Boise, the City of Trees


By
Josh Bernard with Todd Shallat, Ph.D.
Office of the City Historian
May 3, 2006

Boise (pronounced boy-see) is Idaho’s largest city and its state capital. Straddling the Boise River in Ada County in the Treasure Valley at the base of the Northern Rockies the city houses more than 200,000 in one of the nation’s fastest growing metropolitan regions. Several large corporations thrive in the city. Home to Simplot Corporation, Boise Cascade, Albertson’s, Micron Technology, and Hewlett-Packard, Boise in 2005 was Forbes Magazine’s “Best Place for Business and Careers.” Elsewhere the City of Trees has won praise as “the Jewel of the West” (Travel Tips Magazine), “Idaho’s Sportstown” (Sports Illustrated), “Best Mountain Biking Town (Bike Magazine),” “Second Best City in the Nation to Do Business” (Inc. Magazine), and “Oasis for Retirees” (Wall Street Journal). In 2003, Sunset Magazine named the Boise River one of twelve most scenic in the American West.

There are many reasons Boise ranks so highly in these national publications. Three key reasons are Boise’s corporate residents and its recreational and educational opportunities. As stated above, Boise is home to a number of companies. Four companies in particular have left their marks on Boise as well as their industries.

The first of these is Washington Group International. Founded as Morrison Knudsen in 1912 with $600 in cash, some horses and a dozen wheelbarrows the company became one of the largest engineering and construction firms in the world. The company started with small irrigation projects around Idaho. In 1935, in partnership with five other companies, Morrison Knudsen completed Hoover Dam. In 2000 the company acquired Raytheon Engineers & Constructors and the combined company became Washington Group International.¹

The second noteworthy company headquartered in Boise is Albertson’s. Joe Albertson opened his first store on 16th and State Streets in July 1939. The store featured many firsts such as a scratch bakery, a doughnut machine and a magazine rack. Albertson’s became a leader in the development of supermarkets. Albertson’s grew to become the second largest grocery chain in the nation. In 2006, Minnesota based SuperValu announced its intention of buying the company out. The new company plans to keep the local offices open as a regional headquarters.²

J.R. Simplot began his business outside of Boise but as his enterprise grew located his headquarters here. Simplot began his business in 1923 in Declo. The company perfected the process of dehydrating vegetables, particularly potatoes and sold them to the military during World War II. During this time the company also branched out into other agricultural ventures when the war caused shortages of fertilizer. In the 1950s the company invented the process to produce quality frozen French fries. Today the Simplot Company is one of the world’s largest privately owned companies and is responsible for Idaho’s potato fame.
Micron Technology rounds out the list of Boise’s leading companies. Founded in 1978, the company is an industry leader in microchip design and manufacturing. Micron leads the nation in patents and ranks sixth internationally in patents held. The company is also Idaho’s leading private employer with most of its 10,000 employees working at its plant in Southeast Boise. A recent joint venture with Intel and a rebound in the market of memory insure continued growth for Micron.3

Boise’s business climate has changed with the changes in the companies mentioned above. Hewlett-Packard also lends to Boise’s high-tech job market. In addition Boise is home to regional operations centers for many banks including, US Bank, Wells Fargo and Key Bank. In recent years Boise has become a center for call centers as well. DirecTV operates the largest call center with 1,700 employees.

Boise has no shortage of recreational opportunities for its residents. Its position astride the Boise River and at the foot of the nearby mountains and its four distinct seasons provides ample chances to get outdoors. One popular summer activity is floating the Boise River on rafts or intertubes. Hiking is another popular activity. In recent years the city has purchased land in the foothills to guarantee access to trails and maintain open spaces. Above the foothills sits the Bogus Basin Ski Resort. Just sixteen miles from Boise, the resort provides alpine and cross-country skiing from late November or December into March.

The city also boasts a large parks system. The parks have a wide range of uses from picnicking, swimming and playgrounds to fields for soccer, softball and Frisbee golf. Four large parks form the nucleus of the parks system. Julia Davis, Ann Morrison, Kathryn Albertson and Veteran’s Park all lie along the Boise River and are tied together by the Greenbelt. The Greenbelt stretches from Lucky Peak Dam east of town through the heart of downtown and on into neighboring Garden City and Meridian. The city continues to work to connect the Greenbelt to the trails in the foothills.

The city also has vibrant cultural activities. The Idaho Shakespeare Festival is located in East Boise and performs a number of plays throughout the summer. Boise is home to three major venues, The Taco Bell Arena, The Morrison Center for the Performing Arts and the Bank of America Center. These locations host a number of concerts, recitals, plays and athletic events throughout the year. In addition, Downtown Boise hosts Alive After Five and First Thursdays that provide music and speeches and highlight local businesses.

Boise is also continually working to improve its education facilities. In March 2006, voters in the Boise School District approved a $94 million bond as the first phase of a plan to rebuild and renovate many of its older elementary and junior high schools. The district currently educates approximately 25,000 students per year. In May 2006, Newsweek named Boise High School – the district’s oldest high school – 503rd out of its 1000 top high schools in the country.
Boise is also home to Idaho’s largest university. Boise State University has a current enrollment of over 18,000 students and offers over 90 baccalaureate degrees and nearly 50 advanced degrees. The university is in the midst of a long-term expansion that will change the look of the campus and surrounding neighborhoods.

