

**B**annack, Montana is the site of many “firsts” in the Treasure State’s history. Although it’s a gold mining ghost town today, it served as the first territorial capital in 1864, had the state’s first jail, hotel, and chartered Masonic Lodge. It also had the first hardrock mine and the first electric gold dredge. If you’d like to learn more about these “firsts” take a self-guided walking tour of Bannack State Park, located about 25 miles southwest of the city of Dillon.

Although the old-time prospectors are long gone, many mining relics and over 60 buildings remain in Bannack. Most are so well preserved that you can actually go inside them — a rare treat when it comes to ghost towns. Bannack is unique for another reason, too — for the quality of the gold found here. While most gold is 80 percent to 95 percent pure, some of Bannack’s gold assayed 99.5 percent which is equivalent to refined gold.

Before you start your walking tour, pick up a brochure at the Visitor Center and read the entertaining stories about many of the homes, hotels, bachelor cabins, saloons, and stores still standing along Bannack’s boardwalk. While factual, these tales are also filled with colorful details about the life and times of the original occupants. For example, one of the cabins was still occupied by bootleggers until the 1960s. When they learned the law

was onto them, they snuck out in the middle of the night, leaving their dishes on the table and their coffee pot on the stove.

On the southeast end of Bannack, the Bessette House is believed to be haunted by the children who died here during an epidemic of scarlet fever. The site is nicknamed the Crying Baby House because of the sounds some visitors have reported hearing.

Bannack’s rich history began 150 years ago with John White’s discovery of placer gold along the banks of Grasshopper Creek. In July 1862, Mr. White filed one of the first recorded mining claims in what was later to become the state of Montana. Good news traveled fast and by fall of that year, “Grasshopper Diggings” was home to 400 prospectors. By the following spring, the population had swelled to 3,000 — the Gold Rush was definitely on!

It’s a wonder so many people survived the first few hard winters in Bannack, especially without sturdy housing. Some had to live in the same wagon that they rolled into town with. Others had time to build only a one-room cabin with a sod roof before heavy snow set in.

One wife and mother, Mary Edgerton, wrote to her family back in Ohio: “The mercury in the thermometers after going forty degrees below zero froze in

by Denise Seith  
**BANNACK STATE PARK**



the bulb. I was so afraid that the children would freeze their noses or ears that I got up a number of times in the night to see that their heads were covered. Their beds would be covered with frost.”

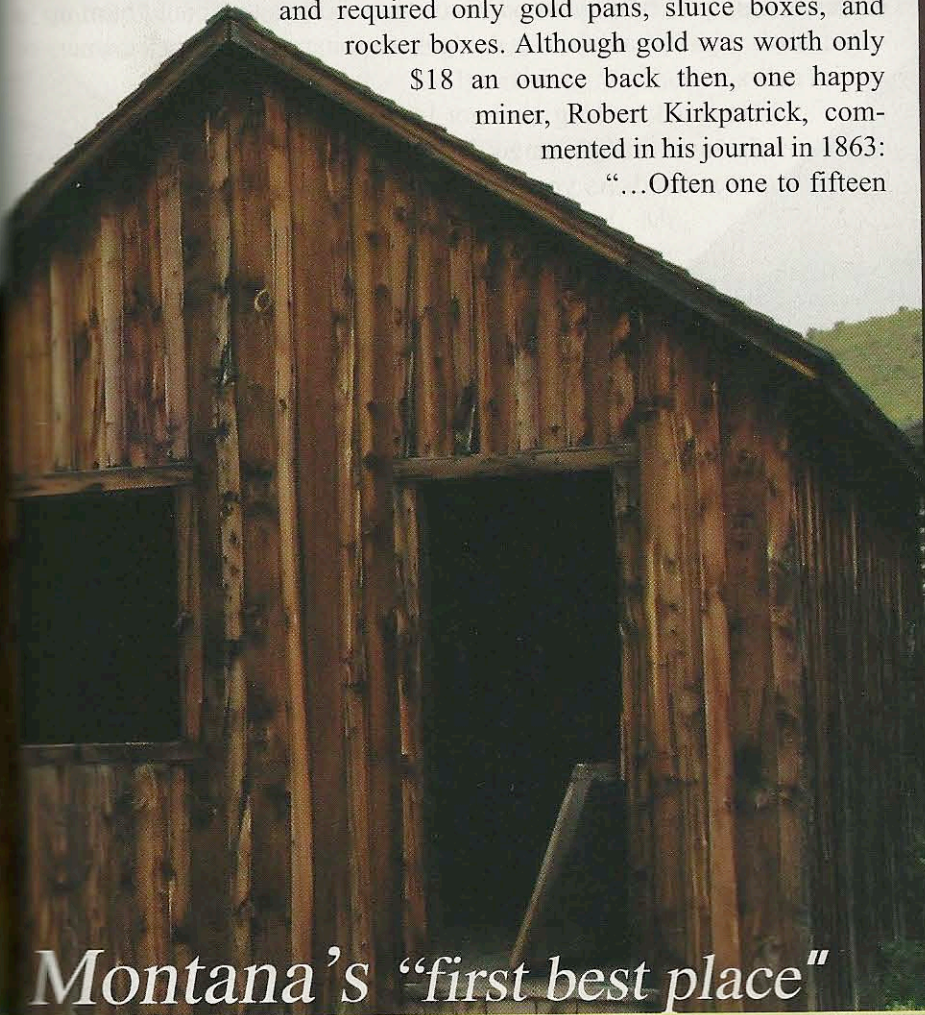
Despite temperature extremes that sites at an elevation of 5,780 feet can experience year round, the pioneer miners proved to be made of hardy stock and persevered.

