

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

THE OLD ASSAY OFFICE IN BOISE

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One of the most historic and important buildings in Idaho is the old United States Assay Office in Boise, now the headquarters of the Boise National Forest. The gray stone structure stands on its own green block between Second and Third Streets on Main, surrounded by noble trees and by a granite fence almost as old as the building.

The building stands as a monument to the national importance of precious-metal mining in early Idaho. It was authorized by the Federal Government in 1869 after a long campaign in Congress.

Seventy-five thousand dollars was appropriated for its construction, and Alexander Rossi, a prominent citizen of early Boise, donated the block of ground. The building was opened for business in 1872, assaying and evaluating the gold production of mines everywhere in the region. A few years later, the direct purchase of gold on behalf of the Government was added to the services of the offices.

Through the years, the total value of business done by the office reflected the rise and fall of western mining regions. Some transactions ran into thousands of dollars while at the same time the assayers would test prospectors' individual samples for 50¢ a piece. During the boom at the turn of the century, the business of the office exceeded a million dollars annually for eleven consecutive years--and a million dollars was a great deal more then than it is now.

From the earliest days, Boise had been a pleasant oasis of green in a desert land, and the dignified grounds and lawns of the Assay Office have contributed largely to that reputation.

Early Boiseans, proud of this important Government building in their midst, contributed ornamental shrubs and bushes, and Federal authorities have always maintained the Assay Office block in admirable condition.

As transportation improved and the importance of mining declined in relation to other industries, the need for assaying services decreased. In 1933 the old building entered a new period of activity. Remodeled internally, it became the headquarters of the Boise National Forest. Although the apartment for the chief assayer, which once occupied the second floor, has been converted to offices, and although the two-story-high workroom where the furnaces for the assay once fumed has been floored over for more office space, the exterior of the building looks much as it always has except for the removal of its original chimneys.

After extensive investigation, the United States National Park Service certified the historical significance of the building, and on May 8, 1965, the building was dedicated as a registered United States Historic Landmark. In 1972, the Assay Office was transferred to the State Historical Society for prominent preservation as a mining museum.