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Last Chance Gulch (Helena Historic District)

A group of miners out of provisions and down on their luck took one last chance as they swung through this gulch on July 14, 1864. They found “color,” and soon miners trickled in, a few at a time, panning, sluicing, and hastily building shelters on their claims. The discovery men became known as the Four Georgians for reasons the community soon forgot. Historians speculate that since one of the miners was from Georgia, where gold was mined before discoveries in the West, they were probably practicing a Georgian method of placer mining.

In the great frenzy to get at the precious metal, miners soon stripped the landscape of everything green, churned up the soil, and built their buildings along the claims that followed Last Chance Stream through the gulch. In October, residents gathered to properly name the mining camp known as Last Chance. After some discussion, they dubbed the new settlement Helena after the Scott County, Minnesota, hometown of one of the men. Last Chance Gulch produced 19 million dollars’ worth of gold in the first four years.

Only so much gold lies close to the surface, and so when placer mining was finished, hydraulic mining changed the landscape even more drastically. Workers used powerful pressure hoses to viciously wash the hillsides. Montana’s capital city thus rose from the mining camp. By the 1890s, Helena’s spectacular architecture and cosmopolitan ambience won the city its nickname, “Queen City of the Rockies.” The historic layers tell of the journey from gold camp to capital city.

This tour begins in Reeder’s Alley.

1. Pioneer Cabin and Caretaker’s House (1864–1865)

The Pioneer Cabin is the oldest home in Helena with a documented construction history. Miner Wilson Butts built the back room in 1864 and his brother Jonas built the front portion in 1865. Jonas, his wife, and three daughters lived in the one room for several years. The two cabins were later joined together to make a single dwelling. The cabin’s restoration in 1938 was one of the first preservation efforts in the West. The Caretaker’s House next door was also originally a miner’s cabin. Under state ownership, the Montana Heritage Commission manages these properties.

2. Reeder’s Alley and the Yee Wau Cabin (1875–1884)

Pennsylvanian Louis Reeder built this quaint collection of tiny row house apartments that once housed miners and, later, single men of varied occupations. At one time some thirty-two one-room apartments spread along the narrow alley in various buildings. Less than half remain. The Montana Heritage Commission currently manages and maintains the brick and stone buildings for the State of Montana. Other landmarks included in this little area are the historic Morelli Bridge and the Stone House. The privately owned Yee Wau Cabin at the alley’s foot is the last remaining building associated with Helena’s Chinese settlement. Look for the National Register interpretive signs that tell more of the story of this territorial-period neighborhood.

3. Anchor Park

Nestled adjacent to the Lewis and Clark Library, this grassy terrace memorializes the USS Helena. Four U.S. ships by that name served the country: the first in the Philippine Insurrection, the second in WWII, the third in the Korean War, and a fourth as a nuclear-powered submarine. The propeller, anchor, chain, and bell are from the third Helena CA-75. It took hits during the Korean War and received the first Navy ship’s unit citation. As Seventh Fleet’s flagship, this USS Helena hosted President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952, served along the West Coast, and was decommissioned in 1972.

4. Broadwater's Buffalo, Lewis and Clark Library

Charles A. Broadwater's carved buffalo head now grazes in front of the Lewis and Clark Library. It guarded the entry to his Montana National Bank (see #16). Some criticized Broadwater's elaborate building, predicting that Helena's future was so tenuous that buffalo would eventually graze on Last Chance Gulch. Broadwater spent extra dollars to install the buffalo over the bank's entrance in 1890, symbolizing his optimism for Helena's prosperity.

5. Colwell Building (Uncle Sam's Block), 62 SLCG (1886)

On this site the Four Georgians made their great discovery July 14, 1864. Appropriately, then, the first bank chartered in Montana Territory, the First National Bank, located here in 1866. Upon its demolition in 1886, testing of its mortar, taken from this corner, revealed a high gold content. The French Second Empire–inspired three-story rooming house replaced the bank (see #24). The new building was symbolically known as “Uncle Sam's Block” because of the site's financial history.

6. California Wine House, 46 SLCG (1860s–1890s)

This building and its several neighbors to the north have their roots in the 1860s and represent the earliest commercial community. August Fack added the second story and brick storefront to the original single story in 1890. Fack's California Wine House was known for its fine art collection. At the start of Prohibition in 1918, the Goodall brothers relocated their assay office in the old saloon. The 1860s stonework is visible at the rear.

