

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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Surely the Silver State's capitol "dome"--technically it's a cupola--was once covered with silver! It was, if you believe virtually every tour guide and bus driver talking to unsuspecting tourists. The literature on the state capitol is replete with references to a "silver dome." After all, other state capitols have cupolas or domes covered with gold or made of copper, and Nevada's Comstock was queen of the silver camps in the mid-19th century.

The oft-repeated story notes that with the seismic retrofitting of the capitol in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the "silver dome" was replaced with a silver-colored fiberglass cupola. However, the tale continues, when the capitol was completed in Carson City in 1871, the octagonal bell-shaped cupola gleamed in the sun because it was made of silver from Nevada's booming mines. Silver seemed to be everywhere then, and the Carson City mint was turning silver bullion into American coins, so why wouldn't the capitol cupola be made of silver. It only stands to reason.

Or does it? What seems a logical assumption is dead wrong! The State of Nevada has seldom been one for extravagance, and the metal used to cover the capitol cupola bears it out. In referring to the new capitol in Carson City, Virginia City's *Territorial Enterprise* (January 3, 1871) pointed out that "[t]he cupola has a curved roof, covered with tin, and is formed in sections to suit the octagon base of the structure." That's right, the "silver dome" was made of tin (actually tin-plated steel called charcoal tinplate). It only looked like silver because of the shiny surface painted silver in color (before 1876 the cupola was painted with "Princess Red" fireproof paint).

If the cupola had been made of silver, its surface would have oxidized with prolonged exposure to air and moisture and turned black. Maintenance costs to keep the cupola gleaming would have been prohibitive. The Capitol Annex dome and two other small cupolas dating to 1906 are still covered with tin-plate panels painted silver.

When and where the story of a "silver capitol dome" started is a matter of conjecture. The why is probably because a silver cupola sounds a lot better in the Silver State than a tin cupola. And if it wasn't true, it should have been! However, construction-related records in the Nevada State Library and Archives bear out the truth to the story behind the "silver dome" of the capitol, and so do the workers who peeled the metal covering off the old cupola in March 1978.

Photo: *Nevada Magazine*

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