New York City has its Empire State Building, Seattle its Space Needle and St. Louis its Gateway Arch. Yes, every American city has its own landmarks, those prominent landscapes, buildings or sites of historic significance. Boise, however, features some that go beyond the typical photo in a Chamber of Commerce brochure. Rather, these landmarks represent the identity of a unique ethnic group: the Basque-Americans. Not necessarily treasured for their architectural grandeur, these landmarks are more importantly honored for their cultural significance. Most are simple, ordinary places that are visible testaments to old-world Basque values and traditions that have been preserved through multiple generations.

In Boise, one can discover Basque boarding houses, recreational spots, cultural centers, eateries and other businesses, public art and a section of the cemetery. These places represent the heart and soul of the Basque story in America and serve as visible reminders of the cultural contributions the Basques make to the city of Boise.

The venerable Tree of Gernika survived the 1937 bombing that leveled the ancient city during the Spanish Civil War. Fifty years later, on his diplomatic visit to Boise, Basque President Jose Antonio Ardanaz planted the oak tree’s seedling on Grove.
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The Star Rooming House and Valencia Hotel

Many boarding houses dotted Boise’s streets from 1891 through 1973, with hundreds of boarders and laborers noted in the City Directory and other historic records. Two buildings on West Idaho Street once served as boarding houses—the Star Rooming House and the Valencia Hotel. Both buildings are near the former Church of the Good Shepherd, which served the Basque community in Boise.

Jose Uberuaga and his wife Felipa (Guarrechena) converted an 1895 building, the Star Rooming House at 512 West Idaho Street, into a boarding house in 1903. They worked hard to make boarders feel as if they were in the Basque homeland. In 1911 he built the Pala Court (fronton) behind the house. Local residents also watched the Basques play games at the Star and Anduiza frontons, a subtle form of respect for this new group of immigrants.

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The Basque Boarding House

Basque values begin in the home (etxea) and continue throughout one’s life. For many Basque immigrants who traveled across an ocean to forge a new life in America, those values extended through the boarding houses because they became a “home away from home.” In the West, many men worked from spring through fall as sheepherders, living a solitary existence in the high deserts and mountains. When they returned to town for the winter, the communal boarding house (ostatua) was a place of shared language, customs and extended “family.” Basque language reverberated around the dining table amidst the clatter of dishes from a hearty evening meal. During celebrations, the lively accordion and flute (txistu) sounds complemented dances such as the jota. Boarding house proprietors served as surrogate parents, helping with language, banking and medical support. Basque
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and his place a nickname—Zapateros (shoemakers). Gabina, like most wives, managed the daily business operation. By 1923, the City Directory listed 54 boarders, including Frank Aguirre as boarding house proprietor and shoemaker. There is no notation, however, of Gabina, who ran the business for more than 50 men. Boarder Eustaquio Garroguerraethevaria, who Americanized his name to Eustaquio Garro and further yet to Ed Garro, does appear in the directory. In later years, Boiseans would know Ed as a town barber and the father of Adelia Garro Sempfe, founder of the Basque Museum & Cultural Center and preservationist of Basque culture in Boise. The renovation of the Star in 1973 ended 57 years of Basque boarders there.

Benito and Asuncion (Comporedondo) Ysursa operated the Modern Hotel at 613½ West Idaho Street; then they built the Valencia Hotel across the street in 1941. Located between Sixth Street and Capitol Boulevard at 612 West Idaho, the Valencia was not only a boarding house, but it also featured a restaurant upstairs. The Ysursas operated the boarding house and raised their family at the Valencia until 1965. Boiseans remember Jesus Alcelay’s Ñañi and later Louie’s Pasta and Pizza restaurants at this same location.

