

BACK STORY

REVITALIZING THE HISTORIC BELMONT COURTHOUSE

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The Belmont courthouse is still standing, after 137 years, and one organization is determined to help keep it standing for another 100. The Friends of the Belmont Courthouse is a non-profit organization formed to preserve, restore and protect this piece of Nevada's legal history.

The courthouse's legacy dates back to Nevada's mining boom days. Although today Belmont is nearly a ghost town, in the mid-1800s, Belmont rose to prominence as the location of an immensely profitable silver mine. According to the Belmont *Courier*, the region around Belmont had produced bullion valued at more than \$2,700,000 by 1875. Believing the location would remain profitable for years to come, Nevadans named Belmont the county seat. The mining profits did not last, however, and the population dwindled. In 1905, Tonopah became the Nye County seat.

Belmont is located in central Nevada, in the northern portion of Nye County. It is 260 miles northwest of Las Vegas and 270 miles southeast of Reno. Visitors can still find services there; a bed-and-breakfast, inn and saloon cater to travelers in the area – but gas up, as there are no gas stations.

Today, Belmont is recognized on the National Register of Historic Places; the courthouse is included in this recognition. Construction of the courthouse began in 1875, and was finished a year later, on July 4, 1876. It came in on time and under budget at \$22,000 and served as the Nye County courthouse for 29 years. Although a few other buildings and portions thereof still remain from Belmont's heyday, the courthouse is the most intact – even more so now that renovations have begun, helping further preserve this piece of Nevada history.

Stories about the courthouse and its history abound. The legendary Jim Butler served there as District Attorney – after evicting his predecessor, who locked himself inside the office and refused to leave. A much-respected county treasurer committed suicide in the courthouse when his theft of county funds came to light. And Judge Peter Breen's grandfather, also named Peter Breen, appeared there as both lawyer and judge.

Since active use of the courthouse ceased, the building has fallen into significant disrepair; time, weather, neglect and vandalism have taken their toll. Windows were broken and removed, the jail cells were temporarily removed for use in Gabbs, Nevada, and leakage from the roof caused water damage. However, recent work by the Friends of the Belmont Courthouse, whose trustees include Chief Justice

Belmont Courthouse original stove.

Photo courtesy John King.



Kristina Pickering, Fifth Judicial District Court Kim Wanker, Nye County District Attorney Brian Kunzi, former Nye County Commissioner Joni Eastley, Donna Motis, John Terras and Terry Terras, has already started to reverse the damage. Last October, the organization, with funding help from Nye County, replaced the leaking roof with one that replicates the original ox-blood red. And the organization is currently working to replace the 29 boarded-up windows with historically accurate glass windows, reusing the original fittings. The Friends group is seeking photographs of the courthouse's interior before it was abandoned, as well as donations to sponsor the window project. For more information about efforts to restore the Belmont courthouse, visit <http://belmontcourthouse.org>. ■