

Myth 148: A Federal Case

By Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



In the heart of downtown Carson City stands Nevada's first federal government building, an impressive 19th century multi-story red brick structure. A 1972 Historic American Buildings Survey report on the edifice claims that Nevada U.S. Senators James W. Nye and William M. Stewart were instrumental in the passage of the congressional bill authorizing the building's construction. In truth, Nye had been dead for more than nine years and Stewart was not serving in the Senate at the time.

How did the distinguished Harvey J. McKee, National Park Service supervisory architect and Professor *Emeritus* at Syracuse University (my *alma mater*) get it wrong and deny other politicians their legacy? For one, he trusted Senator Stewart's *Reminiscences* (1908). The memoir, published shortly before the senator's death, is riddled with errors and exaggerated claims, as Stewart's biographers have since identified.

McKee wrote that "Nevada Senators Stewart and Nye were largely responsible for the

[\$100,000] appropriation," noting that Stewart asserted on page 278 of *Reminiscences*

that "[I] secured mandatory legislation with an additional appropriation for the construction for the present Government Building at the capital."

Actually the *Congressional Record* reports that Nevada U.S. Senator James G. Fair on December 4, 1883 introduced S. 55 providing "for the erection of a public building for the use of the United States courts, post-office, and other Governmental Offices in the city of Carson City."

Stewart, who was appointed by the state legislature as Nevada's first U.S. Senator in 1864, had left the office in 1875, and was not appointed again as senator until 1887.

McKee, in reading Stewart's embellished memoirs, also confused Senator Nye's support for a U.S. Mint in Carson City in the 1860s with the later federal building.

Nye served as Nevada's second U.S. Senator until 1873 and died in New York three years later.

It can be argued that the principal father of Nevada's first federal building was actually Representative George W. Cassidy. Long-time journalist C. C. Goodwin in his memoirs *As I Remember Them* (1913) wrote that after Cassidy's distinguished eight-year career in the Nevada State Senate, "an appreciative constituency sent him for two terms to Congress [1881-85] and he held his own there and did much for the state."

On December 11, 1883, Cassidy introduced H. R. 947 providing for a federal building in Carson City. While the house bill never came up for a vote, Cassidy used a clever parliamentary

maneuver to get the companion senate bill passed by the House of Representatives on January 5, 1885. President Chester A. Arthur signed the bill eight days later. Nevadans had to thank U.S. Senators Daniel W. Voorhees (Indiana) and John J. Ingalls (Kansas) for getting the senate bill passed in the Senate on March 3, 1884 as Nevada Senators Fair and John P. Jones missed the vote.



It took over a year to find a suitable location in Carson City for the federal building. On March 1, 1886, the federal government purchased a lot on Carson Street bounded by Spear, Plaza, and Telegraph streets.

The Carson Opera House was located on the site and was soon moved to the north side of Spear Street.

Mifflin E. Bell, U.S. Treasury supervising architect, designed the structure with its imposing clock tower.

The construction contract was awarded on May 25, 1888 and the cornerstone laid on September 29 later that year.

The building was completed and occupied on May 19, 1891 and cost \$134,605.53 to construct.

The federal district court moved to Reno in 1965 and the post office moved to Carson's nearby Washington Street in 1970. A quit-claim deed was recorded on May 17, 1971 transferring the building from the federal government to the State of Nevada. The State Library operated in the building between 1972 and 1992.

The old federal building has since been restored and renamed for former Nevada U.S. Senator Paul Laxalt, the current occupant being the Commission on Tourism.

Photo credit: Top: The Carson City federal building, now known as the Laxalt Building, ca 1900, N SB-0245.

Bottom: The federal building, ca 1920s, CCC-0125. The Kitzmeyer Building is the other prominent structure in both images. Photos courtesy of the Nevada State Archives.

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