The Cyrus Jacobs-Uberuaga House

In 1864, when Grove Street was called Market Street, the city’s fabric was just beginning to come together. That year, Cyrus Jacobs hauled materials from Walla Walla, Washington Territory, to build a small home for his wife, Mary Ellen, at 607 Market Street. Eventually, the house filled with children, music and friends. Market Street became Grove Street and the Jacobs’ little home grew to be a community gathering spot where Boiseans met for business, politics and friendship. The small brick house is an architectural gem that stands proud as the city’s oldest brick building, one of a few that remain from the mid-1800s. By 1910, Basques were establishing their own identity on Grove Street. That year, a Basque immigrant couple, Simon and Josefa (Alegría) Galdo, began to operate a boarding house in the former Jacobs’ home. In 1913, Ciríaco and María Cruz Bicandi assumed management of the boarding house. Eventually, they passed it along to José and Hermenegilda “Hilda” Uberuaga, who ran it from 1917 through 1969. Jose would wake early to
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start Hilda’s beans and then leave for his job at the railroad. Hilda cleaned, managed daily business needs and cooked almost constantly. She grew a huge garden to support her boarders and bought customary salted cod fish, as most Basques did, from the Fifth Street Market. In an oral interview, the late Luis Arrizabala remembered the days when many Basques gathered at Uberuaga’s: “Well, ‘cause when we came, you automatically stayed for dinner ... you just about sat and ate with everybody else, and ‘til it got, could be anywhere from 5 to 20 people in this room.” After eating they would push the table against the wall to make room for dancing and music. On Sundays and special holidays, Basques gathered in droves at Uberuaga’s.

Boarding houses were integral to the formation of Basque-American communities in America. Without them, it’s doubtful the Basque culture would have remained so strong in Boise. By 1973, most boarders had dispersed and assimilated into the larger community. Many had married and moved into their own houses to establish their families. This cultural shift closed the doors of the Uberuaga and other boarding houses.

The Jacobs-Uberuaga House earned national landmark status as a rare surviving showcase of Basque immigrant life.

Grants from the E.L. Wiegand Foundation transformed the Jacobs-Uberuaga House into a teaching museum. Pictured: Jacobs-Uberuaga’s wood burning stove.
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In 1983, Adelia Garro Simplot purchased the Uberuaga property to preserve it as a Basque cultural landmark. She established the Basque Cultural Center of Idaho, Inc. in November 1985. Later renamed the Basque Museum & Cultural Center, the small nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving Basque culture set up operations in the Uberuaga home at 607 Grove. Eventually, the museum moved next door to the larger 611 Grove Street building. The museum embarked on an extensive historic preservation project at the Cyrus Jacobs-Uberuaga House under the direction of Executive Director Patty Miller and curator Jeff Johns in late 2003. Students, local citizens and educators volunteered their time to help archaeologists stitch together the past by unearthing artifacts at 607 Grove. Grants from the E. L. Wiegand and Laura Moore Cunningham foundations, along with donations from citizens and businesses, funded the restoration. Crews shored up the house’s structure and retrofitted the interior with period reproduction lighting, props, wallpaper and paint to represent both the Jacobs era and the later Basque boarding house era.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of a busy city today, visitors to the Cyrus Jacobs-Uberuaga House can read Jacobs family letters, see family items and view a small suitcase that held an immigrant’s entire belongings for a voyage to a new world. Audio recordings share memories of both the Jacobs’ and Basques’ experiences. One can even see the white match sticks on the house’s old red brick, etched there by boarders as they stepped outside onto the porch years ago to have a smoke after one of Hilda’s meals.

**Basque Museum & Cultural Center**

The Basque Museum & Cultural Center is the first museum in the U.S. dedicated to Basque heritage. The museum’s educational exhibits and displays, special collections, library, kitchen, gift shop and classrooms weave Basque-American identity into Boise and beyond. The museum has become one of Idaho’s primary cultural institutions and has earned an international
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The Basque Block

Intersecting Capitol Boulevard, Grove Street is a pedestrian-friendly marketplace lined with trees and old brick buildings. It’s clear that this street is reminiscent of days gone by, but it’s not a typical historic block. It is Boise’s Basque Block, the only such district in the United States dedicated to Basque culture. The block is steeped in traditional Basque symbolism, including Basque flags, Lauburus, red and green pinwheel symbols of Basque identity, are embedded in the street. Visitors can experience Basque food, dance, music and games as authentic as if they were in the Basque Country. The spirit of the old Basque azoos (neighborhood) is reflected in the Basque Block, which has expanded beyond the Basque-American experience to become a greater Boise gathering place. In many ways, the block has helped shape the identity of Boise itself.

