

Pioneer Cabin, Caretaker's House & Yee Wau Cabin

The Pioneer Cabin is the oldest documented dwelling in Helena and the only documented miner's cabin built during the first months after the Last Chance/Helena discovery. The back section is the original section as was built by veteran gold miner and Indiana native, Wilson Butts. Wilson Butts arrived at Last Chance with the first wave of miners in the summer of 1864. He was in nearby Bannack when gold was discovered in Helena so he was in the perfect position to come try his luck in "Last Chance."

The cabin that Butts built is the back room of the present Pioneer Cabin

In the spring of 1865, Wilson's brother Jonas joined him and brought along his wife Louanna and their three young daughters. The family lived in their covered wagon until the second room of hand-hewn logs, square-notched at the corners, had been built in front of Wilson's bachelor cabin. The new room with its large front window, the first glass on the gulch, served as a parlor and bedroom for the family of five. The cabins were only later connected with the "breezeway" addition.

WHEN HELENA WAS FIRST FOUNDED, THE ORIGINAL CAMP WAS CALLED LAST CHANCE. ON OCTOBER 30, 1864 A GROUP OF SELF-APPOINTED MEN VOTED ON THE NAME OF LAST CHANCE. TOWN NAMES UP FOR NOMINATION WERE TOMAH, PUMPKINVILLE AND SQUASHTOWN. WE ARE THANKFUL THAT HELENA WON THE VOTE.

The Gilpatrick Family settled into the Butts' former cabin around 1867. Stephen and Luella Gilpatrick planted two small locust seedlings carefully brought to Montana in coffee cans. These were the first non-native trees planted in Helena and they long provided the only shade in the neighborhood.



*Pictured here is the **Pioneer Cabin**. The back section was the original one-room cabin, with the front being added a year later. This cabin was home to Wilson Butts and his brother Jonas. Jonas and his wife Lonna had three young girls who all lived in the front section of the cabin. They did their cooking in the back section.*

This home was later occupied by the Gilpatrick family in around 1867. The Gilpatricks brought two locust seedlings and planted the first non-native trees in Helena.

The Butts' neighbors in the Caretaker's Cabin were William and Rachel Davenport. Sallie Davenport, their daughter, kept a journal during the family's trip west aboard the stern-wheeler *St. John* en route to Fort Benton. Several days into the voyage, measles broke out onboard. All three Davenport children were very ill. Only Sallie, oddly the more delicate of the three children, recovered. Willie (the young boy in the family) died as the boat docked at Fort Benton and Anna lingered until she died on September 6, 1865.

At the same time that Jonas and Wilson Butts built the front room onto their cabin, William Davenport built his log cabin next door. Sallie, the surviving Davenport child wrote: "It had a board partition, so that it made two rooms. Two fair size windows and a roof made of slabs on top of the dirt. But, at the first heavy rain, there was not a dry spot in the house, and when that dirt was thoroughly soaked, it would drip for days..."



*Pictured here is the **Caretaker's Cabin** that was built by the Davenports. The Davenports moved west with their family of three children, but only Sallie survived. Sallie writes in her journal about the sod roof of the cabin and how the cabin would be soaked and would drip for days after a rain. By the 1890s, both the Caretaker's Cabin at Pioneer Cabin became part of Helena's Red Light district.*

Next door to the Caretakers Cabin is the Yee Wau cabin is the only remaining Chinese-associated dwelling in Helena. Typical of the tiny dwellings that once lined Last Chance Gulch, the Yee Wau cabin was one of the last built on the heels of the gold rush circa 1870. From 1876 to 1886 the Yee Wau brothers, longtime local dealers in Chinese merchandise and groceries, owned the property. Chinese immigrants comprised ten percent of Montana's territorial population. These important pioneers made significant contributions especially in laying the tracks of the Northern Pacific across Montana in the 1880s. In Helena, Chinese citizens proved services, owned property and paid taxes. Chinese dwellings, businesses and expansive gardens spread for five blocks below Reeder's Alley as the male-dominated Chinese population dwindled by the late 1890s, others continued to occupy the tiny cabin. Clairvoyant Daniel J. Schraier hung his shingle here in 1899.

The Montana Historical Society located at 225 North Roberts, across the street from the Capitol Building currently features the exhibit titled "Our Forgotten Pioneers: The Chinese in Montana." www.mhs.mt.gov.



Yee Wau Cabin today. (privately owned)



Yee Wau brothers pose outside their cabin at the base of Reeder's Alley.

By the 1890s, historic maps indicate that both the Pioneer Cabin and Caretakers Cabin became part of Helena's red light district. The Caretaker's house and the Pioneer Cabin are Helena's only surviving remnants of what was once a thriving red light district along today's South Park Street. In fact, the small extensions at the back of the Caretaker's House were used as cribs – one-room offices where women conducted business. Interestingly, the wall that runs along the East side of Reeder's Alley was installed over the cribs' windows as an attempt to confine the women and prevent their solicitation into Reeder's Alley. The Alley itself was never part of the red light district.

Source: Real Property Acquisition Feasibility Study, Montana Heritage Preservation and Development Commission, December 2005.

Today, the Caretaker's Cabin and the Pioneer Cabin are owned and managed by Montana Heritage Commission, State of Montana. It is through the Commission's dedication and the work of the Montana Preservation Alliance that we are able to showcase the Pioneer Cabin. We are truly fortunate that our beautiful State continues to invest in preserving the past.

www.HelenaMT.com

Be sure to visit the Reeder's Alley Visitor Information Center at 105 Reeder's Alley. Open Monday-Friday 8 am to 5 pm with information always available in our outdoor kiosk.