In late 1863, the rough and tumble mining camp officially became the town of Bannack, named for the Bannock Indians who frequented the area. (Bannock is actually a Scotch word meaning “a cake cooked over an open fire.” Camas root cakes were a staple for the Native Americans). Notice the slight difference in spellings between Bannock and Bannack. Washington D.C. made a mistake on the town’s official paperwork, turning the “o” into an “a” and creating the name Bannack.

The first placer deposits found in Grasshopper Creek were easy to work and required only gold pans, sluice boxes, and rocker boxes. Although gold was worth only \$18 an ounce back then, one happy miner, Robert Kirkpatrick, commented in his journal in 1863: “...Often one to fifteen

**Background:** Bachelor cabins.

1. Although Bannack was home to the state’s first jail, not many offenders were kept here. With the gold rush at its peak, no one wanted the job of guarding prisoners. For those who were incarcerated, the gallows were in plain sight out the barred windows.
2. The Methodist Church was built in 1877, 15 years after the founding of the Bannack. A traveling minister, William Wesley Van Orsdel, or “Brother Van” was responsible for promoting the need for the first and only church in Bannack.
3. The mining exhibits found along the boardwalk represent all of Bannack’s major mining boom periods, from the first major discovery of placer gold in Grasshopper Creek in 1862, until WWII when all non-essential mining was prohibited. After the war, placer and hardrock mining continued. In fact, Montana’s nickname is “The Treasure State” thanks to its mountains having yielded fortunes in gold and silver since the mid 1800s.
4. Built in 1875 for \$14,000 as the Beaverhead County Courthouse, this was the first brick courthouse in Montana. The county seat was moved to Dillon in 1881, so the building sat empty until about 1890 when Dr. John Meade purchased it for \$1,250 and remodeled it into a posh hotel with a spiral staircase.
5. Looking out the window at the Meade Hotel.



Montana’s “first best place”



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**Background.** Street scene left to right: Gibson family home, Montana Hotel, unnamed building, Masonic Lodge/schoolhouse.

1. Gallows.

2. Left to right: Turner House was not only a cabin for the Turner family, but over the years it also served as a post office, barbershop and had the only telephone in town for some time. Assay office was one of the first and most important buildings in Bannack. This building later served as the Oliver Stage Station and a butcher shop. City Drug also saw many uses over the decades, including a general store and a temporary school when the regular school was in disrepair.

3. Walking down the boardwalk.

4. Bannack Historic Lodge 3-7-77 was built in 1874 at a cost of \$1,500. The first floor was a school for students K-8th grade for over 70 years, closing in the early 1950s. The Masonic lodge is on the upper floor. Although you cannot tour the upstairs, you can look through the glass and see the original carpet, and the historically correct arrangement of furniture and equipment for the time period.