Boise State University Basque historian John Ysursa refers to the values that Basques brought to America as “invisible cargo.” The Basque Block represents a strong work ethic and dedication to community. Pelota games are still played at Anduiza’s fronton, demonstrating the Basque love of recreation. Bar Gerinka, Leku Ona and the Basque Market are reminders that food and drink are important communal experiences in the Basque culture. Visitors can hear Euskara spoken at the Basque Center, and Basque festivals such as Jasaldi, San Inazio and the Sheepherders’ Ball merge old customs of dance and music with new generations. The Basque Museum & Cultural Center’s educational exhibits, language classes, tours and events, such as the annual Basque Museum WineFest, share Basques’ pride of culture with anyone who wishes to learn.

Laiak Sculptures

Two colorful 16-foot-tall metal sculptures welcome visitors to the Basque Block at the Capitol Boulevard and Grove Street entrance. The immense pieces of art represent oversized ancient farm implements called laiak. The interpretive sign text on the pieces is in English and Euskara, translated by Boise State Basque language professor Nere Leite. These signs marked the first time Euskara appeared publicly in Boise. Huge red, white, green and blue ribbons atop each laia symbolize the seven Basque provinces: four in Spain on the south side of Grove and three in France on the north side. The large stone bases that support the sculptures signify the stonework that many Basques carved at the local Table Rock quarry. One large oak leaf
Becoming Basque

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cultural landmarks 111

Patty Miller of the Basque Museum recalled that when the block was being created, then-museum board member Ed Groff introduced the idea of placing “something that would last, made of granite” into the sidewalk. The result: 22 blocks, each weighing 400 pounds, were inset into the concrete sidewalks. Each granite piece is unique. Six feature provincial coats of arms, four include traditional songs and 12 blocks are inscribed with 500 Basque surnames in spiral shapes.

Miller remembers a Humanitarian Bowl pep rally on the Basque Block one December. Five or six band members stood around the Pintto Pintto song inscribed in one of the granite stones. The song about a little dog is one of the first learned by children. She recalled the group of musicians “began slowly, reading the music and playing a trumpet, trombone, bass and other instruments. By the time I made it across the street, they were playing it with pep-band flare!”

The public art on the Basque Block paints a picture of a culture that has been preserved with great respect and pride. Most important, many individuals, Basque and non-Basque, worked to create this unique cultural district in Boise. The collective effort upholds one of the Basque’s central values: community. There is a Basque saying, “Indarrak biltrak obro doke ezik bartrutx,” meaning, “The sum of the strengths is greater than each individually.”

Tree of Gernika

Gernikako Arboia de bedeinkatua,
The Tree of Gernika is blessed,
Euzkaldunen artian guztiz maitatua,
And between all the Basques loved,
Ematan zabal eau munduan frutua,
Give us and spread in the world your fruits,
Adoratzen zaitugu arboia santua.
We adore you holy tree.

J.M. Iparraguirre, 19th century songwriter from the province of Gipuzkoa

Granite blocks set into the sidewalk feature symbols, surnames and songs. Opposite: Gernika commemorative medal in the Basque Museum’s collection.

Sidewalk Features and Interpretive Signs

Boise’s Lasting Legacy Project dedicated funds for public art when the Basque Block was formed in 2000. A series of signs resulted, marking each historic building on the block and providing information about their histories and their Basque connections. A colorful piece of artwork on the Basque Museum facade pays tribute to Basque shepherders in the West, many of whom left a visual record of their culture through carvings on aspen trees (arborglyphs).
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19th century songwriter from the province of Gipuzkoa
Idaho to plant an oak sapling from the Tree of Gernika at 607 West Grove Street. The symbolic planting was a powerful moment for Basque-Americans in Boise. Today, a healthy oak tree spreads wide, marking the center of the Basque Block and serving as a tribute to the ancient gatherings in the Basque Country that marked autonomy and freedom.

