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Bureau of Land Management
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U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

The Historic Mill Site at American Flat

Former Home of the United
Comstock Merger Mill



Historical photos courtesy of the Joe Curtis Collection, the Nevada Historical Society,
and the Special Collections Department, University of Nevada, Reno, Libraries.



1922 Opening Day Celebration for the American Flat Mill. Nevada Historical Society.

Nevada's Rich Mining History

In 1859 miners discovered the Comstock Lode—a massive silver ore body beneath Virginia City, Nevada. Word spread, and people traveled here from California and the eastern United States in search of riches. Virginia City prospered, and the Comstock Lode rose to national significance. The largest boom, the Big Bonanza, occurred in 1873–1880. Soon after, mining operations exhausted the highest-grade ores and the region's economy declined.

In the 1910s and 1920s mining engineers Roy Hardy and Alex Wise sought to take advantage of a new technology that used cyanide to extract gold and silver from ore. They believed that this Merrill-Crowe process would allow them to mine and mill low-grade ores and tailings at a profit. With the financial backing of local



An ore train, with its electric battery locomotive, brought ore from the workings in Gold Hill and Virginia City to Building 1, the Ore Bin. Joe Curtis Collection.



V & T locomotive #25 delivering building materials to the mill during construction. Joe Curtis Collection.



The mill office on opening day, September 23, 1922. Nevada Historical Society.



Workers installing equipment at the fine-grinding building, 1922. Nevada Historical Society.

rancher Herbert Humphrey and wealthy investors in the Northeast, the United Comstock Merger Mill was constructed in 1922.

The mill, now commonly known as the American Flat Mill, spread out over 29 acres. It boasted eight buildings, a 10,000-foot-long tunnel for electric trains transporting ore and water to the mill, and connections to two spurs of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad (V & T). Two trains with as many as twelve cars ran at any time through the haulage tunnel, delivering up to 6,500 tons of ore per train per day. The V & T transported houses for workers, building materials, mining equipment, and other supplies to the mill.

Locals celebrated the completion of the mill, believing it would usher in a new era of prosperity. At the time, the mill was the largest of its kind in the world. The buildings and infrastructure, along with a town of prefabricated houses for the workers, cost \$5 million. Historians would later describe the American Flat Mill as the “last gasp of the Comstock.”

Fall of a Giant

The American Flat Mill was short-lived, closing in 1926. The costs of mining and milling had been underestimated, partly because the ore proved sticky and difficult to process. To make matters worse, the ore's value had been overestimated, and silver continued to fall in value from a dollar an ounce in 1920, to about 67 cents an ounce in 1924. Ultimately, the Morse Brothers of Denver, Colorado, stripped and sold all of the machinery and items of value from the site, leaving only concrete ruins behind. Even workers' houses were moved to other locations, such as Virginia City.

By the 1960s the immense ruins, with their elaborate architecture, became a major attraction for locals and youthful partiers. The intriguing backdrop drew artists, filmmakers, and photographers as well. Graffiti, ranging from crude to intricate, would cover almost every inch of the ruins. For safety reasons, the mill was demolished in 2014.

Today, nothing remains of the American Flat Mill, but visitors can visit the historic site. It is located 1.5 miles south of Gold Hill, Nevada (part of the Virginia City National Historic Landmark). See inside of the brochure for an aerial photo and a description of building uses. Additional information and a virtual tour of the American Flat Mill before its demolition may be available from other sources on the Internet.



Hazards to the Public

Abandoned mining and milling sites are dangerous and can be deadly. The American Flat Mill was no different. The ruins became a serious public safety hazard. Unfortunately, fencing and warning signs posted by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) did not deter visitors. Serious injuries occurred every year, and one fatality was reported. A 2008 audit by the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of the Interior directed the BLM to mitigate the hazards. Six years later, all the buildings were demolished.



Graffiti photos courtesy of Howard Goldbaum.