7. Clarke, Conrad & Curtin Store, 40 SLCG (1869)

Pioneer merchants A. G. Clarke, Thomas Conrad, and John Curtin founded this hardware store, specializing in Queensware and a wide selection of hardware, in the 1860s. They built this spacious commercial building in 1869. In 1874, it survived the worst and last of the nine fires that swept Helena between 1869 and 1874. The original, simple storefront was remodeled in the 1890s before the firm dissolved in 1897. Well-preserved terra-cotta molding, fancy brickwork, and turned wooden columns reflect Victorian-era taste.

8. Dunphy Block, 38 SLCG (c. 1868)

Another of the few commercial buildings tracing its origins to the 1860s, the Dunphy Block was reputedly Main Street's first two-story building. Another first was the bowling alley, for men only, installed in its basement in 1869. Thomas Cruse opened his bank here in the 1880s; the safe is still in the building. Remnant rubblestone walls, seen at the rear, reveal its early origins, but the stylish façade reflects 1890s remodeling.

9. Raleigh and Clarke Dry Goods, 36 SLCG (1865–1888)

Well illustrating Helena's growth from mining camp to prosperous town, the quoins and arches of the original stone building, constructed circa 1865–1872, are visible at the rear. Merchants William B. Raleigh and Charles A. Clarke opened their store here in 1878, adding the cast iron and brick façade to the front during the boom period 1884–1888. The store flourished until 1898.

10. Sands Brothers Dry Goods, 32 SLCG (1874–1889)

Morris and Julius Sands established their dry goods store here in 1874. They remodeled in 1889, adding the second story. The building bears a striking resemblance in miniature to the Power Block (#30), also built in 1889. Fourteen corbelled arches carved out of the face of the granite cornice, lion head ornaments between the second-story Romanesque window arches, and heavy granite piers that carry the weight of the wide display windows are the ultimate expression of late-nineteenth-century commercial architecture. Conversion of the storefront to plate-glass display windows—shipped by rail—is ready evidence of the changes the railroad made in Helena's appearance.

11. Boston Block, 21–25 SLCG (1890)

The Boston Clothing Company, purveyors of “gentlemen's furnished goods,” was the first occupant of this flamboyant commercial block. Upstairs were gambling and furnished rooms. When Helena's red-light district a few streets south closed during Prohibition, by 1927 the women had resurfaced here. Well-known madam Ida Levy located upstairs. She moved next door to the St. Louis Block in 1933, and Pearl Maxwell operated the Royal Rooms here in the Boston Block until her death in 1953. The handsome building was a worthy companion to the flamboyant Novelty Block, which once stood north of the St. Louis Block.

12. St. Louis Block, 19 SLCG (1882)

The Italianate-style building housed a number of businesses including a bank, saloon, and Gamer's boot and shoe shop. Connected to the St. Louis Hotel at the back on Jackson Street, the old hotel became a vaudeville theater and later a movie theater. The entrance and lobby were in the middle part of the building. No trace of the theater remains. Upstairs, where the frame shop is today at 19½ South Main, longtime madam Ida Levy ran one of the best-known brothels in Montana from the 1930s through the mid-1950s. Her successor, “Big Dorothy” Baker, ran the house until 1973.

13. Trolley on the South Walking Mall (1880s)

With the arrival of the Northern Pacific in 1883, Joseph O'Neill began a taxi service using horse-drawn trolleys like this one. For ten cents, passengers rode brightly painted trolleys between the Northern Pacific Depot, a mile to the northeast, and downtown. Great Falls legislator Charles Bovey and his wife, Sue, were great collectors of Montana's early treasures and spent a fortune buying, restoring, and replicating buildings in Virginia City and Nevada City, Montana. The Boveys donated the trolley to the people of Helena.

14. Sculpture, north end of the South Walking Mall (1974)

Titled Kinetic Fountain, the sculpture of the miners at their sluice box is also known as The Prospectors. It visually demonstrates how miners across the west worked their claims. Lyndon Pomeroy created the welded metal sculpture reminiscent of Helena's beginning.

15. Women's Mural, Broadway and North LCG (1979)

Painted on the side of the Livestock Building, the mural commemorates groups and individual women who contributed to the greater community. Suffragists, painted ladies, schoolteachers, and pioneers, as well as rodeo star Fanny Sperry Steele and guitarist M. J. Williams, represent Helena's diverse women. Women planned, designed, and painted the mural. Intended to last no more than a dozen years, it has become a permanent landmark.

