

Myth #78: Second Oldest Capitol Building West of the Mississippi? by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Literature describing Nevada's State Capitol generally claims that it is "the second oldest capitol building west of the Mississippi." Construction began in Carson City in 1870. Completed in 1871, seven years after statehood, it was expanded and modified in the early 20th-century. In 1957, plans to raze the structure were dropped. By the early 1980s, the capitol had been completely renovated in the course of a seismic retrofit.



The California State Capitol in Sacramento is considered the oldest capitol building still in use west of the Mississippi. While building construction began in 1856, due to numerous complications, it was not completed until 1874. However, the state legislature first met there in 1869. It has been commonly assumed that since Nevada's legislature met in its new statehouse in 1871 that it was the second oldest capitol west of the Mississippi.

A survey of the twenty-two state capitals west of the Mississippi (Baton Rouge, Louisiana and St. Paul, Minnesota are east of the river), identified one capitol where the state legislature had met in the building in 1870. While there are some former capitol buildings that predate both California and Nevada's existing capitols--Arkansas' first capitol dating back to 1833 is now the Museum of Arkansas for example--only the current Kansas State Capitol predates the construction of the Nevada State Capitol. Most states older than Nevada have replaced their first capitols with newer ones.

Work began on the capitol in Topeka in 1866, five years after statehood, and the east wing was completed in 1873. State officers had already moved into the building in 1869 and the legislature met there the next year. The west wing was completed in 1881, and the central portion and dome in 1906.

Although it can be argued that the Kansas State Capitol was not finished until 1906, thirty-five years after the completion of the Nevada State Capitol in 1871, the criteria for oldest appears to hinge on when did the respective legislatures first meet in their statehouses. The California State Capitol was not completed until 1874, yet it is considered the oldest capitol west of the Mississippi because the legislature met there in 1869. Following that logic, the Kansas State Capitol would be the second oldest because its legislature met in the building in 1870, and the Nevada State Capitol the third oldest because its legislature met in the statehouse in 1871.

To complicate matters further, the Nevada State Legislature has met in a building independent of the original capitol since 1971. Only two other states, North Carolina and Arizona, have separate legislative buildings. While five of Nevada's six constitutional officials maintain offices in the original capitol, dictionaries consider the official capitol a building in which a state legislature meets.

You make the call.

Photo: Nevada State Library and Archives.

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