Boise’s businesses, recreational opportunities and educational facilities combine to make Boise an exciting place to live and work. Today Boise is the third largest city in the Pacific Northwest and rapidly growing. Growth brings new challenges: air pollution, traffic congestion, rising cost of providing fire and water service, infrastructure deterioration, loss of school-age children to outlying suburbs, and the urban gentrification that drives up housing costs. Boiseans displayed their frugal nature in early 2006 with defeat of a library expansion bond while approving the above-mentioned school bond just a month later.

Increasingly the pressures of growth have sparked a citywide interest in preserving historic streetscapes and learning lessons from Boise’s past. Boise grew up on the Oregon Trail, over 400 miles from a neighboring city of comparable size. The railroad boom skipped Boise, rare for any other capital city in the country. Boise’s first rail line was a branch line from Nampa. However, a United States Assay Office opened in Boise in 1872, one of only a few nationwide. Boise also had electric power and an electric streetcar system not long after cities like New York and Chicago. Only a year after Boise finally appeared on the Union Pacific main line, it opened its first municipal airport. All of these developments made Boise the city it is today.

Pre-Incorporation Years

Boise has long been a destination. Shoshone, Bannock, and Paiutes once inhabited much of Southern Idaho. Their annual migrations brought them to the Boise valley for hunting and fishing opportunities. The valley also served as a natural route to the annual gathering called the Sheewoki Fair. During this important meeting the nearby people of the Shoshone, Bannock and Paiutes met with their more distant neighbors the Nez Perce, Cheyenne and Crows near the confluences of the Boise, Weiser, Payette, Malheur and Owyhee Rivers with the Snake River. For over a month during fishing season the tribes fished, conducted trade, and held ceremonial dances. This tradition lasted until European-American settlement dispersed the indigenous peoples. The proximity of the Sheewoki Fair as well as other annual gatherings and hunts made the Boise Valley an important part of the trade between the Pacific Northwest and Intermountain Western Indians.4

European exploration of Southern Idaho began in 1811. Trapper Donald Mackenzie led a party sponsored by John Jacob Astor’s Pacific Fur Company through the area in November. Wilson Price Hunt led another party through later that same month. Two years later, Mackenzie Party member John Reid returned and attempted to establish a fur trading post near the mouth of the Boise River. The venture failed in January of 1814 when hostile Bannocks destroyed his party. Mackenzie returned several more
times throughout the decade and tried, unsuccessfully, to rebuild Reid’s fort to supply
the Snake Brigades of trappers to the area. The fort could not be built until 1834 when
Hudson’s Bay Company successfully constructed the original Fort Boise.5

The 1820s saw a rise in the competition for the fur trade between Hudson’s Bay
Company and American trappers. Parties led by Peter Skene Ogden and Jedediah
Smith sought to completely trap out all of the beaver resources in Southern Idaho in
order to make the land unappealing to either the British or American interests.

In May 1833, U.S. Army officer Captain Benjamin Bonneville led an expedition through
the area to evaluate its resources and map the area. His party created a local legend
and is credited with giving Boise its name. The French born Bonneville and his party
mounted a small rise east of the city and, as legend has it, proclaimed, “Les bois, les
bois, voyez les bois.”6

“The trees, the trees, look at the trees,” described their reaction to seeing the
cottonwood-lined Boise River after crossing the long stretch of the Snake River Plain.
Today the scene is depicted above the entrance to the auditorium at Boise’s South
Junior High and is reflected in the name of another junior high school, the local horse
racing establishment and a number of businesses.

Despite Bonneville’s generous description, settlers passed the area by for thirty years.
Emigrants on the Oregon Trail passed Boise in large numbers but used the valley only
as a brief respite from the desert crossing behind them and the difficult 400 miles that
remained ahead of them to the Willamette River Valley. In 1860 the Army planned to
place a fort in the area to protect emigrants from Indian attacks, but the eruption of the
Civil War delayed the plans.7

After the city’s founding, Boise continued to serve emigrants as a place to purchase
supplies, rest and, for some, an end to their journey. The Coxes were one such family.
James Cox and his daughter Ada returned to Boise in 1864 after wife and mother Sarah
died on the trail to Oregon. James promised Sarah a Christian burial, and she was
interred at the fort’s cemetery on Cottonwood Creek. Ada married a local freighter in
Boise in 1866 and settled in Owyhee County. James settled in southern Ada County
and was buried next to his wife in 1872. Both were later moved to Morris Hill Cemetery
after years of flooding damaged portions of the Cottonwood Cemetery.8

The Army renewed plans to create a garrison near Boise after the discovery of gold in
Southern Idaho in 1862. George Grimes accompanied Moses Splawn and others into
the Boise Front on a tip from Indians that gold could be found. They came into the
basin on Clear Creek, named for its absence of gold. At this time another band of
Indians met the party and warned them away. The party ignored the warning and
dodged the Indians to find gold at Grimes Pass on Grimes Creek. The party gave the
creek George Grimes’ name after he was killed in a skirmish with the Indians and buried
near the site of the discovery.9
Members of the party returned to Walla Walla, bringing word of their find and requesting protection. The Army forwarded the request to Washington, D.C. Other prospectors made another request after the discovery of gold and silver in the Owyhee Mountains in early 1863. That spring, the Army ordered Major Pinckney Lugenbeel to take a detachment to the Boise Valley to build a garrison at a suitable location to protect both of the new mining districts and the Oregon Trail traffic.\textsuperscript{10}

The Davis Brothers, Frank and Thomas, claimed homesteads on the north side of the Boise River in the spring of 1863, south and west of the original town site. The brothers and another homesteader heard of the Major's approach and set out to meet him. Major Lugenbeel camped on Government Island west of the homesteads and met with the settlers. They recommended the location at the point where Cottonwood Creek left the foothills. The Major and his men surveyed the area and on July 4, 1863 decided to place the fort at the recommended site.\textsuperscript{11}