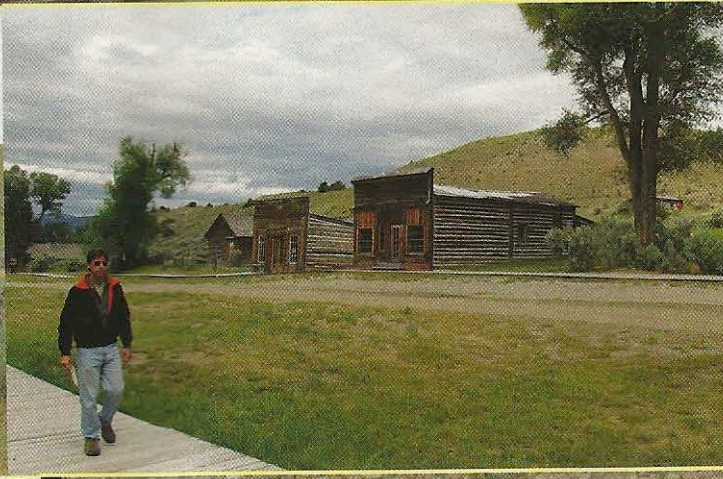
5. Sign reads: Grasshopper Creek in midsummer, 1862, John White and party discovered gold on this creek several miles down stream. The first major gold rush to what is now Montana resulted.

dollars to the pan was got in a few choice spots and I have seen the best dirt on the bedrock yellow with gold as it was shoveled up... some went from fifteen to seventy-five dollars to the pan.”

Can you imagine what Mr. Kirkpatrick would think if he was working his same claim now, but reaping the reward of today’s gold prices?

As you might expect, it wasn’t too long until the shallow placer diggings were exhausted, so miners then developed other means of extracting gold. For several decades, hydraulic mining was popular as a means to get at the higher bench deposits of gold. Then along came dredging. In 1895, the first electric gold dredge in the Western Hemisphere was built here. In fact it was so successful, that four more dredges were constructed along Grasshopper Creek. All ran for about seven years before being dismantled and moved elsewhere. The F.L. Graves dredge was operated by electricity, but the others — the Maggie Gibson, the Cope, the Bon Accord, and the Graves and the Graeter — were powered by wood-fired steam boilers that could burn up to eight cords of wood a day. The dredges were named after their owners or investors.

Hardrock mining also got its start at the same time placer gold was first discovered. As you can



Imagine, following the gold/quartz veins through the solid rock was very difficult and slow using simple hand tools and black powder. The ore then had to be processed by stamp mills that operated in the canyon east of Bannack. The stamp mills crushed the rock and miners washed the gold free with a series of sluice boxes. Although noisy, the stamp mills were also the sound of prosperity. Approximately \$500,000 in gold (selling at \$18 per ounce) was taken out of the area by the end of 1862. That's none too shabby of a return in any day and age!

