

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

ISAAC N. COSTON
(Advertiser Column By Judith Austin)

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The main subject of our column this week is an unusual figure in the history of Boise. Although he was important in the territory and in the formation of the state of Idaho, his home is probably far better known than he is.

Isaac N. Coston came from New York State to Walla Walla in 1862 and to Boise in 1863. A photograph in the Idaho State Historical Society Collection shows him much as he must have appeared when he arrived in the region at the age of 30. Although Coston had been trained as a lawyer, he began a rather different life in Boise; after returning east in 1864 to marry Miss Wealtha Maynard, he established a ranch about seven miles up the Boise River from town, on the south bank of the river. The site of the ranch was inundated by the Barber Mill pond. Coston and his first wife had one daughter; the mother died in 1867. Five years later, he married Miss Mary Drake, who had moved to Boise from New Jersey in 1870 and whose father owned a substantial portion of south Boise. Mary Coston is shown in a photograph in the Idaho State Historical Society Collection taken not long before her death in 1925 (ten years after her husband's) at the age of 76. Isaac and Mary had four daughters of their own.

Coston had built a small cabin when he first began ranching. It is shown, in expanded form (to house all those girls!), in another photo in the Idaho State Historical Society Collection. Taken at the original ranch site, this picture was given to the Idaho State Historical Society by the Costons' youngest daughter, Olive Coston Garland, Mrs. Garland, who died in 1964 at the age of 81, had taught domestic science (home economics) in the Boise schools for many years and had also been dietician at St. Luke's Hospital. Her eldest sister, Helen, was born in the cabin in 1873. Helen was the first graduate of St. Teresa's Academy in Boise, 1893; a teacher and elementary school principal of Washington School; and the first female probation officer in Ada County! We know little about the next-to-youngest sister, Anna, and not much more about the next-to-eldest, Alta. We do know, however, that Alta also attended St. Teresa's, studied osteopathy for a year in Missouri, and homesteaded near the head of the New York Canal, not far from her father's ranch before moving to Orofino in 1939. She died there twenty years later.

Meanwhile, Isaac himself was making substantial if quiet contributions to his community. He was elected to the Territorial Council (equivalent to the State Senate) in 1870, 1872, and 1876 and Territorial House of Representatives in 1882; and he was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention from Ada County. In addition, he served for many years on the board of directors of the Idaho Insane Asylum (now State Hospital South) in Blackfoot, beginning with its establishment in 1885. He was not only a very successful farmer but also an experimental one-- he was the first farmer in the Boise Valley to make money growing buckwheat, normally an imported grain; and he experimented with soil quality and climate conditions on the two parts of his property, bottom lands along the river and sagebrush slopes above it. In 1877, it was reported that the fruit trees planted on the slopes of his ranch withstood frost conditions much better than trees on the flat, because of constant air currents on the slopes.

Another picture in our collection shows his original cabin (now connected to one built on 5th Street between Main and Idaho in 1863 by Benjamin Pearce) as it stood in Julia Davis Park after being moved there in 1934 by the Sons and Daughters of Idaho Pioneers. The cabins were moved next to the museum in November 1972, and with the Logan House and later the Adelman House, became the Pioneer village, under the care and supervision of museum personnel. An iron fence, that used to be around the territorial capitol building circles the Pioneer Village.