

Where the gold went

CAÑON'S HISTORIC HOMES

More on Cañon's historic homes, Royal Gorge Regional Museum & History Center, 612 Royal Gorge Boulevard.

STORY BY
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PHOTOGRAPHY
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Their history reads like the script of a Hollywood epic—romance and intrigue, opulence and decay, lost opportunity, and more than one close call. The old Robison mansion, perhaps Cañon City's most impressive home, "had its neck on the chopping block a lot of times," according to local historian Sue Cochran. So far, it has been spared the axe.



Above: 824 Rudd. Built by an early Cañon City real estate developer and mine owner. The seven-room cottage was subsequently owned by the Johnson family for thirty years.

Below: The Robison Mansion. 12 Riverside Drive. House and contents have been repeatedly sold and/or auctioned off over the course of seven owners, yet the mansion is still intact. And again, for sale.



ROBISON MANSION, 12 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, 1884, BRICK. (BELOW LEFT)

On February 10, 1963, the *Chieftain Star Journal* (Pueblo newspaper) headlined its impending demise: "Cañon City Landmark to be Destroyed." The accompanying article announced the Robison home would be razed to make way for a rest home. The (native) brick mansion and carriage house had been built in 1884 by Lyman Robison, who, like many of Cañon's early leading citizens, had profited handsomely from mining interests in Leadville, and later, Cripple Creek. Lyman also built two of the town's biggest business blocks, the Apex and Annex, named after his mines. His son, David L., who was born in the house and later expanded into furniture and insurance after his father's death in 1912, raised his own family there. By the 1930s, the home (on four acres) had become a real estate albatross. As an aging widower, David lived alone in the house, unable to maintain or to sell it and unwilling to leave it.

The next owner, *Daily Record* publisher Don Hardy, hoped to turn it into a museum or community center, but was unable to drum up sufficient funding. He sold to Roy and Edith Wilson (in 1961 and for a mere \$21,000) who intended to tear it down—hence the *Chieftain* headline. But they just couldn't do it, and instead turned it into a lived-in museum open to public tours. In 1976 Edith, then a widow and tired of the enormous upkeep, put it all up for auction. Once again the mansion, gutted, fell into disrepair. And once again, it was rescued. Kenneth and Naomi Ireland moved in with their family in 1979, and began yet another restoration. In 1984 they had the property placed on the National Register of Historic Places. After Naomi's death, Kenneth hung on briefly, before he, too, put the house up for sale, listing it at \$300,000. There it languished until 1989 when Ed Tezak bought it for a discounted \$200,000. Tezak dumped another million-three into restoration, much of it in exterior work. His background lay in road and bridge building, so the home soon sported spiffy new ironwork, a fountain, and brick-paved drives. Ed also bought the carriage house, intending to turn the whole property into a private club. But, by 1990, following a prolonged squabble with the city fathers over zoning and licensing, Ed gave up. He sold to Rocky Joe and Kathleen Wells in 1995 for \$650,000. The Wells obtained a historic grant for roof repairs, but soon found themselves repeating the oft familiar refrain: just too much upkeep. Once again the house went up for auction. And once again, it was saved. It is now for sale again.



GIBSON/COLE/BENZMILLER RESIDENCE, 907 GREENWOOD, 1898, STONE. (BELOW)

D.E. Gibson owed his fortune and the origin of his lovely stone house to catastrophe: fire—which nearly destroyed Cripple Creek in 1896. Gibson supplied much of the lumber to rebuild the town. At one time, he owned sixteen lumberyards in California and Colorado (including Salida, Florence, Grand Junction, and Montrose). Later, the family expanded into auto agencies as far away as La Jolla, Calif. and Panhandle, Texas. In 1898 Gibson built his home (using prison labor for the then-princely sum of \$30,000) of stone from local quarries. The mansion featured leaded glass windows and French tile throughout, a billiard room, wine cellar, ballroom, and four bedrooms with private baths. Tragedy stalked the family—Gibson passed away on his sixty-fifth birthday; his son David (D.E. Jr.) died in a car wreck near Gunnison; his youngest son Holman expired while napping after a golf game; and his grandson died in a shooting accident. The home remained in the family until it was sold by the widow of



D.E. Gibson, Jr. to the Cole family—Cole was mayor of Cañon City from 1930-1941. The Coles lived in the house for twenty years, then sold it in 1973 to Dr. Benzmiller, a local pathologist, and his family, which added an indoor swimming pool. The family still lives in the house.

