

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

BOISE

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An 1862 Boise Basin gold rush led to Boise's development as a nearby mining service community less than a year later. Strategically located at an Oregon Trail junction with roads serving mining communities that flourished around Idaho City and Silver City, Boise grew up adjacent to a military outpost established July 4, 1863, to protect Oregon Trail traffic that had stimulated local Indian hostility. Founded July 7 by a group of pioneer merchants and developers, Boise's early population of 725 rose to 1,658 in an 1864 census. Occupying an attractive oasis site in a sagebrush desert next to a high timbered ridge, Boise was designated as Idaho's permanent capital, effective December 27, 1864. After initial mining excitement gave way to slower development of ranches, irrigated farms, and gold or silver lodes, Boise survived as a distributing and political center remote from any other community of comparable size. Civic leaders spent two decades trying to attract a railroad that would support a population of more than 2,000 frontier settlers who had turned up not long after 1880.

When a Union Pacific connection finally was built to Portland, adverse terrain required an awkward location for Boise's depot fifteen miles down a freight road to Silver City. A branch line from Nampa helped local businesses four years later, but a mainline passenger depot did not come for forty-two years. A national financial panic of 1884 accounted for early railroad delays and deferred construction of large irrigation canals as well. As a result, Boise's population grew only to about 6,000 by 1900. But canal company financial failures restricted Caldwell and Nampa--rival Boise Valley towns that otherwise might have competed for valley trade--and favorable freight rates allowed Boise to expand as a distributing center for more than a 200-mile region.

A major federal reclamation project enabled Boise to develop rapidly for more than a decade after 1900. With a four-fold population increase prior to two decades of agricultural economic distress following 1920, Boise became a city that attracted international recognition during an unsuccessful effort in 1907 to prosecute William D. Haywood as a mine labor union conspirator in assassinating a former Idaho governor, Frank Steunenberg. Boise's most prominent attorney, Senator William L. Borah, gained a national reputation during that trial.

Elected to six senate terms, he went on to become Foreign Relations Committee chairman. More than four decades later, Senator Frank Church--another notable Boise attorney--followed him in that post.

With an exceptionally good airport that served as an airbase after 1940, Boise experienced a steady growth as a corporate as well as a government and trade center. A metropolitan population of more than 190,000 (over 100,000 of whom received municipal services) included a substantial Basque element that became a major western center of Basque culture. Boise served as headquarters for large construction (Morrison-Knudsen and Trus-Joist), agricultural processing (J. R. Simplot and a Heinz subsidiary, Ore-Ida), forest products (Boise Cascade), and banking (Idaho First National and First Security) enterprises. Computer manufacturing--well-suited to Boise's isolated location that prevented heavy industrial development--was represented by major Hewlett Packard and a number of other regional plants. Columbia Basin reclamation headquarters and a national federal interagency fire control center stood out among a large number of state and federal agencies. Excellent air transportation and banking facilities made this expansion possible. A relatively uncrowded recreation environment contributed to urban development in a rural setting. Far enough from Salt Lake, Spokane, Portland, and California metropolitan areas to maintain an independent identity, Boise continued to thrive as a desert oasis next to a forested mountain wilderness.

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