At the same time, Cyrus Jacobs was en route to Bannock City (Idaho City) in the Boise Basin with the intention of setting up a store. He diverted to Boise and on July 7, he and other travelers organized the Boise City Company and surveyed the town site for Boise. The company consisted of the Davis Brothers, Jacobs, Lugenbeel, Henry Chiles Riggs and other men from Bannock or those headed for the gold fields. The survey founded the town from the gates of the fort to the south and west. The company set aside lots for future settlers and public buildings. The twenty men of the company then held a lottery and drew for six lots each.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Incorporation}

The Idaho Territorial Legislature officially incorporated the city on December 12, 1864, five days after it was named as the territorial capital. The naming of Boise as capital led to a colorful incident in the history of the state. At the time of Idaho’s designation as a territory, Lewiston was the leading city and Governor William Wallace established that town as the temporary capital. The Organic Act of 1863, passed by Congress, stated that a temporary capital would be established until such a time that the legislature could convene and vote on a permanent site. The first legislature convened late in 1863, but the issue of the capital was addressed too late and left to the next session.\textsuperscript{13} When the legislature reconvened in the winter of 1864, the Boise interests put forward a bill early so as not to suffer the same fate as the prior year. The bill to move the capital to Boise was passed and signed by the new Governor, Caleb Lyons, on December 7, 1864. The act was to become effective on December 24, 1864. The Lewiston faction challenged the decision and filed suit. A local judge issued a warrant for the arrest of Governor Lyon. He received word of his impending arrest, and under the guise of a duck-hunting trip, fled the area. State Secretary Silas Cochrane, the legal successor to the governor,
was then arrested instead. The Lewiston faction’s suit claimed that the legislature was invalid due to conflicting laws regarding the election of the legislators and the date of organization of the body. They chose the more favorable law regarding the date the session was to have started, arguing that all measures passed by the body were void. A friendly judge in Lewiston agreed and declared his home city as the capital. The territorial seal and archives remained locked and under guard at the county jail in Lewiston as a symbol that the seat of government remained there. The matter came to national attention – and at this point the tale varies widely in the telling. One story had a U.S. Marshal taking the seal and archives to Boise in the dead of night to avoid a fight. Another version claimed that newly appointed Territorial Secretary C. DeWitt Smith brought troops from Fort Lapwai, forcing the release of the files and then bringing them to Boise under escort. Regardless, the Territorial Supreme Court ultimately sided with Boise, and the issue was officially put to rest.

The Second Legislature also established Ada County on December 22, 1864. Prior to that Boise was in Boise County, as was all of Southwestern Idaho north of the Snake River. The Legislature named Boise the county seat; the county was named for the daughter of H.C. Riggs, the surveyor of Boise and Boise’s delegate to the legislature. In return, he later named his son Boise Riggs.

Though officially organized by the legislature, Boise lacked a city government until November of 1867. Since the Territorial Legislature granted charter in 1864, city leaders had fought the creation of a city government. They argued that the extra level of government was excessive with the presence of the both the territorial and county governments. Each time an election came up, the candidates running on an anti-charter platform won and refused to form the city council. The anti-charter movement finally failed in 1867. The federal government required a formal government in order to certify the city plat and grant title to landholders in the city.

Surveyor General Lafayette Cartee completed the first survey of Idaho in 1867 and brought the issue to the fore. On November 18, 1867, Judge John Cummins called a meeting to name the City Council and Mayor. The members unanimously elected Henry Prickett as Boise’s first mayor. The new city government set out to better organize the fire company and outlawed the free running of hogs in the city.
Rowdiness marked Boise’s first decade. Early reports in the Boise News from Bannock City listed fights, described a scuffle between a soldier and a civilian, and the accidental shooting of one soldier by another. Acting Governor C. DeWitt Smith, a devout Methodist, said he had “found this country the home of refugees from justice, of men delighted in crime, and boasted of their evil deeds – even seemed proud of them.”

Despite the wild nature of Boise’s early days, by 1866 the tide was turning toward a more permanent and orderly society. The Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman led the early charge for change. The August 4, 1864, edition listed local businesses that agreed to close for the Sabbath and called for others to do the same. The same issue also made an early call for the establishment of a Branch Mint or Assay Office. The newspaper listed the losses that miners and local businesses suffered from accepting “unclean gold dust at less than true value.” The November 24, 1864, issue called for an end to the random and drunken discharge of pistols within the city. The paper stated the need for responsible citizens and law enforcement to prevent threats to person and property.

The Statesman spoke early of the bright future for the town and credited the many women and families present in the city. An October 20, 1864, article noted that there were fifty families in the area with residences being built as fast as materials could be supplied. The “fair sex” was recognized for the refinement and prosperity of the city. A census conducted in 1864 counted 1,134 residents in Boise, of that number, 204 were women and 318 were children.

Churches played an early part in the taming of Boise as well. On August 14, 1864, Father Saint Michael Fackler held the first Episcopal service in Boise. Two years later the Episcopal Church was completed and ready for services. The church was later named St. Michael’s. Later that same year the Baptist Church opened as well.

The large number of children in the town required schools. Many private schools operated as early as 1864. These schools offered lessons in music, dance, penmanship and French. The Ada County Commissioners organized the Boise School District in 1865, and a building was provided on the corner of Capitol Square at Eighth Street and Bannock through public funds and private donations. The school district got off to a slow start, and private schools flourished for a few more years. The first free public school opened two blocks north on Eighth and Washington in 1868.