Good advice if you encounter
an abandoned mine:
STAY OUT & STAY ALIVE

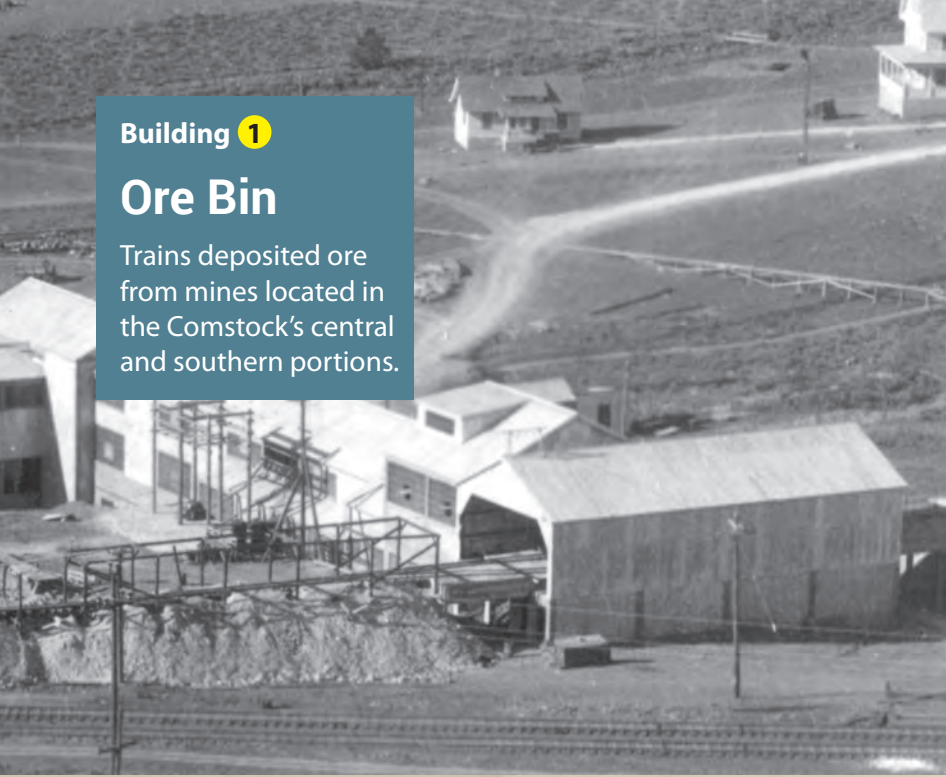


To be good stewards of our public lands,
enjoy but do not deface or otherwise
harm American heritage sites.

Building 1

Ore Bin

Trains deposited ore from mines located in the Comstock's central and southern portions.



