

## *Trustees for Those Who Come after Us*

Chere Jiusto

*It has been most truly said . . . that these old buildings do not belong to us only; that they have belonged to our forefathers, and they will belong to our descendants unless we play them false. They are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those that come after us. So I say nothing but absolute necessity can excuse the destruction of these buildings; and I say, further, that such a necessity has never yet existed in our time.*

—William Morris, 1889,  
to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

More than a century has passed since William Morris and his peers at the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings in England faced squarely an all-too familiar threat, the loss of history and human expression that comes with the demolition of landmark buildings. And although our generation has learned some hard lessons in what not to lose through the wholesale destruction of Urban Renewal, the loss of Montana's history and culture marches on at a slower, but steady, ongoing and avoidable rate.

It happens in rural places, at ranches, ghost towns, and abandoned rail lines where keeping buildings like barns and grain elevators is tough when such structures fall behind the times. It happens in communities, where abandoning or replacing schools and courthouses is sold to officials as newer, greener, cheaper, and easier.

And it happens at the state level, where a cogent policy



*“Deaf & Dumb School—Boulder, Montana,” designed by John C. Paulsen, 1897. Asylum building on right. C. S. Haire was the architect for the wing and tower, added in 1902 (center and left). These were removed in 1976, restoring the*

*building to its original 1897 configuration. Photographer unidentified. Courtesy Montana Historical Society, Helena (PAc 98.58 Mr)*



*Stairway, Asylum Building, Boulder River School, Chere Jiusto, photographer, © 2005 Chere Jiusto.*

governing the preservation of even the most outstanding historic buildings is lacking. This truth was brought to public attention last winter, when the Montana legislature was asked to appropriate \$180,000 to demolish one of the state's most elegant buildings, a stately Renaissance Revival building at the heart of the campus that is now the Boulder Developmental Center. The building, now abandoned, began its life in 1897 as the Montana Deaf & Dumb Asylum, designed by our first State Architect, John C. Paulsen. In response, the Montana Preservation Alliance, of which I am the director, raised our red flags. "Penny Wise, Pound Foolish" was the message we took to our legislators; that demolition of this building not only would erase yet another historic treasure from



*Asylum Building, Boulder River School, today, Chere Jiusto, photographer, © 2005 Chere Jiusto.*

our landscape, it was not in the long-term interest of the state or the Boulder community in which it resides.

We were not the only ones alarmed by the thought that this building was no longer fit even for pigeons, and that the best solution the state could come up with was to destroy it. State administrators too had been trying to avoid that path—the director of the Boulder Developmental Center had offered to give the property to a civic group who would take it over and rescue it; while the State Architecture and Engineering division had met with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to alert them to the fact that the building was in jeopardy. In fact, staff of the SHPO had identified the building as one of two-dozen back in



*Ornamental radiator, Asylum Building, Boulder River School, Chere Jiusto, photographer, © 2005 Chere Jiusto.*

1980 that, even then, were cited as priority properties due to their historic and architectural qualities. The recommendations came out of a systematic inventory of more than 1,700 state-owned buildings, more than 400 of them historic. Of those, they highlighted those two dozen as historic properties of the highest pedigree, that our state should strive to preserve. On the list were some of the best and boldest—the State Capitol, Western’s Old Main, the Boulder Asylum Building, the Galen State Hospital. Others were more humble but representative—early ranches, the agricultural experiment stations, the first State Forest Ranger’s Station near Olney, the fish hatcheries at Anaconda and Somers.

Instead of enticements for agencies to act as stewards of state heritage, administrators live with a lack of funding to maintain *any* of their buildings, and little incentive or reward for doing right by their historic stock. Failure to encourage agencies to rejuvenate or reuse buildings of this caliber led to demolition by neglect. Now, a quarter of a century later, a review of the track record is mixed. Montanans valiantly rallied to restore our Capitol in 2000, and purchased Virginia City to save it in 1997. But other buildings suffered: some were lost, some unloaded, and some such as the Boulder asylum and many buildings at Warm Springs Hospital, simply left to stand vacant and deteriorating for decades.

### **The Tenderest Interest and Care**

In the early years of statehood, community and political leaders laid the foundations of the institutions of Montana society. Courthouses, libraries, schools, and colleges took front seat, but there were also hospitals, poor farms, asylums, and prisons built to provide for the state’s less fortunate or less functional citizens.

These institutions were built to the same architectural standards as loftier state establishments, often on campuses that were intentionally planned as places of healing or rehabilitation. Warm Springs, Boulder, the Orphanage at Twin Bridges, Galen, Pine Hills Correctional Facility, and the Mountain View School for Girls all were designed to be not places to warehouse the “indigent” or “feeble-minded” among us, but places where those less fortunate citizens of our state could live with some degree of dignity.