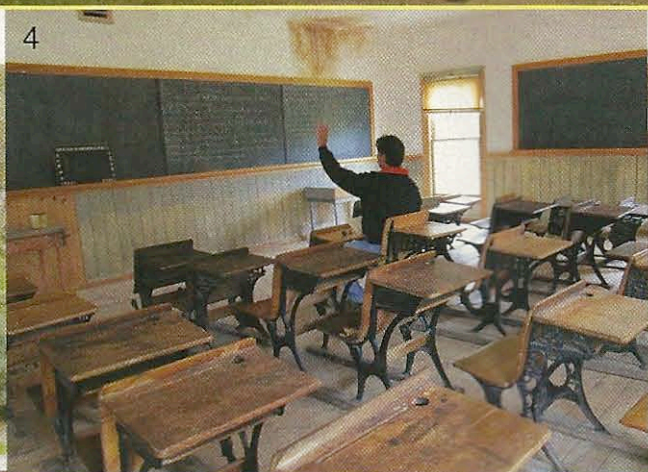
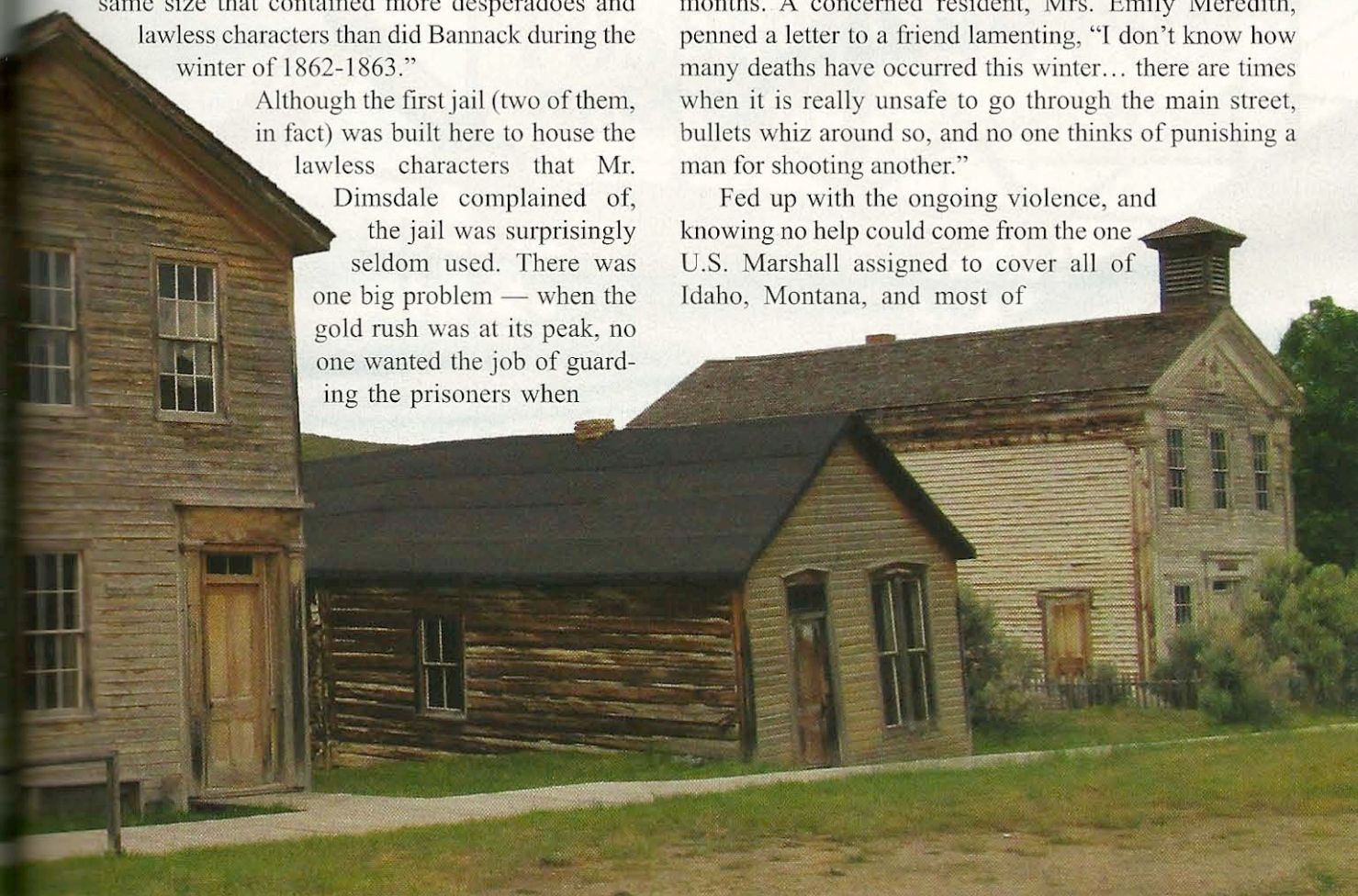
With all the panning, sluicing, and dredging going on, some lucky miners were striking it rich. But the early days of Bannack were not always pleasant for the townspeople. Newspaper writer Thomas Dimsdale reported: "It is probable that there never was a mining town of the same size that contained more desperadoes and lawless characters than did Bannack during the winter of 1862-1863."

Although the first jail (two of them, in fact) was built here to house the lawless characters that Mr. Dimsdale complained of, the jail was surprisingly seldom used. There was one big problem — when the gold rush was at its peak, no one wanted the job of guarding the prisoners when

they could be out working their claim instead. So it was actually easier for the sheriff to warn, banish, or hang offenders instead of imprisoning them. The sheriff had a gallows built just for this purpose on the north side of town — and it still stands today.

Sheriff Henry Plummer turned out to be much worse than all the other murderers and horse thieves he had hanged! Although Plummer had served time in San Quentin in the 1850s for manslaughter, and was tried and acquitted for another murder after that, he still managed to be elected sheriff of Bannack in May 1863. Unbeknownst to the town's law-abiding citizens who had faith in the lawman, Plummer and a gang of about 25 others (they referred to themselves as the "Innocents") committed countless robberies and murders in just eight short months. A concerned resident, Mrs. Emily Meredith, penned a letter to a friend lamenting, "I don't know how many deaths have occurred this winter... there are times when it is really unsafe to go through the main street, bullets whiz around so, and no one thinks of punishing a man for shooting another."