Building 8

Substation

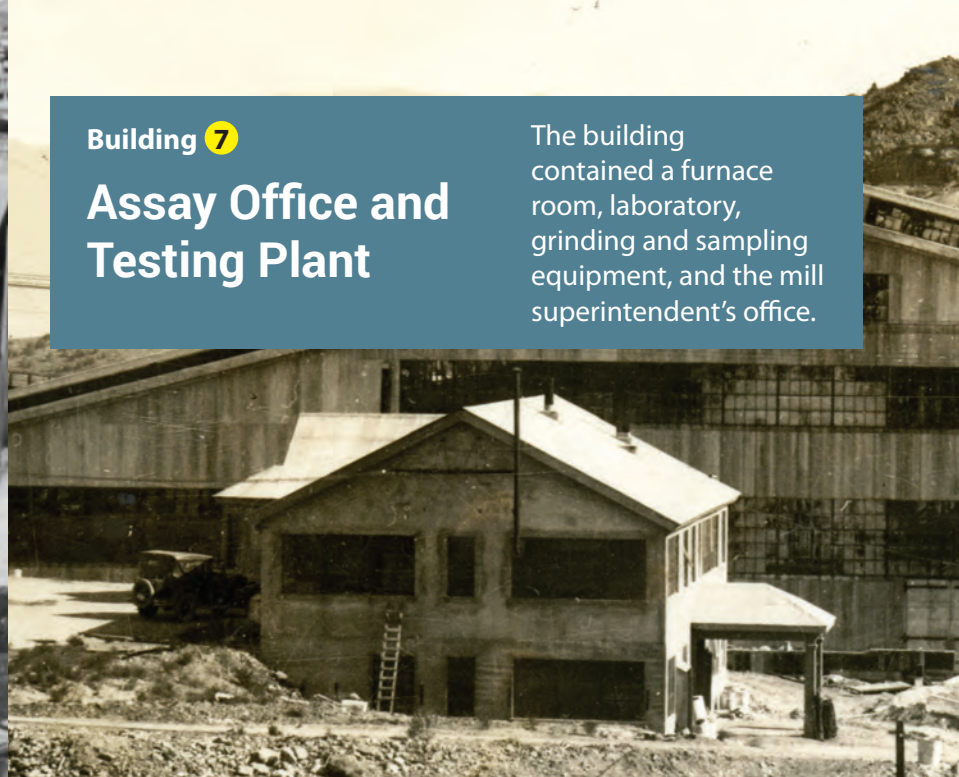
Three oil-cooled transformers located in the substation transferred power for use at the mill.



Building 7

Assay Office and Testing Plant

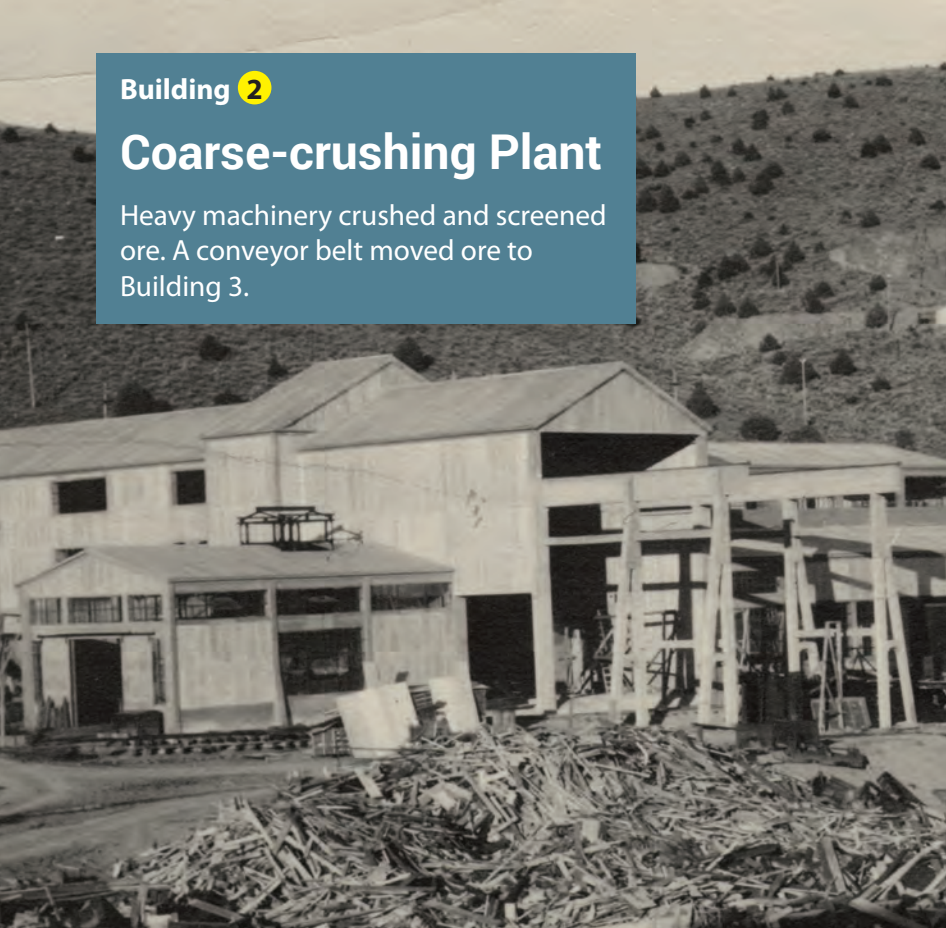
The building contained a furnace room, laboratory, grinding and sampling equipment, and the mill superintendent's office.



