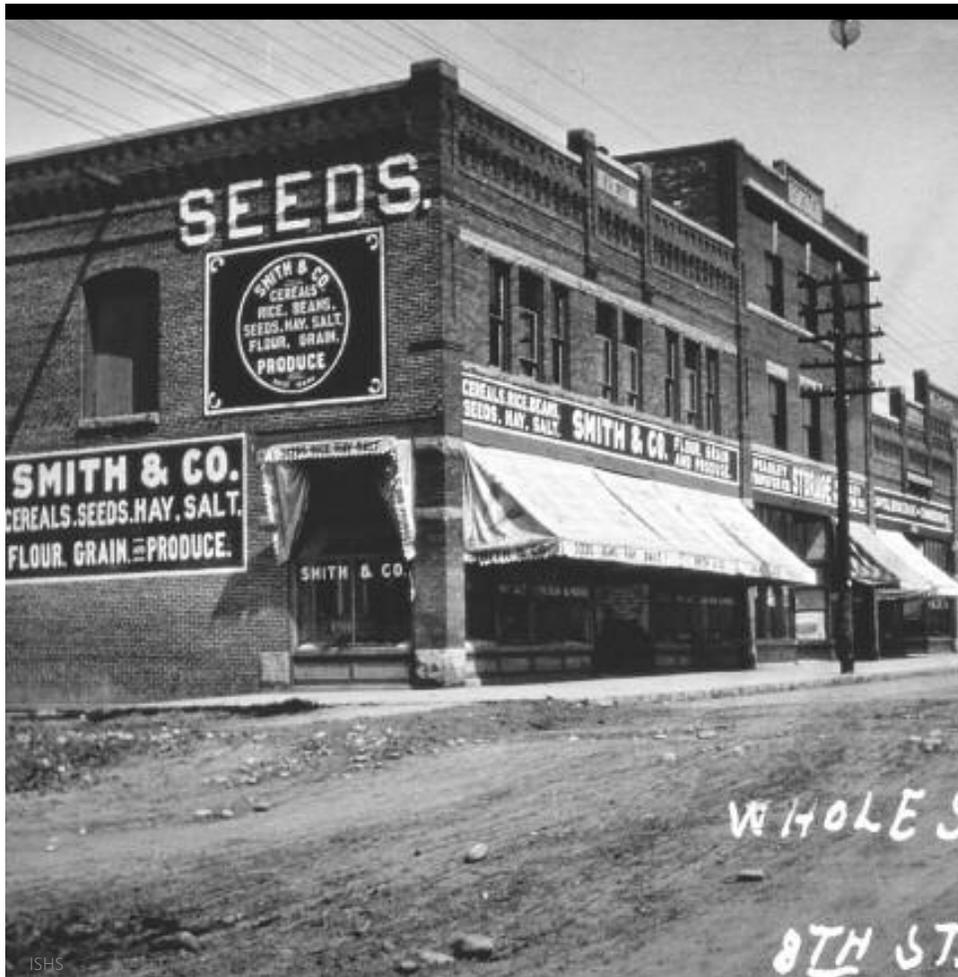


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Otto W. Smith's warehouse at Myrtle and Eighth, completed in 1902. Pulleys and hoists unloaded goods from wagons on the building's south side.

2 Saving the **WAREHOUSE**

by Ann Felton

On Aug. 1, 1864, Boise teemed with activity as 100 immigrant wagons streamed down its crowded Main Street, mixing with those of local farmers bringing hay and produce to market. Adding to the confusion were long lines of ox teams loaded with lumber and other goods from Salt Lake and the Columbia River. Scenes such as these are far removed from today's growing metropolitan area of Boise. The last visual images of that time in history disappeared in 2006-07 with the reconstruction of the O.W. Smith Building, the oldest building in the downtown warehouse district. Its reconstruction took away the bay windows and doors that serviced the freight wagons of pioneer Boise. This destruction of the city's past might not seem so surprising except that it occurred in a designated historic district supposedly designed to protect historically significant buildings. With this development came questions about the city's commitment to preserving a sense of its historic past.

