by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

The Gold Hill Hotel is situated on Nevada Highway 342 between Virginia City and Silver City on a steep grade just below Greiner's Bend. The rough-hewn, stone and brick hotel is the oldest extant hotel building in Nevada. However, the business' letterhead and signage were inaccurate for many years. The hotel was not built in 1859, the year of the gold discoveries at the head of Gold Canyon in then-Utah Territory.

It stands to reason that 1859 was too early for a substantial building the likes of the Gold Hill Hotel. The first recorded Comstock Lode discovery of decomposed, gold-filled quartz at Gold Hill was in the early spring of that year. In the miners' frenzy to dig out as much gold as possible before year-end freezing temperatures and snowfall froze the ground, they only erected tents, dugouts, shacks, and shanties for shelter.

The severe winter weather of 1859-60 started early in November and many miners returned to California. Activity picked up again in February 1860. However, the Pyramid Lake Indian War, erupting in May, brought mining on the Comstock to a virtual standstill until hostilities ceased just prior to that summer.

Then the "Rush to Washoe" was underway. Gold Hill's population grew from 638 in August 1860 to 1,297 in July 1861, four months after the creation of Nevada Territory. A frenzy of construction meant a corresponding level of activity at the Carson County Recorder's office as deeds, mortgages, agreements, and partnership records were filed by the hundreds. The result was a legal record that is not always clear today and transactions associated with the Gold Hill Hotel site that are not easy to decipher.

Hotels and boarding houses were in great demand. In July 1861, the Riesen House--today's Gold Hill Hotel--was under construction. Beginning in July 1861 businesswoman and entrepreneur Miss Louise Forster (often misspelled as "Foster" in official records) entered into a complex series of legal transactions regarding the hotel site and building. On September 23, according to Carson County, Nevada territorial records, Louise Forster and Alfred Riesen formed a co-partnership to construct and operate a hotel on property they jointly held on the west side of Main Street. Although Forster sold the hotel, she and Riesen leased the building back. The Riesen House, "Riesen & Foster [sic], proprietors," was first listed in J. Wells Kelly 1862 *Directory for Nevada Territory*. A Gold Hill Hotel, also identified in the directory, had no connection to today's Gold Hill Hotel.

The Riesen House encountered problems. A wet winter inundated the Comstock in 1861-62. Torrential rains and melting snow in January 1862, shortly after the hotel's completion, resulted in substantial structural damage. According to a story in San Francisco's *Alta California*, first reported in the Virginia City
Territorial Enterprise
of January 13, 1862, "…the southwest and southeast corners of the Risen [sic] House, a fine structure, have fallen, but the main part of the building remained firm." A photograph by Lawrence and Houseworth Co., dated 1862, depicts the two-story, stone Riesen House with its south wall shored up and under repair.

Perhaps the damage to the building and other business problems led Forster and Riesen to end their partnership. By late 1862, Horace M. Vesey leased and operated the hotel with his son Edward. The structure was renamed Vesey's Exchange, then Vesey's Hotel, and later the

Vesey House. The popular hotel hosted many Comstock social events such as "Vesey's Ball," an elaborate cotillion party, which was held in the new hall, a multi-story frame addition on the hotel's south side, on November 11, 1863.

While leasing the hotel, Horace Vesey was elected the Storey County Recorder in September 1864. Vesey ended his association with the hotel in 1867 and went on to manage hotels in Virginia City, Gold Hill, and Glenbrook. The Vesey House was still in business when Horace died on March 19, 1876 in Reno. By then, the Comstock had begun its long economic decline. The Vesey House was one of the many business casualties. According to the November 1890 Sanborn Fire Insurance map for Gold Hill, the business was now called the Capital Hotel and the frame addition was gone.

By 1907, the building served as a private residence. The purchase of the property by Dorothy and Fred Inmoor in 1958 breathed new life into the structure, then called the Gold Hill Bar and Hotel. Bill Fain is the current owner of the establishment. Fain renovated the building and added more rooms in 1986-87. A weekly history lecture series as well as plays and other entertainment are held in the charming venue.

The construction date of 1859 was used by the Inmoors in their desire to promote the Gold Hill Hotel as Nevada's oldest. The date predates the Inmoors and was painted on the building when they bought it. Fain unknowingly perpetuated the fake lore. Ironically, claiming 1859 as the year of construction for the Gold Hill Hotel was unnecessary as the St. Charles Hotel in Carson City did not open until September 1862. It is still operating as the second oldest hotel in Nevada.

Photo of Gold Hill Hotel courtesy of Bill Fain. This photo shows one of the hotel's 20th century additions.
1864-1865 Nevada City Directory page courtesy of Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, April 2003. To see early photos of the Gold Hill Hotel and read more about its history, logon to their Web site at http://www.goldhillhotel.net/history1.htm
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