As Montana Governor Preston Leslie noted in 1889,

Montana’s people following in the light and example of older governments, and animated by the same Christian spirit, have in former years enacted laws showing the tenderest interest and care for the poor and unfortunate afflicted; in fact, offering to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, speech and hearing to the deaf mute and employment to the willing worker. Every child is the ward of the territory, and its treasury is open to its educational necessities.<sup>1</sup>

The Boulder building is a case in point. Erected at a time when a belief in government and the power of its institutions to lift society for the betterment of all people informed our architecture, the building is an architectural masterpiece that would have satisfied Governor John E. Rickards’ position that “In the higher interest of humanity, the Orphans’ Home and the Deaf and Dumb School can not be too liberally treated by the State.”<sup>2</sup> Cut stone, molded brick, wrought iron, and carved wood were all shaped by



*Pressed brick, Asylum Building, Boulder River School, Chere Jiusto, photographer, © 2005 Chere Jiusto.*

the knowing hands of experienced craftsmen. Pride in construction was evident right down to such details as rusticated foundations and ornamental radiators.

In 1915, reporter G. E. Pinto (who was himself deaf and semi-mute) visited the Boulder campus and gave a glowing account of the place. “Anyone taking the time to visit this school,” he wrote, “will go away with the feeling that this is a mighty good world to live in, and especially the section called Montana, since she treats her unfortunates in such a splendid manner.”<sup>3</sup>

Thankfully, when asked to authorize its demise, our Montana legislators both heard our plea to save the Boulder asylum and responded. They had no wish to see this grand building reduced



*Column, Asylum Building, Boulder River School, Chere Jiusto, photographer, © 2005 Chere Jiusto.*

to a pile of rubble. In a dramatic turn-around, the Long Range Building committee recommended that the same funding earmarked to demolish the building be appropriated to save it.

Our legislators did us all proud when they voted to spend that demolition money to instead drive out the pigeons, stabilize the building, and repair the roof whose leaks threatened the structural integrity of the building more than anything else. In the end, they granted the old Deaf & Dumb Asylum a reprieve.

Now the stage is set for the next phase of life at the Boulder Administration building. And in the future of this building, in some ways, lies the future of this community.

### *Saving Communities*

*There may have been a time when preservation was about saving an old building here and there, but those days are gone. Preservation is in the business of saving communities and the values they embody.*

—Richard Moe, President  
National Trust for Historic Preservation

The Boulder community grew up around the School for the Deaf & Dumb, after town leaders determined in the early 1890s to secure a state institution within their valley. Since the doors opened, the institution has provided employment to many a Boulder resident. By the 1910s the Boulder school encompassed at least half a dozen large institutional buildings, a 400-acre ranch, and additional smaller outbuildings. A second building as large as the school for the deaf and blind was attached to the original campus building, erected for what were then called “feeble-minded” or “backward children.” Known as the Montana



*Side view, Asylum Building, Boulder River School, Jim Jenks, photographer,  
© 2005 Jim Jenks.*

State Training School, the program grew and eventually took over the facilities when the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind moved to Great Falls.

The landmark historic buildings remained the visual and functional centerpiece of the campus until the later twentieth century, when a chronic lack of funding at Boulder and changing program needs led to charges of inadequate care for these wards of the center. The campus again evolved, with cottages and stodgy institutional structures built to take over from the soaring Victorian buildings of the past.

Through the decades, the town of Boulder remained small, and like many rural Montana towns in the latter 1900s, its downtown withered as local businesses lost out to bigger stores and towns up the road. The Boulder Developmental Center is still one of the town's biggest employers, and in a replay of history, recently the county has successfully lobbied to have a new meth treatment center located there, to boost the economy and community stability.

Today Boulder stands in need of new businesses to reinhabit its commercial buildings, and a renaissance to breathe new life into the town. While this may have seemed a long shot just a few years ago, the prospects for rebirth may just center around the building that many have considered a white elephant for so long. As those in the historic preservation movement have learned, adaptive reuse of historic buildings can be the catalyst that restores old buildings and the neighborhoods and towns surrounding them. The old Boulder asylum may be a key to the town's rejuvenation, just as restoration of the historic Billings railroad depot was the ticket to turning the city's historic downtown around.

Will that happen? It is now up to preservationists, the

Boulder community, and that inspired investor who we know is out there, just waiting for a project like this one. When visiting Helena last fall, Donovan Rypkema, the nation's leading spokesperson on the economics of historic preservation, had this to say about the building: Renovating a building like the old Asylum for the Deaf & Dumb "can be daunting. But daunting is not the same as impossible." We at the Montana Preservation Alliance believe that preserving historic buildings is the pathway to saving communities, and we have helped that to happen time and again across our state. It is our experience that, when enough people believe it's important, everything is possible.

#### Notes

1. Preston Leslie, *Montana Governor's Message to the Honorable Members of the Council and House of the Legislature of Montana*, (Helena, MT: Territory of Montana Executive Office, January 1889).
2. John E. Rickards, *Message of Governor John E. Rickards to the Fourth Legislative Assembly of the State of Montana* (Helena, MT: State Publishing Company, 1895).
3. G. E. Pinto, "Montana's Great School at Boulder," *The Butte* [MT] *Miner*, December 19, 1915.