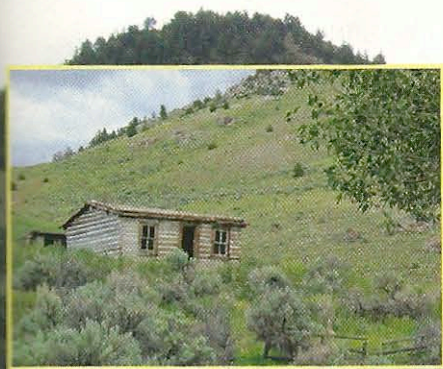
Fed up with the ongoing violence, and knowing no help could come from the one U.S. Marshall assigned to cover all of Idaho, Montana, and most of



Wyoming (before these territories were states), an opposing gang of prominent and daring citizens banded together and called themselves the "Vigilantes." These men tracked down and executed about 20 of the Innocents, finally discovering the identity of their ring leader — Sheriff Plummer — after one of the criminals confessed on his way to be hanged. In January 1864, the Vigilantes rounded up the remaining outlaws, including Plummer, and led them to the gallows. At the very end, Plummer pleaded, "Please give me a good drop."

As is common with the discovery of gold just about anywhere, numerous businesses moved into town to provide services and sell their wares to the miners and their families. At first, the stores were as crudely built as the first bachelor cabins, but within a year or two, sophisticated buildings and nicer homes were erected. Food and supplies remained expensive, though, because they had to be hauled into Bannack from considerable distance and at considerable expense. That meant that even if a miner's pan gleamed with gold much of the time (miners made about \$5 per day compared to the national average of less than a dollar a day pay for unskilled labor), most of it had to be spent on everyday items. Flour sold for \$25 per hundred pound sack, but was known to shoot up to \$100 during winter shortages, nails were a dollar a pound, sending or receiving a letter was a dollar, and butter was a huge luxury. These prices were small fortunes back then.

With all the people moving into



the area, it didn't take long for the streets of Bannack to be lined with saloons, hotels, tailors, carpenters, doctor's and lawyer's offices, and a variety of stores. It took 15 years, however, before the Methodist Church was built in 1877. Although many buildings in Bannack served dual or different purposes over the years, the first and only church was built exclusively for worship. A combination Masonic Lodge and schoolhouse was added in 1874. The upstairs Historic Lodge 3-7-77 is closed to visitors, but you can still peek through the glass and see the original furniture, rugs, and equipment used by the Masons. The downstairs schoolroom is still filled with small desks. Take a seat and see if you can answer the questions written on the chalkboard. An antique merry-go-round sits just outside the front door as a reminder that kids throughout the ages enjoyed recess.

As with most boom and bust gold rush towns, when the shiny stuff ran out, people moved away. Bannack was no exception. With the start of World War II, all non-essential mining, including gold mining, was prohibited and that was the beginning of the end for the town. Even though mining resumed after the war, gold prices were low, and therefore so was a man's interest in staying and making a living as a prospector. By the late 1940s, Bannack had truly become a ghost town. The post office had closed, there was no doctor or grocery store left, so only a few stragglers remained.

Luckily, a group of concerned

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citizens wanted to preserve the town site, and in 1954, after much fund-raising, court orders, and auctions, the property was bought and donated to the state of Montana. Over the next 30 years, the state acquired more property and today works with the non-profit Bannack Association to protect this national treasure. Preservation is the association's philosophy, rather than restoring the buildings to look as if they are new.

Today, treasure hunting is not allowed in the state park, but Montana placer gold may still be found in many areas, including Beaverhead County, where Bannack is located. Keep in mind that gold panning on National Forest lands or BLM does NOT require a permit. Dredging, however, does. Other prospecting activities may require a Notice of Intent, so to be sure and check with a District Ranger for specific regulations and guidelines.

Although the clanging dredge buckets and stamp mills have been silent for years, if you want to see a ghost town come alive, visit during the third weekend in July. The annual "Bannack Days" celebration raises both money and awareness for the state park. Hands-on demonstrations of pioneer crafts, music, food, gold panning for the kids, and many more activities make the town hustle and bustle once

again. If you want to fit in with the festivities, bring your bonnet and cowboy boots, but leave your gold pan and detector in the car.

**If you go:**

Bannack State Park  
4200 Bannack Rd.  
Dillon, MT 59725  
Phone: 406-834-3413  
[www.bannack.org](http://www.bannack.org)

❖ Open every day except December 24 and 25.

❖ Bannack has two primitive campgrounds with picnic tables, fire rings, vault toilets and water, but no hook-ups or dump station.

**Driving Directions:** Take Interstate 15 south from Dillon to exit 59 (Hwy 278 exit). Head west on Hwy 278 for about 20 miles. Turn south onto the paved Bannack road and drive four miles, then turn left onto the gravel park entrance road. Pay \$5 per vehicle admission at the Visitor Center and pick up brochure for self-guided walking tour.

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**Editor's Note:** *If you are not sure about where you can and cannot prospect, be sure to contact the GPAA or Public Lands for The People.*