Boise’s path to becoming a legitimate city still faced hurdles. Calls for an Assay Office came early, beginning in 1864 with the Statesman’s editorial and a Territorial Memorial to the U.S. Congress requesting the same. Interest also rose in 1866 in bringing the railroad to Boise. That interest grew in 1869 with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad through the neighboring states of Nevada and Utah.
It was much easier to get the Assay Office than to get the railroad. Congressman E.D. Holbrook championed Boise’s request for an Assay Office during his two terms in office. Bills to authorize the construction of a building in Boise passed one House of Congress or the other in 1866, 1867 and 1868. Many factors contributed to the debate. Idaho produced an estimated $52 million in precious metals between 1861 and 1866, roughly 19 per cent of the total production for the United States.\(^\text{27}\) However, Congress had already approved construction of a Branch Mint in The Dalles, Oregon.

Many questioned the need of another mint or Assay Office so nearby. The conflict over the Oregon Mint even involved Idaho. Before final approval, a debate raged over locating the Branch Mint at the Dalles or in Portland. The Statesman felt that Idaho had no business in Oregon’s Mint, but only in securing her own. A December 8, 1864, editorial stated, “Idahoans shouldn’t have to pack their metal to Oregon to support the apple shippers and bacon packers.”\(^\text{28}\)

On July 15, 1870, construction on the Assay Office began at the site donated by local businessman Alexander Rossi.\(^\text{29}\) General Cartee and Judge John R. McBride supervised the project. Construction ended in July 1871, but a delay in the shipping of equipment from San Francisco held up the opening of the Assay Office until March 1872. It was built from native sandstone and was among the first monumental government buildings in the Pacific Northwest. C.L. Longley, a later assayer, wrote that on many occasions women carrying flowers were turned away from the door. The women, hoping to visit acquaintances, apparently mistook the building for the local jail.\(^\text{30}\)

Rossi served as the first assayer after the original Treasury Department appointee failed to arrive. Rossi had received his education in engineering and was a skilled assayer. He had served in that function privately in Boise. In 1867 the First National Bank of Idaho was chartered in Boise with B.M. DuRell and C.W. Moore as bank officers. When the bank opened, DuRell and Moore bought out Rossi and operated and assaying service at the bank at a higher fee than the Assay Office charged.\(^\text{31}\)
Boise residents treated the opening of the Assay Office as a grand affair. Many residents donated time and materials to landscape the grounds, which took on a park-like setting. The building became the pride of Boise, a symbol of prominence and legitimacy. Only seven other Assay Offices existed in the country, and there were even fewer mints. Boise now ranked among such cities as Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco and Salt Lake City as a home to the Department of the Treasury. Many thought this was fitting based on Idaho’s gold production and its loyalty during the Civil War. One block south of the Assay Office existed the other pride of early Boise, Grove Street. A canal complete with waterwheels once watered the trees that gave the street its name. Many of the city’s leaders lived on Grove Street, just minutes away from their enterprises on Main Street. General Cartee conducted his business on Grove Street, as the city’s leading nursery was located at his home near Fifth Street. Leona Hailey Cartee wrote, “In fact there seemed to be a general impression that to live on Grove Street and belong to the Episcopal Church was all that was necessary to open the doors of good society and enter the Gates of Heaven.”

Cyrus Jacobs also lived on Grove. The house he built in 1868 was later used as a Basque Boarding House. It still stands as the oldest brick building in the city and is now part of the Basque Museum. The Boise Canal that once provided the water for Grove Street now runs underground, visible in only a few places but memorialized at Ninth and Grove streets by a modern sculpture by Boise artist Amy Westover.

The development of a complex irrigation system proved to be a large force in Boise’s later growth. Many simple canals and ditches sprang up along the river in the early years to irrigate the farms and orchards that bordered Boise. In 1882, engineer Arthur Foote moved to Boise to design a canal that would reach Nampa and projected that nearly half a million acres of desert land could be irrigated.

Financial difficulties plagued the project, and funding dried up after the financial panic of 1884. Foote’s wife, Mary, was a nationally known author and helped sustain the project with earnings from her publications about Boise and the West. They lived in a house in the canyon not far from the project, just below present-day Lucky Peak Dam. By 1890 the canal plan faltered and Arthur moved on to another project. The Footes moved to the area that is now the Hillcrest Country Club and finally left Boise in 1895. A string of investors and speculators continued Foote’s work, and in 1900 the New York Canal opened. By 1906 the project irrigated 38,000 acres.

In 1877 William Morris started a more modest project to irrigate over 17,000 acres on the Boise Bench as a land venture. He sought to provide water to his land in order to sell smaller parcels. He died suddenly in 1878, but his nephew, William Ridenbaugh, continued the project. He sold it two years later, and by 1891 it provided irrigation to 22,000 acres and electricity to Boise.

On July 4, 1887, the Capital Electric Light, Motor and Gas Company turned the power on in Boise for the first time. Generators located at the foot of the Bench – near the current Park View Apartments – provided power to a few electric lights downtown. The Idaho Statesman modestly proclaimed that the electric lights “added to the brilliancy of
the Fourth. At that time the Ridenbaugh Canal ended in a reservoir just above the power plant. The water then fed a penstock, 62 feet down the hillside, to power the generators. By 1889 the company had a contract with the city to operate 40 lights for $100 per month. In 1895 the company operated nine generators at the site; six provided electricity for 3,500 incandescent lights, and the other three powered 95 carbon arc streetlights.

