstone will not be opened again until 2087.

March 12, 2013

Following the excitement of the cornerstone ceremony, things returned to normal at the Capitol Building Construction site. Workmen labored throughout the summer and by the time winter came around again, much of the remaining work was interior finishings.

Rather than secure rented space, the 1888 Territorial Legislature met in the almost completed Capitol Building in February. This would be the first of of 64 consecutive legislative session to meet in the building.

As mentioned before, the 1888 Legislature voted to continue the construction of the building with the addition of the wings, despite fervent opposition by Governor Thomas Moonlight, who believed it to be a gross misuse of State funds.

Why the hurry to continue construction? A large portion of the push was probably good old politics. Yes, the current building may have been adequate for a few years, but the the Central and Northern portions of the territory were growing rapidly. New railroads were being built across the plains and new towns were springing up in their wake. Some felt that Laramie County, with its millionaire cattle barons and powerful politicians, was unfairly funneling the Territorial "cream" into its own coffers. They argued that the real growth was happening outside of Southeast Wyoming.

It was hard to deny these accusations. The Territorial Legislature, who controlled the purse strings, was heavy on Laramie County representation. 7 of the 24 members of the House and 3.5 (Charles Guernsey represented portions of both Laramie and Crook Counties) of the 12 members of the Council were from Laramie County. 2 of the 8 counties (Fremont and Crook) had only 2 representatives in the full Legislature, making it hard to be heard. The addition of 3 counties and the bankruptcy of many of the large cattle operations would shift some of the power by 1890.

On March 27, the Capitol Building Commission declared the building complete and 4 days later, presented their final report to the Governor. There was no pomp and circumstance or parade to celebrate and the completion was barely mentioned in the papers. The drama in the Legislature and a local high profile murder case made for more interesting reading.



(WSA Sub Neg 15695, Exterior of Capitol Building nearing completion in 1888)

March 13, 2013

The 3rd floor of the Capitol Building was designed as a functional attic by the architect, David W. Gibbs. In the 1st Capitol Building Commission's Final Report, they quote one of his letters where he says that "by means of sky-lights and second story window transoms, we make the attic story (usually thrown away) as useful as any other part of the building." This explains why the windows are at floor level throughout the central portion of the building. The architect considered them to be transoms for the 2nd story windows and from the outside, they appear to be a part of these lower windows.

In the first and second wings additions, the windows appear higher on the wall due to a drop in the 3rd story floor, which allowed for "stadium" seating in the chamber galleries for public viewing during the Legislative Session.

The steep stairs to the 3rd floor are also a result of considering the 3rd floor to be the attic of the building. In buildings of the time, stairways on the main levels were generous and showy while stairwells to servants quarters, back hallways basements and attics were usually narrow and steep. There was thought to be no need to take up more space than was necessary and building codes did not restrict stairs to be extent they do today.

Space was at a premium and the State could not well afford to leave any part of this new edifice empty, so committee rooms, offices and public galleries for the chambers below were made in the "attic." The State Museum even used the large room off the south sides of the Rotunda after the old Council (Senate) and gallery floor was extended. After the Supreme Court Building was built in the 1930s, the State Library, Museum and the Supreme Court all moved across the street.

(WSA J.E. Stimson Collection Neg 4348L, 1922. This photo shows the State Museum displays on the 3rd floor of the Capitol Building. Notice the unique arches of the Rotunda. A wall now stands where the display case sits.)



To be continued...