DEPUTY WARDEN'S HOUSE, 105 MAIN, 1901, BRICK & STONE. (LEFT)

The 1860 Fremont House, which served as hotel, post office, school, and general store and was the leading hotel in the community by 1870, was torn down in the early 1890s to make room for the Deputy Warden's house when the prison system expanded. The Colorado State Penitentiary was constructed here in 1877. The deputy warden's home was constructed in 1901.

Using prison labor and local materials, the house cost only \$7,500 to build and was heated by steam from the prison boilers. It boasted electricity and hot and cold water—earlier-built homes had to have these amenities added. The first deputy warden to occupy the house was J.C. Burghart. Prison officials occupied the house for seventy years before it was turned into offices.

ATWATER/BABBERGER HOUSE, 821 MACON, 1891, BRICK. (BELOW)

S.H. Atwater was a civic and religious leader and early real estate developer dedicated to planned development of Cañon City. The home was completed in 1891. Constructed of brick and red sandstone, it had its own private independent water and sewer systems and a private gas works. Atwater sold the house in 1910 to W. H. Dozier, president of the First National Bank, a bank built on the riches of Cripple Creek. Following Dozier's death in 1933, the home was purchased by Guy Hardy, publisher of the Cañon City *Daily Record*. Hardy never lived in it, but rented it out as a rooming house.



In 1956 Carl Babberger, born and raised in Cañon City, and his wife, Enid, purchased the property. Carl had spent some time as an engineer in California, working with Howard Hughes, and was the designer of the "Spruce Goose." When he returned to Cañon City, he served as Land Surveyor and Engineer until his retirement.

The present owners, James and Donna McLearn bought the house in 2004 and still live there.

DAWSON/JOHNSON HOUSE. 824 RUDD, WOOD. (PREVIOUS PAGE)

I.F. (Irving Fred) Dawson built this seven-room "cottage" in 1900. An early Cañon City real estate developer, defined as "a good hustler... honorable in all his transactions," Dawson was also part owner with his father, uncles, and brothers—all went by their initials only—of the Copper King Mine in nearby Dawson City.

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DAWSON/JOHNSON HOUSE, 824 RUDD.

The mine and the town were barely a flash in the pan as local history goes. Would-be miners flocked to Dawson City, hoping to get rich quick, but the gold vein was disappointing and the company the family had hoped to sell the mine to declined when the gold didn't appear to be sufficient to warrant the asking price of \$100,000.

Meanwhile, the Dawsons sold lots for \$50 to the prospectors with visions of grandeur and gold. The town faded away within a few months and I.F., originally from Dodge City where he had also been in real estate, returned to Cañon City. There, prime lots were going for a whopping \$250 to \$1000! Within two years, I.F. moved on to Denver, presumably to continue hustling property.

The Johnson family bought the house at 824 Rudd, somewhere around 1910. Three generations of Johnsons lived there, the men in contracting, cement and plaster, the daughter Jessie a fixture of the local dry goods store until her death in 1961. Subsequent owners included the Dices (eight years), Annas (twenty years) and the Loves (thirty-five years).



For more information and “before and after” photographs of these and many other historic homes in Cañon City, stop by the Royal Gorge Regional Museum & History Center, 612 Royal Gorge Blvd., Cañon City. The Museum, which is open Monday-Friday, from 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m., can also provide you with a map for a self-guided tour. 719-269-9036.

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