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As with most towns, Boise's battle to preserve its heritage has evolved over the last 60 years. After World War II the city grew as the nation prospered and the GI Bill created new suburbs throughout the surrounding bench areas. Businesses in the core of the city started to suffer as small neighborhood malls appeared in the outlying developments. In 1965, city leaders followed the nationwide trend of renewal and redevelopment in hopes of transforming Idaho's capital city into a modern and viable business center. They created the Boise Redevelopment Agency and a plan evolved calling for the replacement of the "deteriorating downtown core" with a new open-air mall. Soon blocks of older buildings were bought and demolished using federal funds from the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. What the city didn't realize was that many of those old and deteriorating buildings contained a cultural and historic connection to the citizens of the town. As people started to see their heritage piled high in rubble, some started to question the demolition. When the bulldozers started to approach the iconic 1927 Egyptian Theater, people stood up to fight against the eradication of their past. But only after blocks of historic structures had been razed did they stop the destruction that had engulfed many pioneer buildings as well as what was left of a once thriving Chinatown.

Across the nation, communities started to question the practices of those early urban renewal efforts and in the late 1970s President Jimmy Carter authorized a series of tax breaks for those engaged in historic preservation. This change in policy hit Boise at a time when a lack of financial backing had ground the downtown mall project to a halt. Suddenly, enterprising businessmen started to look at those "deteriorating buildings" in a new light and together with innovative architects began to refurbish the historic fabric of the downtown area. The city recognized there was value in promoting the cultural history of Boise. In 1976, the city established the Historic Preservation Commission with a mandate to "promote, preserve and protect historic buildings, structures, sites, monuments, streets, squares and neighborhoods" so they could serve as a visual reminder of the city's past. Through the creation of historic districts, the commission could designate areas that held special historic significance to the city and then exercise an oversight position over reconstruction of visual elements in those areas. All major remodeling or construction projects in those districts had to pass the review of this commission and its decisions could be overturned only by the City Council. During this time, what had once been a struggle between developers and historic preservationists turned into a win-win situation with the refurbishing of old structures into productive commercial spaces. In



Foster's triangular "flat-iron" warehouse was rounded to accommodate the railroad's downtown right-of-way. The curved north face of the 1910 building has since been encapsulated by a parking garage.

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Peasley Transfer Company ran freight from the warehouse district during the heyday of railroad era.

1975, one of the first projects of this type started in the old warehouse district along downtown Boise's 8th Street.

The history of the warehouses reaches back to those far-gone days when the survival of the town depended on the timely arrival of supplies. The city, founded as a trading supply point for miners, needed to expand its ability to store massive amounts of goods awaiting transfer to outlying mining areas. The growth of the city became dependent upon the freighting industry and the warehouses were needed to hold the goods. By the 1870s, the mines in the area started to produce less, but Boise did not follow the fate of many former supply towns by fading away. Instead, it grew as its citizens recognized the potential of the region. The railroads also saw the area's viability and started construction of the Oregon Short Line railway. In 1893, the railroad built a spur line into Boise's downtown area, and soon after came the construction of a fine stone depot and park near 10th and Front

streets. Prior to that time orchards owned by Thomas Davis spread along the northern side of the river. Upon receiving word of the railway's intentions to locate downtown, he platted blocks 1, 2 and 3 of the Davis Addition, transforming a section of orchard into a workable spot for a warehouse district. The railroad company's right of way passed through those blocks and in 1902 the first of many new warehouse buildings graced the area. The original set of warehouses stretched between Broad and Myrtle on the west side of 8th Street, with the right-of-way forming an alley behind the buildings. Soon the district expanded in all directions, including another set of buildings between the alley and 9th Street. In 1905-06, a spur line was laid down the center of the alley, bringing the railway cars to the back doors of the buildings.