A rival company, Boise Gas and Light, built another generating station at the foot of the Bench in Old South Boise below Federal Way and east of Protest Hill. Opened in 1904, this plant used water from the Ridenbaugh-Rossi Mill Ditch. In addition, it had one coal-fired steam generator for use in emergencies and when water was unavailable.

In 1891, Boise received another modern development, closely linked to the arrival of electric power in the city. That year Walter E. Pierce began service on his trolley line from 13th Street along Main Street and Warm Springs Avenue to the Natatorium. He continued to expand his line within the city limits, and in 1900 the Boise Rapid Transit Company turned its first profit at five cents a ride.

The trolley line to the Natatorium led to the development of Warm Springs Avenue; many residents of Grove Street moved to more stately mansions and took advantage of the same geothermal water that supplied the Natatorium. The streetcar lines also led to a northward expansion along 13th Street as Pierce and other developers marketed land along the lines and created Boise’s North End.

Competition sprang up in 1906 when the Boise Valley Electric Railroad Company began running in Boise and expanded service to the rest of the valley. In 1907 Pierce founded another company, the Boise and Interurban Railroad. His company constructed a northern route along State Street to Caldwell. The Boise Valley Electric Railroad built a southern route to Caldwell via the Boise Bench. Eventually the two lines connected and created the Boise Valley Loop.
In 1911 the two trolley lines merged and, along with the two power companies, created the Idaho Railway Light and Power Company. The trolley lines played a key role in creating the valley’s power grid. As the trolley lines traveled west and connected communities to each other, they brought electricity as well. In 1906, with the slowing of mining activities near Silver City, power generated at Swan Falls dam was diverted to Nampa and Caldwell. The completion of the Boise Valley Loop in 1911 completed the grid, and excess power from Swan Falls powered the valley. The Idaho Power Company emerged in 1916 from all of the local electric and trolley companies.42

The early availability of electric power and the presence of the Boise Valley Loop became important for Boise’s community pride in the absence of a main line connection to the railroad. The Oregon Short Line Railroad constructed a branch line from Nampa to Boise in 1887; the original depot was located on the Bench near the site of the current building. The Oregon Short Line constructed a new and attractive structure on 10th and Front and created a bustling railroad district on the south side of downtown. The adjacent warehouse district and a few railroad trestles are the only visible reminders that the railroad once existed downtown.43

From "View of Boise City, 1890, looking south. Central School stands in the foreground. The waterwheel-lined street in the upper left is once prominent residential district Grove Street while the upper right depicts Table Mountain, now known as Table Rock. A 1890 Lithograph.

The Idaho Statesman dubbed April 16, 1925, “the biggest day in Boise’s history.”44 On that day Union Pacific President Carl R. Gray arrived on the first train over the new main line at the new Boise Depot to kick off the daylong festivities. The newspaper reported
that all hotels were full and described the events held to commemorate Boise’s realization of a 40-year dream. City residents dressed in period costumes dating from the beginning of American history through Boise’s own history. Many businesses took at least half the day off, and schools, county and city buildings were closed for the day. Even the state government at the Capitol went to minimum staffing for the day. In recounting events in the next day’s edition, *The Idaho Statesman* declared that the psychological barrier of the branch line had been removed from the city.45

Cautious to avoid another missed opportunity, Boise took its destiny in its own hands concerning development of an airport. In 1926 the city constructed its first airport, called Booth Field, on what is now the Boise State University campus. Again Boise’s civic pride came into play as citizens’ groups, chiefly the American Legion and the Chamber of Commerce, donated much of the work. On April 6, 1926, Walter Varney inaugurated the field with a flight that connected Boise to Pasco, Washington – a regional railroad mail hub – and to Elko, Nevada. This first flight is also noted as the birthday of United Airlines, of which Varney’s company, Varney Air Mail Service, was a founding member.46

Pilots soon called for improvements to the field; among them was national celebrity Charles Lindberg, who visited in September of 1927. Trees and telephone poles restricted emergency clearance and approaches to the airfield. In addition, the bordering river and its downtown location limited chances for future expansion. Varney Air Mail Service and the *Boise Capital News* led the drive to pass an $85,000 bond measure in 1928 to expand the airport.47

The city sought to gain a significant role in the new and growing economy based on airfreight and air travel. Despite the need, a lively debate ensued among Boise’s newspapers and its citizens. Key among opponents’ arguments was the fact that, given its limited expansion opportunities, the airport’s location would eventually make it obsolete. Planners scrapped an early proposal to place the airport on city-owned land on the South Bench due to the fact that a road would have to be built to the site, pushing costs even higher.48

The bond failed in April 1929 by 60 votes. However, a new mayor was elected on the same day. The new administration chose to hold another election on the bond in June, and it passed. Booth Field served Boise until 1939, when the new DC-3 plane made it necessary to construct a longer runway. The Works Projects Administration completed the first portion of Whitney Field on the Bench, and United started its Mainliner service on January 22, 1939. Booth Field – renamed College Field – continued to serve as a small private airfield into the 1940s.49

Despite the problems of the 1930s, Boise continued to grow, increasing in population from 21,544 in 1930 to 26,130 in 1940, according to the U.S. Census. In addition to the new airport, other important buildings were constructed in Boise. Key among these is what is now called the old Ada County Courthouse. Constructed as part a WPA project and designed by two prominent Boise architectural firms – Tourtelotte and Hummel, and
Wayland and Fennel -- the building was completed in 1939. The building was designed in the Art Deco style, common in the late 1920s and into the 1930s. The county built a new courthouse on Front Street in 2002. The State of Idaho now owns the old courthouse, and its future is uncertain.

