

Madison County Court House  
Wallace Street  
Virginia City, Madison County  
Montana

HABS No. MON-3

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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

RECEIVED  
FEB 1968

MADISON COUNTY COURT HOUSE

Virginia City, Madison County, Montana

LOCATION: Occupies a city block on the south side of Wallace Street, the main street of Virginia City.

OWNER: Madison County

OCCUPANT: Official offices of the County

USE: Madison County Court House and County Offices

BRIEF STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This is a rather large and stately court house built in a gold mining town that by then had lost the seat of the Territorial Government and many of its inhabitants to the richer claims of Helena. Site and building have been falsely referred to as being selected for the capitol (another source referred to it as being the start of the Governor's Mansion - also untrue).

I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and Subsequent Owners: The people of Madison County.
2. Date of Erection: A contract was awarded for construction on May 22, 1875 (Commissioner's Journal, Vol. H, pp. 11, 44, 46-50, 286; Vol. I, p. 190, entry 1). Building was completed in 1876. Cost - \$35,000.
3. Architect: Unknown.

4. Builder: Daniel A. Steele of Montana.

5. Original Plans: Not on file at the courthouse. Assumed lost or destroyed.

6. Notes on Alterations and Additions: A new roof of cedar shingles was applied in 1894 at a cost of \$475 (Commissioner's Journal, Vol. 0, pp. 63, 67). Chimneys shown in early photograph are now gone. A two story addition was put onto the rear of the building to the east of the (now) extended central corridor shortly after the turn of the century. Another two story addition to the rear of the building that extended the corridor and added rooms to the west of the building was constructed in 1962. Neither addition is considered of historical importance.

7. Important Old Views: Photograph (date unknown but obviously before the turn of the century) shows the front (north) facade and west side of the building. Photograph included in the Photo-Data Book, courtesy of the Historical Society of Montana.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

1. Pre-dated the brick Courthouse of Bannack, Montana (1876) and is probably the oldest permanent courthouse in the state.

2. Constructed at a time when Virginia City had lost claim to the Capitol of Montana to Helena after a long series of legal battles.

3. The Madisonian (newspaper) reported that on April 10, 1875, furniture of the capitol was moved to Helena. Contract for the construction of the Madison County Courthouse is dated May 22, 1875, according to the Commissioner's Journal.

C. References:

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

2. Commissioner's Journal, Vol. H, pp. 11, 44, 46-50, 286; Vol. I, p. 190; Vol. O, pp. 63, 67, County Clerk and Recorder's Office, Madison County.
3. Inventory of the County Archives of Montana, prepared by the Inventory of Public Archives (Historical Records Survey), Division of Professional and Service Projects, Work Projects Administration, Bozeman, Montana, 1940.
4. Pace, Dick, Golden Gulch, Butte - McKee Printing Co., 1962.
5. Miller, Joaquin, An Illustrated History of Montana, Chicago & New York - Lewis Publishing Company, 1894.

## II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The sturdy two story brick structure resting on an exposed stone basement-foundation has overtones of the Italinatate style that has been modified by some neo-classical detailing. The building, erected in a gold mining town of one and two story frame buildings, many of a temporary nature, dominates the town's architecture.
2. Condition of Structure: Good, well maintained.

### B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions: Original partitions - 50'-8" x 80'-4". Additions not measured.
2. Foundations: Cut stone 2'-2" thick form the foundation-basement walls (some parts exposed),
3. Wall Construction: Brick bearing walls of 16" thickness. A water table of cut stone defines the first floor line. Brick pilasters adorn the corners of the building. A wood porch frames and covers the main entrance supported by wood columns. The full flight of exterior steps leading up to the first floor are not the original.

4. Chimneys: Brick; several removed.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and Doors: The main entrance double doors, wood paneled, are recessed into the masonry wall and have wood paneled pieces on the sides and underside of the brick arch. The doors are set-in more than a foot - this recessing of the doors allowed the interior framing of curved wall around the circular staircase. A fan-shaped transom of four lights caps these doors. The brick arch of three-header courses, off-set, completes the framing of the opening.

b. Windows: Basement windows are 4/4 double-hung wood sash. First floor and second floor windows are identical - 6/6 wood sash having a fan-shaped transom of three lights. The only exceptions are the two window-doors located above the main entrance that have eight lights with a fan-shaped transom of three lights. All of the first and second floor windows have stone sills and an arch of two-header courses. A circular window of thirteen lights with a brick casing is located in the front gable end.

6. Roof:

a. Shape, Covering: Gable roof; original hand-split wood shingles replaced in 1894 with wood shingles.

b. Framing: Assumed to be truss system. Attic area used for record storage; could not gain access.

c. Cornice, Eaves: The boxed-in eaves carry the width of cornice and have decorative carved wood knee-braces grouped in pairs, located above the pilasters, up the cornice and along the eaves.

d. Cupola: A decorative wood cupola or tower, consisting of a platform and a four-sided enclosure, is perched on the ridge line at about the mid-point of the building. Wood window-doors of six lights having a fan-shaped transom of three lights are set in a wood frame, with two of the

window-doors to a side. The entire frame work and covering are wood and the hipped roof has wood shingles.

e. Skylight: A small skylight has been added - date unknown - on the east plane of the roof.

C. Technical Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

a. Basement: Contains the jail, sheriff's office, living quarters and storage.

b. First Floor: An 8' wide corridor extends from the front doors to the rear (addition continues the hallway). Various county offices open from the hall. A decorative circular staircase, just inside the main doorway curves upward to the second floor.

c. Second Floor: Divided by a hallway extending (originally) from the balcony overlooking the circular staircase to the entrance of the court room that extends from the east wall of the building to the west wall. The balcony has been framed in to form a small office, but the balustrade of the staircase still remains. The law library, court reporter's office and judges' chambers are along one side (east) of the corridor, and the commissioners' office is on the right (west) side of the corridor.

2. Stairway: A wide circular staircase connects the first and second floors. The newel post, hand rail and balusters are of American walnut (and not oak as originally reported), deeply stained. The true identity of the wood is difficult to determine but the balusters show no signs that would indicate quarter-sawed oak. The treads and risers are of vertical grain fir.

3. Flooring: Oak.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: Plaster.

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5. Doorways and Doors: Four-paneled wood doors having a transom light are set in a wood frame that has decorative mouldings. The two doors leading in to the court room are three paneled, with a five-light transom above the doorway.
6. Trim: Wood trim with mouldings. See drawings.
7. Hardware: Generally replaced with new pieces.
8. Lighting: Modern electric fixtures.
9. Heating: Steam radiators.

D. Site:

1. General Setting and Orientation: The building occupies a city block on the south side of Wallace Street. The building is oriented facing north across Alder Gulch. The site slopes steeply upward to the south.
2. Enclosures: There is a stone retaining wall across the front (north) and along one side (west) of the site. A metal fence tops the wall.
3. Outbuildings: None.
4. Walks: Concrete.
5. Landscaping: Not original.

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January 1964

APPROVED:

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DATE:

*April 1964*

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Addendum to:  
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BLACK AND WHITE  
PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
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Department of the Interior  
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