**Basque Mural**

A large painted mural hangs adjacent to the Bar Gernika Basque Pub and Eatery on Capitol Boulevard. The art is the creation of Boise artist Noel Weber and an international group of sign painters called the Letterheads. Bill Hueg, the Letterheads’ leader and noted muralist, visited Boise in 2000 to gather interesting subject matter for three murals that would be painted as part of their 25th conference. Hueg accompanied Jose Luis Arrieta, the foreman of the Highland Sheep Company, to witness sheepherding in Idaho and learn about the Basques.

The Letterheads’ public art piece visually celebrates Basque history, drawing the observer into a panoramic mural that traces the Basques’ journey from Euskadi to Boise. The colorful piece highlights the evolution from old-world Basques into new-world Basque-Americans, beginning with Basque explorers, seafarers and merchants and ending with modern-day Boise cultural leaders. A baseri (Basque farmhouse) that is nestled in a Pyrenees landscape is juxtaposed with a western American sheep camp. Picasso’s Gernika painting symbolizes the horrific bombing of the Basque town of Gernika, and the Tree of Gernika is placed strategically near Boise’s Star Boarding House. Juanita Uberuaga Hormaechea, the “mother” of Boise’s Oinkari troupe, and Boise’s Basque musical giant, Jimmy Jausoro, smiles with his accordion. St. John’s Cathedral represents Basque faith, and weightlifter Jose Luis Arrieta signifies the Basque love of sports and recreation. This piece of public art provides the viewer with a full picture of the Basque journey through time and place, and is a tribute to the shaping of Basque-American identity in Nevada and Idaho.

**Morris Hill Cemetery’s Basque Section**

Bicandi. Ubersaga. Garmentia. Those and many more Basque names grace the headstones in Boise’s Morris Hill Cemetery. The Basque section at Morris Hill reveals hundreds of first-generation Basques who were born in...
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At one time a number of Basque cemetery plots were unmarked. Boise Basque Liz Hardesty spearheaded a project to match death records and burial sites so that Basques could be properly honored in their final resting places. Through the hard work of Liz and the volunteers she assembled, they identified more than 60 “lost” names and more than 60 graves. Dorothy Bicandí Aldecoa paid for all of the markers and a monument to honor the Basques. The granite stone, topped with the Basque lauburu symbol, is inscribed: “With respect and pride, we honor the memories of our Basque ancestors in this sacred place. You are not forgotten…”

Conclusion

These places are special because they are visible testaments to the Basque-American experience in the West. The generation that bravely separated from their natal families and homeland laid a foundation of old-world cultural values and traditions for successive generations to build upon in America. As Boise has grown in population, diversity and complexity, the Basques have been assimilated into a larger culture. But a distinct Basque-American identity remains strong. This identity has deeply influenced the history of Boise and will ensure that the Basques’ unique culture is preserved and perpetuated for years to come.

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Meggan Laxalt Mackey, a French-Basque, has worked in federal public service for more than 20 years in Idaho. She holds a bachelor’s degree in history from Boise State, with emphases in public history and publications.
At one time a number of Basque cemetery plots were unmarked. Boise Basque Liz Hardesty spearheaded a project to match death records and burial sites so that Basques could be properly honored in their final resting places. Through the hard work of Liz and the volunteers she assembled, they identified more than 60 “lost” names and more than 60 graves. Dorothy Bicandi Aldecoa paid for all of the markers and a monument to honor the Basques. The granite stone, topped with the Basque lauburu symbol, is inscribed: “With respect and pride, we honor the memories of our Basque ancestors in this sacred place. You are not forgotten…”

Conclusion

These places are special because they are visible testaments to the Basque-American experience in the West. The generation that bravely separated from their natal families and homeland laid a foundation of old-world cultural values and traditions for successive generations to build upon in America. As Boise has grown in population, diversity and complexity, the Basques have been assimilated into a larger culture. But a distinct Basque-American identity remains strong. This identity has deeply influenced the history of Boise and will ensure that the Basques’ unique culture is preserved and perpetuated for years to come.

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