After the WPA completed the airport’s three runways and partially completed the terminal building, the city continued to seek a partnership with the government to increase the size and traffic at the field. In late 1940 the Army visited Boise to evaluate the prospects of Army usage of the field in the lead-up period to U.S. involvement in World War II. The area on the Whitney Bench, wide-open for expansion, and the existing 8,200-foot runway – deemed among the longest in the world then and still suitable by today’s standards – helped convince the Army that the Boise Airport could be used in a partnership.\textsuperscript{50}

The Army offered up to $1.5 million dollars in improvements to the airfield if Boise contributed $35,000 to pave two of the three runways, provided 60 acres for buildings and constructed a 600,000 square foot hardened parking surface. In addition, the city needed to provide some smaller satellite sites for a radio station, utilities hook-ups, and a railroad right-of-way to connect to the main line. The city willingly accepted the Army’s offer, and a number of local businesses began to win bids for the many projects required.\textsuperscript{51}

The project progressed rapidly, and in March 1941 the first soldiers began to arrive at the airport. The remaining buildings at the Boise Barracks were used once again; housing airmen while facilities were completed at Gowen Field, named per Army policy, after a local airman, Lieutenant Paul Gowen. At the start of the war, Gowen Field housed 2,250 officers and men. The base became a key training center for B-17 crews, which raised the number of soldiers from 4,000 to 6,000. The location of the airport on the Second Bench hastened Boise’s expansion to the south as the First Bench grew to serve the needs of the airmen.\textsuperscript{52}

At the conclusion of World War II, the Army decided to discontinue leasing the base. The base’s mission changed from training to out-processing, and by the end of 1945, over 5,000 men were separated from duty and returned to civilian life at Gowen Field. By early 1946, the Army had virtually abandoned the base, sold at surplus many of its supplies, and returned the leased property to the city. The city in turn leased the military side of the field to the Idaho National Guard; today, the south side of the airfield continues to serve as a home to Idaho’s Air and Army National Guard as well as Marine Corps and Navy Reserve units.\textsuperscript{53}

Boise continued to grow in the 1950s, and the census recorded 34,393 people living in Boise. However, growth slowed and the count remained flat in 1960 at 34,481. Boise saw a general decline in business, and the downtown area was in visible decline. The opening of Karcher Mall in Nampa caused a general panic and led to Boise’s darkest hour -- urban renewal.
As part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, the federal government made millions of dollars available to cities to revitalize core areas. Larger cities used the money to clear away slums and to replace them with freeways, commercial districts and housing projects. Boise lacked any significant slums and took a different path. City leaders sought to build a new regional mall in the downtown area, referred to as the Core Business District. The plan to build an 800,000 square foot regional mall encompassed eight city blocks and portions of three others. In contrast, Karcher Mall was approximately 400,000 square feet. In 1966 Boise began to receive federal funds, and the Boise Redevelopment Agency (BRA) was formed.\textsuperscript{54}

The BRA began acquiring and demolishing properties in the heart of downtown. Boise acquired national notoriety for the third time in the century when Boise native L.J. Davis published an article, “Tearing Down Boise,” in Harpers’ November 1974 issue. He explored urban renewal in Boise and suggested that it would not be long before residents of the city, “an amiable, even-tempered people,” grew angry that “cars were parked where their childhoods used to be.”\textsuperscript{55}

Davis noted that some residents were already beginning to stand against urban renewal, but he also quoted BRA board members such as Carroll Sellars, who stated, “Let’s face it, most of these old buildings are junk piles. We’re not tearing down a damn thing that’s worth saving.”\textsuperscript{56}

Many people disagreed. Some key buildings were saved as urban renewal stalled in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, the damage had been done; as Davis put it: “Downtown Boise gives the impression that it has recently been visited by an exceedingly tidy bombing raid conducted by planes that cleaned up after themselves. Main Street is virtually deserted.”\textsuperscript{57}

BRA did complete a few key projects, but its devotion to the mega-mall concept left a void in downtown. The First Security Bank Building, completed in 1978, was one of BRA’s few positive accomplishments. Now owned by U.S. Bank, the building stands on the southeast corner of Main Street and Capitol Boulevard, and remains Idaho’s tallest building at nineteen stories.

The year 1985 was truly a watershed for Boise’s redevelopment. Residents replaced many incumbents in City Hall, who in turn killed the idea of the downtown mall and changed the focus of development. The city retains many unique buildings, due largely to preservationists of the 1970s who fought BRA. They saved the Egyptian Theater and other important buildings, and they raised the overall awareness that Boise’s history was worth saving. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Boiseans rebuilt downtown rapidly. Although some of the projects have met mixed reviews, it no longer resembles a bombed out city. Of the original eleven blocks planned for the mall, only the site of the Eastman Building remains undeveloped.

Other projects that languished due to the narrow focus on the mall have been completed as well. One BRA plan called for a cultural district that included six blocks
west of Capitol Boulevard in the Eighth Street warehouse district. The area houses the Boise Public Library, the Esther Simplot Performing Arts Academy, and the Fulton Street Theater. Much of the historic architecture of the district changed due to other developments in the area as the 8th Street Marketplace and BoDo converted many of the buildings for retail use. However, the combination of cultural and commercial use has helped to revitalize this portion of downtown Boise and maintained a slice of its historic nature.