16. Column of Broadwater's Bank

At the east end of the Women's Mural (#15) on the Livestock Building's southeast corner is a remnant column marking Broadwater's Montana National Bank and Edwards Street, a thoroughfare that no longer exists. The column is all that remains of Broadwater's fabulous building designed in 1889 by John C. Paulsen and destroyed by fire in 1944 (#4 & #25).

17. Masonic Temple, 104 Broadway (1885)

Up the hill across Broadway, the Masonic Temple was the third home of the Helena Masons, serving until 1942. Masons have been important to Helena's history beginning with the town's first death in March of 1865, when they gathered to give Rodney Pococke a Masonic funeral. Helena architects Heinlein and Matthias (#36) won a competition awarding them the contract. Roman and French Renaissance influences combine with local Stedman Foundry ironwork.

18. Parchen Block, 106 Broadway (1886)

Architect W. T. Welter employed the French Second Empire style in his design of this business block for Henry M. Parchen (SC #21 & #22). For decades during the twentieth century, Marino's Italian grocery occupied the storefront. The Marinos lived upstairs and ran a boardinghouse. Note the ghost sign on the building's east side.

19. Ming Opera House/Consistory Shrine Temple, 15 N. Jackson (1880)

Up and around the corner from the Placer Hotel is John Ming's opera house. Renowned throughout the Pacific Northwest, it hosted famous performers such as Marie Dressler and Eddie Foy. Masons acquired the building in 1912. In 1915, architects George Carsley and C. S. Haire remodeled it in Egyptian Revival style. Original hand-painted 1880s scenery and the spectacular \$10,000 pipe organ installed in the auditorium in 1915 are still used occasionally. The Masons maintain this Helena landmark.

20. Helena Light and Traction, 17 N. Jackson (1903)

The Latin inscription over the entry proclaims *ex aqua, lux et vis*: "from water comes light and power." This substation plant of Helena's main utility company, built after a fire destroyed the main plant, provided power for the streetcars that ran until 1927.

21. Atlas Block, 7 North Last Chance Gulch (1889)

F. J. Shaffer and James Stranahan, the architect of the Bluestone House (SC #2), designed this remarkable symbol of Helena's early struggles. An insurance company built the Richardsonian Romanesque-style building as an advertisement. The salamanders—mythical creatures like phoenixes that fire cannot destroy—cavort atop the building while stylized flames lick across the building's top. Atlas bears the symbolic burden for the policy holders.

22. Placer Hotel, 15–27 North Last Chance Gulch (1913)

New Year's Eve in 1913 saw the grand opening of this modern hotel. The elegant party competed with the Montana Club's traditional New Year's Eve "Smoker" for men only (#32). Wives wanted to attend this gala event that brought an end to parties for men only. The next year, the Montana Club's celebration was for couples. George Carsley designed the building in consultation with his famous mentor, Cass Gilbert. Legend has it that political deals were clandestinely made in its rooms and many a legislator called it home during the sessions. Newly converted to condominiums, the Placer and the Iron Front (#36) are Helena's remaining historic hotels.

24. First National Bank, 101 North Last Chance Gulch (1886)

The second home of Montana Territory's first bank, chartered in 1866 (#5), combines Romanesque, French Second Empire, and popular Victorian-period stylistic elements. St. Paul architects Hodgson, Wallingford, and Stem designed this and the Lewis and Clark County Courthouse (CS #2) at the same time. Distinctive brownstone shipped via the railroad from Bayfield, Wisconsin, trims both landmarks. Look for the fish downspout and bank president Samuel Hauser's thumbprint in the circle (between the arches) on the west façade.

25. Architectural pieces on the North Walking Mall

Architect John C. Paulsen designed many early Helena landmarks that have survived only in pieces. Remnants of his work are in evidence here. The massive polished granite columns at the south end of the play area flanked the entryway of Paulsen and McConnell's 1888 Pittsburgh Block. It had forty offices and stood at 107 North Last Chance Gulch. The cupolas that crowned Paulsen's Novelty Block (#11) are preserved on top of the kiosk. Next to the kiosk, ribbons of carved granite adorning the old Helena High School at Warren and Lawrence form benches. The school, also Paulsen's work, closed in 1934 and was razed in 1975.

26. Granite Block, 34–36 North Last Chance Gulch (1929)

The terrible history of Helena's fires continued on July 16, 1928, when lightning sparked a conflagration that destroyed most of this block, leaving only the corner Power Block (#30) unscathed. Roomers in the Granite Block moved trunks, grips, and everything they could carry out of the building and into falling rain. The rain drenched everything but the fire itself. This replacement, built by Kleinschmidt family interests, is a stunning complement to its neighbor.