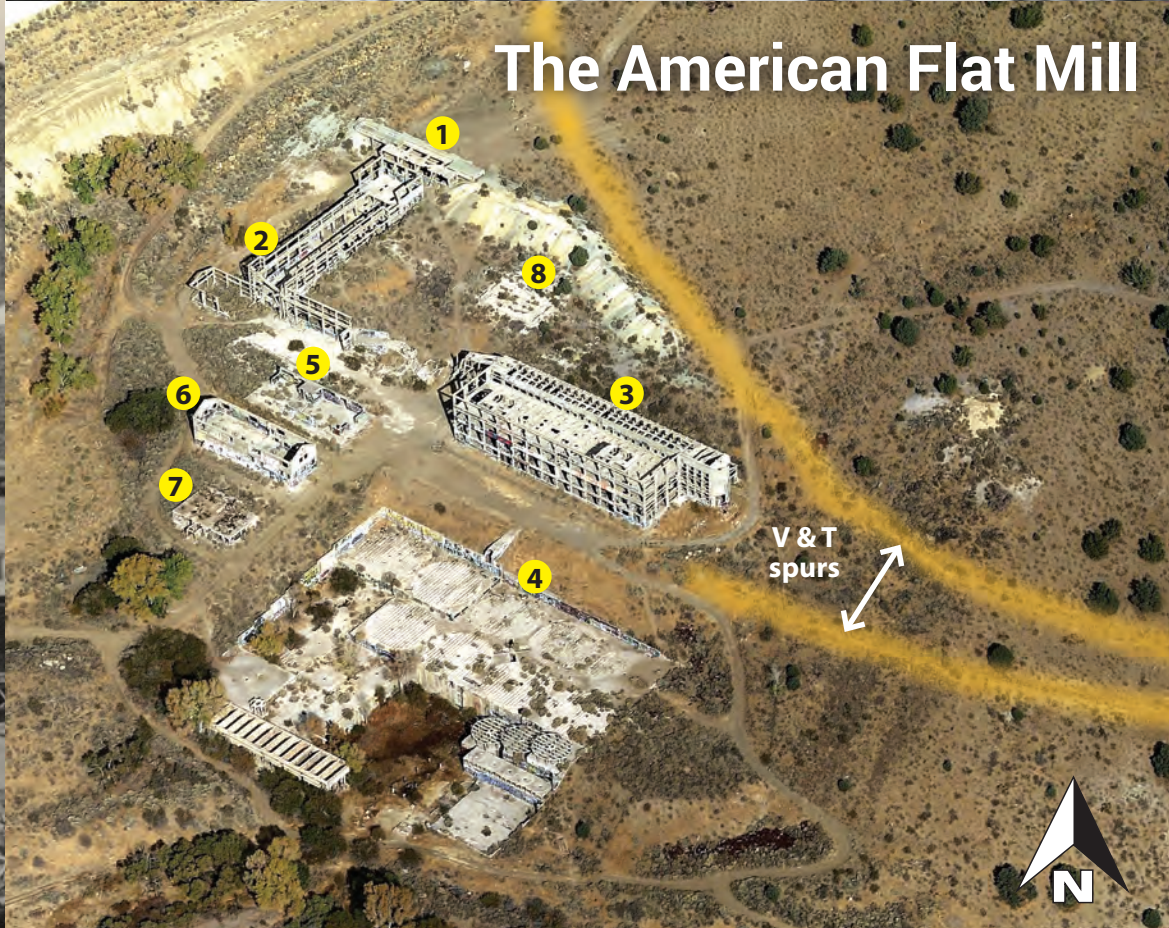
Building 2

Coarse-crushing Plant

Heavy machinery crushed and screened ore. A conveyor belt moved ore to Building 3.