Boise grew rapidly as urban renewal was taking place downtown. Annexations to the south and west caused Boise’s population to more than double in the 1970 Census to 74,990 residents. As part of that expansion, the city reached another transportation milestone in 1968. On December 12, the city held a small ceremony near the Franklin Interchange on Interstate 80 North to mark the opening of Boise’s first two portions of the Interstate Highway System. The freeway worked its way west from Oregon, and construction began in 1965 on the portion to connect Meridian to Boise as well as the Downtown Connector. The completion of this portion of the freeway allowed travelers to drive from downtown Boise to Ontario, Oregon with virtually no stops. Later construction continued further east to connect Boise to Mountain Home, Pocatello and Utah.58

In 1974 a redevelopment plan tied to the downtown mall called for the extension of the Boise West Connector with the addition of a Broadway-Chinden Connector. Like many dreams in Boise, it took many years to realize. The downtown mall concept finally disappeared into history with the construction of the Boise Towne Square Mall near Franklin and Cole roads in 1988. However, the connector idea lived on and was completed on August 7, 1992.59 The connector and the freeway to Meridian, now part of Interstate 84, are today among the most traveled roads in Boise and a major challenge for transportation and land-use planners.
The Boise Towne Square Mall filled the enduring need Boise felt for a regional shopping center, a quest that nearly killed the downtown during the previous two decades. During the last year of construction, The Idaho Statesman breathlessly documented the number of tiles used in construction and how many football fields would fit under its roof. Columnist Tim Woodward noted that when the mall finally opened, Boise would lose its distinction as the only metropolitan area in the country lacking an Orange Julius. When the mall opened in October 1988, the interior space covered over 900,000 square feet and housed 180 stores. Since 1997 the mall has added another 500,000 square feet.

As Boise looks ahead to 2050 and beyond, few expect much change in its recent pattern of growth. Projections place the Treasure Valley’s total population at almost one million long before mid-century, a prospect that holds major implications for land use, transportation systems, air quality and water supplies. Boise’s major attributes – abundant natural resources, low cost of living, recreational opportunities and overall livability – all face potential degradation without proper planning and foresight. As the seat of state government and the source of an enormous percentage of its employment and tax base, Boise is a major economic engine for all of Idaho, and its fate is intertwined with all of its neighboring cities.

Boise has been a military town, a railroad town, a center of agriculture and mining, and a focal point for business and education. If nothing else, the city has proven itself adept at re-invention – a talent that could prove invaluable in the decades to come.

Boise Mayors 1867-2006

| 1868-1869 – Thomas B. Hart | 1887-1889 – Peter J. Pefley |
| 1869-1871 – Charles Himrod | 1889-1893 – James A. Pinney |
| 1870-1871 – Charles Hailey – Elected but never took office; Himrod continued to appear in official records during this term. | 1893-1895 – Peter Sona |
| 1872-1873 – George M. Twitchell | 1895-1897 – Walter E. Pierce |
| 1873-1875 – Thomas E. Logan | 1897-1899 – Moses Alexander |
| 1876-1878 – Thomas E. Logan | 1901-1903 – Moses Alexander |
| 1878-1879 – Charles Himrod | 1903-1905 – James H. Hawley |
| 1879-1880 – Cyrus Y. Jacobs | 1905-1907 – James A. Pinney |
| 1880-1881 – Charles P. Bilderback | 1907-1909 – John M. Haines |
| 1885 – Sol Hasbruck | 1911-1912 – Harry K. Fritchman |
|  | 1912-1915 – Arthur Hodges |

1916-1919 – Samuel H. Hays
1919-1921 – Ern G. Eagleson
1921-1925 – Eugene B. Sherman
1925-1927 – Ern G. Eagleson

1927-1929 – Walter F. Hanson

1933 – Ross Cady – acting mayor for remainder of Pope’s term.

1933-1935 – J.J. McCue

1936-1939 – James L. Edlefsen
1939-1941 – James L. Straight

1941-1942 – H. Westerman Whillock – called to active military duty, resigned May 11, 1942


1945-1946 – Samuel S. Griffin
1946-1947 – H. Westerman Whillock
1947-1951 – Potter P. Howard
1951-1959 – Russell E. Edlefsen
1956-1961 – Robert L. Day
1961-1965 – Eugene W. Shellworth
1966-1974 – Jay S. Amyx
1974-1986 – Richard R. Eardley


2003 – Carolyn Terteling-Payne – served as acting mayor until special election after Coles’ resignation.

2004-Present – David Bieter
Timeline of the Boise Project (by Johnny Hester)

1884—A. D. Foote surveys a main canal and several lateral ditches.
1890—Foote and C. H. Tompkins contract W. C. Bradbury to work on the canal.
1891—Bradbury leaves the project due to insufficient funds.
1892—Foote pulls out of the canal project.
1896—Tompkins loses the water claim and leaves the project.
1899—The New York Canal Company formed to finish the canal.
1900—Water first runs through canal on June 20.
1902—Congress passes the Reclamation Act on June 17.
   Surveying and planning begins for a project to irrigate the Boise Valley.
1904—U. S. Reclamation Service launches the Boise Project.
1905—Congress approves the Boise Project on March 27.
   Town of Diversion Dam is established.
1906—Bidding opens for the Boise Project on February 1.
   Construction on canal section from Indian Creek to Deer Flat begins in February.
   Construction on Boise Diversion Dam begins in March.
   Construction on canal section above Indian Creek begins in May.
   Construction on Deer Flat begins.
   Atlantic steam shovels arrive at Deer Flat in September.
1907—Contractors pronounce 41% of diversion dam completed on April 1.
1908—Boise Diversion Dam completed in October.
1911—Deer Flat Reservoir completed.
1912—New York Canal completed.
1879 – Thomas Edison completed all of the components necessary for the public use of electric lighting.

