

Myth #67: Carson City's E.D. Sweeney Building: A Case of Mistaken Identity by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

A vintage two-story brick building sits on the southwest corner of Curry and King Streets in Carson City. Local lore has it that the structure at 102 South Curry Street dates back to 1859-60 shortly after the town was founded in Eagle Valley, Utah Territory. Pioneer Edward D. Sweeney, a proud Irishman known for his zealous celebration of St. Patrick's Day, is credited for its construction.



The story goes the edifice was either the first, or one of the first brick buildings, erected in the fledgling burg. Newspaper stories, photograph captions, historic building tour maps, virtually everything printed about the Sweeney Building makes claims for the age of the building that are not supported in local government records associated with the property. So how did this case of mistaken identity come to pass?

A study published in 1974 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service sheds considerable light on the origin of the confusion. The architects and architectural historians conducting the survey found that townspeople claimed the Sweeney Building was built sometime between 1859 and 1860. The study, entitled *The Architecture of Carson City*, quoted a biographical sketch of Edward Sweeney in Sam Davis' *History of Nevada* (1913) which stated that he "built the first brick building in the city of Carson, wherein was situated the United States Land Register Post, and other Federal offices." From all indications, Carsonites had misconstrued that the town's first brick building reportedly built by Sweeney and the Sweeney Building were one in the same.

The HABS survey noted the deed records associated with the property on the southwest corner of Curry and King--the north 1/2 of lot no. 1, Block 7, in the Sears, Thompson, & Sears Division--did not have Sweeney buying the property from James E. and Lottie Wood until February 6, 1864. "Whether the building had been erected by then is not answered by the deed," the authors of the study conjectured. "Stylistically, the structure could well date from 1860."

County assessment rolls contain the answer to the mystery. On January 30, 1864, J. E. Wood, a prominent rancher in Eagle Valley, paid his property taxes on the north 1/2 of lot no. 1, Block 7, in the Sears, Thompson, & Sears Division. The total assessed value of the land and improvements came to \$500.00. A week later the Woods sold the property to E. D. Sweeney. On January 10, 1865, Sweeney paid the yearly tax on the 1/2 lot in the downtown area. The assessed value was now \$2,500, and \$2,000 of the total was assessed on "Brick Store On Same" lot. Tax records clearly demonstrate that Sweeney erected the building sometime after he had purchased the property in February 1864. Unfortunately, there are only a few extant issues of Carson City newspapers in 1864 and none of them make mention of the building's construction.

What seemed a logical assumption that the first brick building in Carson City supposedly built by Sweeney was actually the Sweeney Building was not logical at all. In fact, the brick building that housed the U.S. Land Office in the early 1860s appears to have been constructed on Carson Street and not where the Sweeney Building is located one block west of the main street. By the time the Sweeney Building was completed and occupied in late 1864, Carson City had dozens of brick buildings, including the St. Charles/Muller hotels and the Upton/Olcovitch stores on South Carson Street which still stand today.

The Sweeney Building not being one of the first brick structures in town does not diminish its importance in Carson City history. Among its first occupants in 1865 was attorney Orion Clemens, brother of Samuel Clemens (AKA "Mark Twain") and former Secretary of Nevada Territory, who went on to represent Carson City and Ormsby County in the State Assembly in 1866. From December 1865 through

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September 1867, the state leased office space on the second floor at \$50.00 a month for Nevada's first governor, Republican Henry Goode Blasdel (the State Capitol, built by E. D. Sweeney's father-in-law Peter Cavanaugh, was not completed until 1871). In 1870, Nevada's best know artist of the 19th-century, Cyrenius B, "Mac" McClellan, and portrait painter of former Territorial Governor and U.S. Senator James W. Nye, operated a studio in the structure. By the early 1870s, Patrick Henry Clayton, one of the leading Democratic politicians in Nevada, conducted his law practice in the Sweeney Building.

Ed Sweeney deeded the property to his wife Ellen on the day he died, February 17, 1913, at the age of 87. The building passed out of the family's hands with Ellen's death in 1919. Today, the Sweeney Building, built in 1864 and not in 1859-60 as generally believed, stands as mute testimony to the vision of a pioneer builder in Nevada's capital.

Photo: The Sweeney Building located at 102 South Curry St. in Carson City dates back to 1864. Photo Courtesy of the Nevada State Museum.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, August 2001 edition)