27. Lalonde Building, 38–42 North Last Chance Gulch (1929)

Napoleon Lalonde, owner of the Bailey Block lost to the 1928 fire, replaced it with this more modern, streamlined building designed by architect John G. Link. Cream-colored glazed ceramic tile veneer covers the brick façade. Rapid reconstruction of buildings reflects the confidence of local merchants who reinvested. The Parrot Confectionery, still operating in one of the storefronts, was among the first tenants.

28. New York Block, 44–46 North Last Chance Gulch (1929)

The New York Store, founded in 1885, was one of Helena's longest operating businesses. After the 1928 fire, owner Herman Fligelman changed the name to Fligelman's and operated here until 1958. Fligelman advertised his business in the façade. A tiny tailor and seamstress perch on the second-story corners along with the centered family crest. Shields of historic Florentine clothier guilds remind shoppers that Fligelman's offered a long tradition of quality clothing. George Carsley designed the building.

29. Gold Block, 50–56 North Last Chance Gulch (1929)

The Gold Block, built in 1888 by T. C. Power, was yet another casualty of the 1928 fire, as the inscription on the second story's central panel indicates. George Carsley designed the new Gold Block, financed by T. C.'s son, Charles Benton Power. The tile roofline reflects the newly popular Mission style while the windows and entry have Gothic-style influences.

30. Power Block, 58–62 North Last Chance Gulch and Sixth Avenue Annex (1889)

"Merchant prince" T. C. Power began freighting goods out of Fort Benton. Diverse business interests led to his control over much of territorial commerce and political success as the state's first senator. The grand Power Block is evidence of the man's powerful influence. Designed by Willetts and Ashley of Chicago, the Power Block represents the transition from Romanesque Revival to the Chicago School. Note that the corner door and window openings correspond to the floor numbers. The four-story annex, built in 1914 to complement its neighbor, features two Sixth Avenue copper-framed storefronts.

31. Goodkind Building, 139 North Last Chance Gulch (1884)

St. Louis architect F. D. Lee designed this beautifully restored building constructed for Colonel C. A. Broadwater. It is the oldest standing commercial building north of Broadway. Decorative windows and a pressed-metal cornice, typical of the 1870s and early 1880s, enhance the brick façade. The Goodkind brothers operated a wine, liquor, and cigar business here for many decades.

32. Montana Club, 24 W. Sixth (1905)

To the west on Sixth Avenue is the nationally renowned men's club founded in 1885 that competes with the Power Block for dominance of Helena's skyline. The first club building, designed by John C. Paulsen, burned in 1903 leaving only the ground-floor arches. Famous architect Cass Gilbert designed the present building incorporating the standing arches. Swastikas at the threshold today have a different connotation, but members carefully chose this universal symbol to wish all who entered peace and prosperity.

33. Diamond Block, 40–52 W. Sixth (1889)

James F. Stranahan (#21; SC #2) made use of the sloping hillside in designing a triangular block with copper-faced oriel windows, small balconies, and faceted mirrors. T. C. Power, Martin Maginnis, and several others were the original joint owners.

34. First Unitarian Church of Helena, 325 Park (1901)

C. S. Haire designed this Richardsonian Romanesque–style church to also function as a theater. From 1933 to 1976, it was the public library, then became a community theater. Inside, a lovely 1905 Tiffany window memorializes Clara, wife of Rev. Stanton Hodgkin.

35. C. W. Cannon Building, 401 North Last Chance Gulch (1890)

An excellent example of the multiple storefront, this corner commercial building originally housed five small shops. Helena architects Wallace and Thornburgh created the design for pioneer businessman C. W. Cannon (SC #19). Cannon's home, LeGrande Cannon Boulevard memorializing his son, and this building are Cannon's community legacy.

36. Windsor (Iron Front) Hotel, 415 North Last Chance Gulch(1888)

Helena architects Heinlein and Matthias (#17) designed this elegant European-style hotel. Its prefabricated iron façade was locally cast at the Stedman Foundry. The pre-cast façade represents a building trend popular in larger cities before the advent of skyscraper construction techniques. In 1889, House Republicans of the state's first legislature regularly caucused in the hotel's meeting rooms. The fourth-story ballroom, added in the early twentieth century when the Independent Order of Oddfellows (I.O.O.F.) owned the building, features an oak floor billed as the best dance floor in the West.