Boise's prosperity in the early 1900s led to the development of grand buildings—even the warehouses bore stately arches, detailed cornices and stout posts. The warehouse district's wholesalers prospered as they sent goods to Idaho's mining, lumber, agriculture and irrigation industries. The area housed hardware, fruit, grocery and paint wholesalers and serviced industries such as a milling company, an icehouse, a storage company and a creamery. Pulley systems protruded from the sides and backs of many buildings, allowing for the transfer of large crates of merchandise from the red brick warehouses to waiting wagons. Two of Boise's leading architectural firms of the time, Tourtellotte and Hummel and Wayland and Fennell, designed most of the buildings. The front of the warehouses facing the streets usually housed offices and storefronts. Between 1902-1915, a four-block warehouse area featured an array of substantial and beautiful buildings.

The grand age of the railroad came to a halt in the 1940s as roadways carved a path across the nation. Automobiles not only changed the way goods were transported, but also the way Boise grew. Wholesalers moved to areas with newer buildings and easier access to highways and the downtown warehouse district started to decline. By the late 1960s, the construction of the freeway system south of town caused a final exodus from the area, seemingly sealing the fate of the 8th Street warehouse district. The buildings were obsolete for modern day warehousing and the area struggled to find a new identity. In 1975, a development team bought five of the warehouse buildings and hired historic planner John Bertram as project coordinator. Because the buildings were "no longer usable for modern day warehousing," the developers requested that the city change the zoning to commercial use to accommodate a plan for developing an 8th Street Marketplace in the area. In 1977, developers Winston Moore and Larry Leasure started the first

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phase of the adaptive re-use plan with renovation of the Northrup Hardware and Coffin Building at the corner of Broad and 8th streets. That same year saw the implementation of the North Bank Project, providing a new and historic streetscape on 8th between the bridge and Front Street. In 1978, the South Eighth Street Historic District gained recognition by being placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Then in 1979, renovations came to the buildings on the east side of 8th Street, where shops and office spaces were developed in the Falk, Carlson Lusk Hardware and Boise Elevator buildings. Conversion of the Falk/Davidson garage into a theatre accompanied the 1979 renovations. The only other business on that side of the street, the Idaho Candy Company, had been in existence since 1909, making that Tourtellotte and Hummel building the home of the longest-standing business of the area.

As Boise started to recognize the importance of its historic architecture, preservationists started to recommend areas for local historic districts. In 1982, the city's Historic Preservation Commission made the warehouse district its third official historic district. Ownership of the area changed in 1994 as S-16 Corporation bought the marketplace. The corporation, owned by businessman J.R. Simplot and his grandchildren, expanded the area over the next 10 years, working with the city to develop a cultural district stretching from the 8th Street Bridge to Grove Street. Additional warehouses were renovated in the area to house practice and business space for the ballet, opera, philharmonic and a contemporary theatre. They combined with the area's existing museums and library to create a unique setting in the downtown area. Educators also saw the advantage of being in the district as a private school moved in, again renovating a warehouse building for its use.

In 2003, Brix and Co., a development firm out of Bethesda, MD, bought the 8th Street Marketplace, renaming it Boise Downtown, or BoDo. The new owners released a plan for renovating the market area, calling for new development between Front and Broad streets. One of the structures bought by the BoDo developers was the district's oldest remaining warehouse, the O.W. Smith Building. On the northwest corner of Myrtle and 8th streets, the 1902 two-story structure was built as a warehouse and storefront for Smith and Company, which dealt in essential goods of the day such as seeds, hay, cereals, salt, flour, grain and produce. Otto W. Smith built this store on a site close to the depot's newly developing warehouse district. The fire of 1903 left the Smith Building untouched and it remained the place of business for Smith and Co. until 1908. The front of the building featured a handsome storefront with windows, a canopy and a recessed entryway. The side of the building that faced Myrtle Street housed a series of bays with

windows and doors to facilitate the loading of wagons. A system of pulleys and hoists were used to load bags of seed or other products onto wagons parked on the Myrtle side of the building. Most of these features were torn down and replaced with a new wall when the building was renovated. The



Davis meat truck, 1919. Meat packers had brought cold storage refrigeration to the warehouse district by 1910.