1882 – The first commercial power plant powered incandescent lights for one square mile area of Manhattan, New York.

1887 – Mines in Hailey and Ketchum used electricity for the first time in Idaho.

1887 – July 4, Capital Electric Light, Motor and Gas Co., located near present day Park View Apartments, provided power for 20 incandescent lights in downtown Boise with water supplied by the Ridenbaugh Canal.

1887 – Boise City Council consented to fund 20 street lamps.

1889 – Capital Electric Light, Motor and Gas Co., contracted by the city to provide 40 lights for $100 per month.

1889 – *The Idaho Statesman*, Central Hotel and Overland Hotel installed electric lights. The Central Hotel burned down the following year, despite advertisements that claimed, “No coal oil is used on the premises.”

1891 – The Boise Rapid Transit Company owned by W.E. Pierce completed Boise’s first electric trolley line from 13th and Main Streets to the Natatorium on Warm Springs Road. Street lighting converted to carbon arc lights, Boise was visible from War Eagle Mountain above Silver City.

1901 – Engineer Andrew J. Wiley, oversaw the completion of Swan Falls Dam. The first long-distance transmission line in Idaho sent electricity 28 miles to provide power to Silver City mines.

1902 – Boise-Payette River Electric Company completed a waterwheel on the Payette River in Horseshoe Bend. The waterwheel powered two 500 Watt generators and a 22,000 volt transmission line sent the power to Boise and the mining camp at Pearl.

1903-1910 – Owyhee County mines led Idaho in gold production, due in part to the use of electric power provided by Swan Falls Dam.

1904 – Boise Gas and Light Co. opened in Old South Boise to rival Capital Electric Light, Motor and Gas Co. This new plant used water from the Rossi-Ridenbaugh Mill Ditch and a coal fired turbine to generate power.

1906 – Transmission lines completed to Nampa and Caldwell from Swan Falls Dam.

1907 – Completion of a transmission line connecting Caldwell and Pierce Park coincided with the completion of two electric rail lines by the Boise and Interurban Railway Company (successor of Pierce’s Boise Rapid Transit Company) and the Boise Valley Railway Company,
owned by H.P. Ustick, provided trolley service to the entire Treasure Valley.

1909 – The powerhouse at Diversion Dam completed to provide power upstream for the construction of Arrowrock Dam.

1910 – The closure of many Owyhee County mines provided a surplus of electricity that was turned to domestic and commercial use in the Treasure Valley.

1910 – Transmission lines from Nampa to Boise via Meridian and Pierce Park to Boise completed the central power grid for the Treasure Valley.

1911 – Capital Electric Light and Motor Co. and partner, Boise and Interurban Railway Co., merged with competitors, Boise Gas and Light Co., and Boise Valley Railway to form the Idaho Railway, Light and Power Company.

1915 – Construction at Arrowrock Dam completed, power from Diversion Dam redirected to Boise.

1916 – The consolidation of five Treasure Valley electric companies created Idaho Power Company, to include the Boise Valley Traction Company.

1928 – The Boise Valley Traction Company was sold by Idaho Power; the street car and interurban trolley system was dismantled and replaced by the automobile and buses.

Endnotes


2 McGrath, Melissa, “Albertson’s okays $17.4 billion buyout; 5.4%,” The Idaho Statesman, Main, January 24, 2006.

3 McGrath, “Micron says it will fill 900 high-wage jobs,” The Idaho Statesman, Main, January 6, 2006.

4 Wells and Hart, 13.

5 Ibid., 14.


7 Wells and Hart, 14.

8 Wilda Collier Dillion, Deaths and Burials: Boise Barracks Military Reserve, Idaho, 1863-1913, (Boise: 2003), 118.


10 Ibid.


12 Ibid.

13 Blase, 18.

14 Ibid., 27.

15 Blase, 9-19 and Wells and Hart, 24.

16 Hartman, 2.
17 Wells and Hart, 30.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 1.
21 Idaho Statesman, August 4, 1864.
22 Ibid., November 4, 1864.
23 Ibid., October 20, 1864.
24 Annie Laurie Bird, Boise, Peace Valley (Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1934), 208.
25 Hartman, 14 and Bird, 197.
26 Hartman, 30.
27 Hussey, 2.
28 Statesman, December 8, 1864.
29 Ibid., 6.
31 Longley, 3, and Hartman 19.
32 Longley, 3 and Hussey, 10.
34 Wells and Hart, 162.
35 Ibid., 56.
36 Ibid., 58.
37 “They Do Say,” The Idaho Statesman, July 5, 1887.
42 Idaho Power Company, 4.
44 The Idaho Statesman, “Boise ready for celebration,” April 16, 1925.
45 The Idaho Statesman, “Just a-wondering,” Opinion, April 17, 1925.
46 Jim Witherell, History Along the Greenbelt, (Boise: Ada County Centennial Committee, 1990), 75.
48 Ibid., 4-10.
49 Felton, 10 and Witherell, 80.
50 Rachel Smythe, Entertaining Strangers, (Salt Lake City: Amber Pen, 2005), 1-18.
51 Ibid., 4.
52 Ibid., 22.
53 Ibid., 175.
56 Ibid., 45.
57 Ibid., 34.
58 The Idaho Statesman, “Rites mark dedication of Boise West Connector,” Main, December 12, 1968.
59 Becky Paull, “Road to the Connector was long, bumpy,” The Idaho Statesman, The Valley, February 16, 1992.