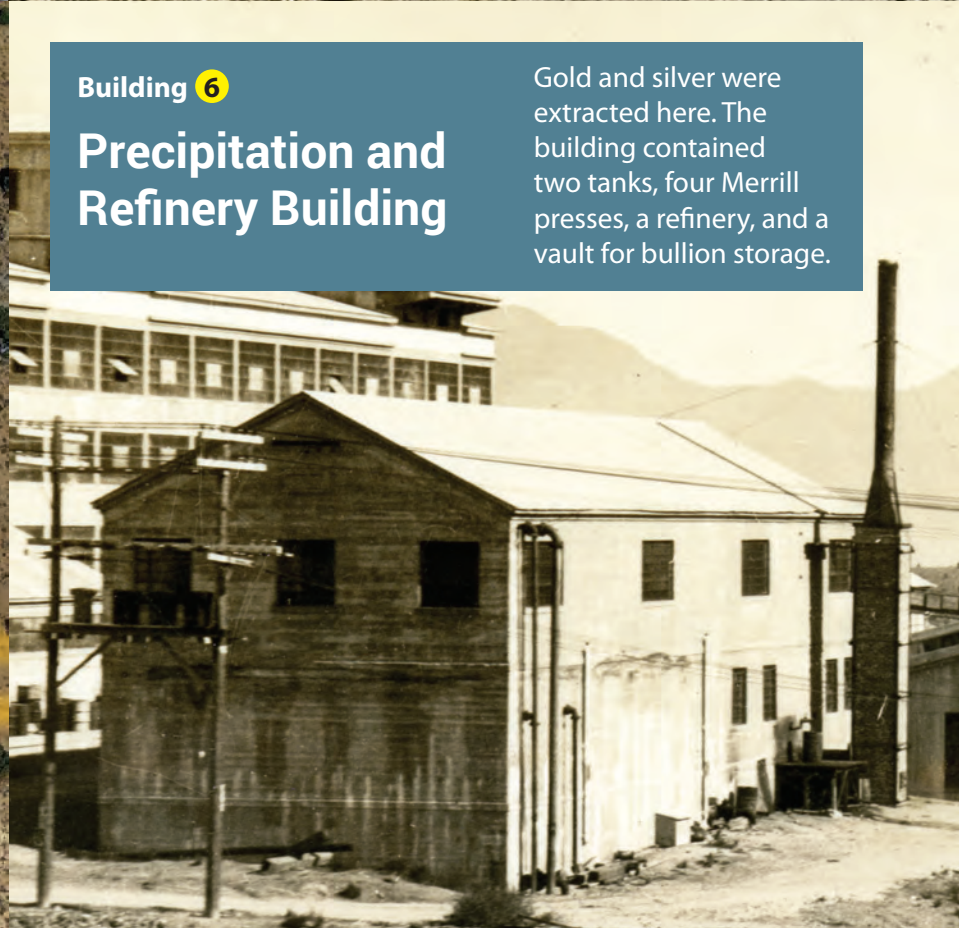
The American Flat Mill



Building 6

Precipitation and Refinery Building

Gold and silver were extracted here. The building contained two tanks, four Merrill presses, a refinery, and a vault for bullion storage.



Building 3

Fine-grinding and Concentration Plant

Ore was finely crushed by five ball mills and washed by 10 classifiers.



Building 4

Cyanide Plant

Ore was moved and processed into thickening, leaching, agitating, and storage tanks.



Building 5

Warehouse

The building housed a storekeeper's office, 3,000 bins for small items, and 1,000 square feet of storage for large items.



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The American Flat Mill site today. Bureau of Land Management, Carson City District.