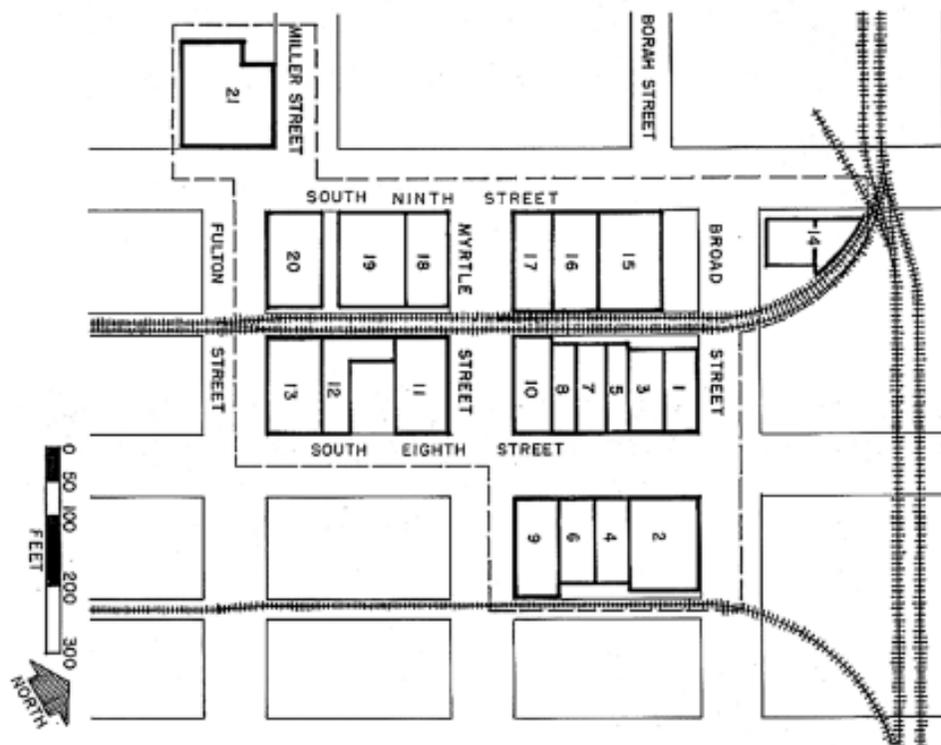
original architectural features provided a visual reminder of Boise's history, illustrating the working history of mule packers and pack trains and the vitally important service they provided to the people of the area as well as the early economy of the city. While the storefront had received structural updates, the previous owners had done little to improve the warehouse portion of the building. It had substandard electrical wiring, no modern heat and many other things that were needed to make the space easily adaptable for modern business use. Over time many of the front and side windows had been altered and the recessed entryway had been filled in and made flush with the front of the building. The brick had been painted and a side rail of cheap concrete had been added to the Myrtle Street side when the Connector was built.

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Instead of renovating the building as their 2003 plan indicated, the BoDo team sold the building in 2005 to local developer Gary Christensen, who submitted a plan that same year to the Planning and Zoning Department to completely demolish the building, citing costly procedures to renovate the structure. Christensen proposed tearing the structure down and reconstructing a commercial and residential building that would “keep the character” of the area. Because of the building’s location in a historic district, the plans needed the approval of the Historic Preservation Commission, which ruled against a complete demolition of the building. In October of 2005, the eight-person commission heard a second proposal by Christensen, which focused on keeping only the front wall of the storefront on 8th Street. The plan called for the demolition of all but 10 percent of the original structure and construction of a new building behind the old façade. Developers would then add a third story to the new building that would be set back from the original storefront. The new design also incorporated the next-door Peasley Building into the plan. Historic planner Bertram and historic architect Dan Everhart both wanted more from the developer. Everhart argued that the real historic value of the building lay in its Myrtle Street wall, whose architecture displayed one of the last visual images of the days the freight wagons. He also reminded the group that demolishing 90 percent of a building is not now, nor ever will be, considered a historic preservation technique. The developers objected to keeping the Myrtle Street wall because of a masonry shear test showing deterioration of the brick on that side of the building. They argued that the cost of renovating the wall would be prohibitive.

The Historic Commission focused on two criteria in determining the fate of the building: whether the changes adversely affected the nature of the Historic District and whether historic renovation proved economically feasible for the owner. In the commission’s opinion, the commercial storefront of the building represented the primary façade of historic significance and by keeping that, the plan did not adversely affect the nature of the district. They noted the preservation of many architectural features on the front façade as essential to keeping the historical accuracy of the building. In Everhart’s opinion, the Myrtle Street façade represented the only readable face defining the building as a warehouse and that losing it did indeed subtract from the “historic fabric” of the district. The commission’s second issue of interest centered on the economic feasibility of renovating the original structure. They concluded that the cost to bring the building up to the seismic standards required by building codes created a financial hardship for the owner and that in the opinion of the staff it would be impossible to restore

the deteriorating brick in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Thus, renovation would not be economically feasible for the owner. One commissioner, while supporting the project, also brought up the concern that “peeling away” so much of the building may not only be stripping away at the warehouse’s his-



The success of San Francisco’s Ghiradelli Square inspired warehouse renovation on Boise’s South Eighth Street. Pictured: map of the proposed Eighth Street warehouse district, 1979.

tory but may jeopardize the structure’s National Registry status. Bertram later voiced this same concern about the district as a whole. He noted that many small changes had been made to the buildings since their placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Those changes, added to the loss of the oldest building in the district, could place the designation at risk, he suggested.

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National landmark status was not enough to save the O.W. Smith warehouse. Only the facade (center of photo) remains from the original building, which was torn down in 2006.

At the October 2005 meeting it became apparent that Historic Register status was not driving the decision. It was, as one member commented, economics. The usability of the building became the bottom line, and the

adverse affect of possibly having the building remain empty seemed of more importance than keeping the historic fabric in place. In the end the commission ruled in favor of the developer's second plan, with the condition that the original storefront be retained as presented by Bertram in three historic photos of the building. The 2005 decision on the O.W. Smith Building marked a change in focus on the part of the Historic Preservation Commission. In this case, promoting the city's economic welfare became more central to the discussion than promoting its cultural and educational welfare. While commissioners talked about architectural aspects of the building and "retaining the character" of the area, little was voiced about preserving the actual history of the district. Historic fabric goes beyond design elements such as beams, cornices and pilasters. It includes a discussion of the working history of the area and the contributions the people who worked in the warehouses made to the city. That history speaks, maybe ironically, about the city's economic past and its earliest means of economic stability. Rather than consider the warehouse's role in Boise's working history, the commission focused on how to reoccupy the building.

While the city should be concerned with preserving only historically appropriate buildings, it seems an unnecessary battle in historic districts where their significance has already been established. It is also undisputable that the economic viability of Boise's downtown core is of vital importance, but one has to question any precedent set by the Historic Preservation Commission to trade that for historical integrity when working within historic districts. While much of the O.W. Smith Building may have met the criteria for demolition due to the high cost of renovation and saving the façade at least brings coherency to the streetscape, the designation of the front as the primary façade of historical significance was simply not justified by the history of the district. A project that focuses on preserving only the front 10 percent of the building, while destroying the wall that truly speaks to the historic nature of the district, cannot truly be called historic preservation of the building. After all what is historic preservation without the history?

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