

Wells, Fargo and Company Express Building  
On the remains of Main Street in the ghost town  
of Silver Reef, Washington County, Utah.

HABS No. U-58

HABS

UTAH

27. SILV

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## WELLS, FARGO AND COMPANY EXPRESS BUILDING

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Location: On the remains of Main Street in the ghost town of Silver Reef, Washington County, Utah.  
Geographic Location Code: 43-Rural-053  
Latitude: 37° 15' 12" N Longitude: 113° 22' 2" W

Present Owner: Washington County

Present Occupant: Vacant

Statement of Significance: This is one of two original buildings still standing in an old mining town which reached a population of 1500 in the late 1870's.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

## 1. Original and subsequent owners:

Wells, Fargo and Company  
Wooley, Lund and Judd  
Alec Colbath (used as a home)  
Western Gold and Uranium Company

## 2. Date of erection: c. 1877

## 3. Builder suppliers, etc.: George Brooks cut stone; Ira McMullin laid stonework.

## 4. Alterations and additions: Most alterations on interior were covered by final partitioning for mining offices. Loading docks and sheds have been added to the rear of the building by Western Gold and Uranium Company although the high position of the rear doors undoubtedly required some sort of a platform.

## B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

The unlikely discovery of silver in sandstone in the neighborhood of Silver Reef is usually credited to a prospector named John Kemple. According to The Silver Reef Miner of October 29, 1878, Kemple gave this version in an interview: "In 1868 I found float near Harrisburg that assayed over \$17,000 to the ton, and in 1870 I discovered the mineral on the White Reef." He never hit pay dirt, however, although he organized the Union Mining District in 1871 and the Harris Mining District in 1874. The first real strike occurred in 1875 when Elijah Thomas and John Ferris found

silver in a ledge on the Northwest side of White Reef. Another strike was made in 1875 by Judge William Tecumseh Barbee, and the silver rush started in November 1876 from Pioche, Nevada and surrounding areas.

The first town was located at the east end of the hill by Barbee, and named quite unimaginatively "Bonanza Flat". He hoped to sell land at somewhat inflated prices, but a merchant from Pioche who refused to pay the price, Hyrum Jacobs, went up to the higher rocky ground to set up his store and called the town Silver Reef. It flourished, and by 1877 had "a post office, newspaper (The Silver Reef Echo), the Rice Bank, and soon Wells, Fargo and Company opened their Express Office and Bank."

The boom was on, and almost overnight a town of 1500 sprang up. Five mills were running and 33 claims were being worked. To support them were nine groceries, two drugstores, five restaurants; the Harris House which provided board and room for 50 men; six saloons, one billiard hall, two dance halls; a Citizen's Hall, and a Catholic Church with a hospital in the basement. The weekly paper, The Silver Reef Miner, carried ads for 40 businesses, including a blacksmith, shoemaker, undertaker, lawyers and a doctor.

The U.S. Census of 1880 gave Silver Reef a population of 1,046, which was probably less than at the peak of the boom in 1878-79. A citizen of the town at the time later said it was unlikely there were ever more than 1500 people in Silver Reef at any one time. The census of 1890 only counted 177 people. An account by Marietta M. Mariger, who visited Silver Reef in the late 1880's as a child, described the town as she remembered it: "As one looks over Silver Reef he is struck almost with awe, or, if you have known the old town a great big lump comes in your throat. Sitting high up on those granite boulders that furnish a substantial foundation for the people who extracted silver from the town's encircling reefs, we see two buildings silhouetted against the sky. One, the larger, with the huge iron doors and the beautiful arched mason work doorways, four of them, is the Wells, Fargo and Company Express Office. Later, the Wooley, Lund and Judd Store. It fronts Main Street. A mulberry tree is at your left as you approach the most southerly of those four front doors, and under it is a tap that constantly discharges a flow of Quail Creek's clear, sparkling water into one of the old mercury tubs from a defunct mill. You see, about midway of the building's front, the bottom part of one of the stamps used to pulverize the ores. As you turn to the left, and walk along what might have been an old side walk, you pass an empty

space of probably 150 feet, and arrive to a white adobe building that has also withstood the ravages of time. This is the old Rice Bank. Had you walked northward, rather than southward, you would have walked about the same distance to the empty site of "The Harrison House," Silver Reef's Waldorf Astoria, which in those glorious days was a two story frame building, the upper story contained the guest rooms. The ground floor had kitchen and dining room and amusement rooms, which contained at least three billiard tables, and an immense grand piano which you may now see in the D.U.P. Museum in St George. An old Orchestrone (an organ operated by turning a crank, and playing perforated paper rolls, like a player piano uses), also from Silver Reef, sits near it. The fine old billiard tables, I am told, were made into furniture for the Court House in St. George. The building fronted on the sidewalk, but a high lattice fence surrounded a yard at the rear. When this old building ceased to be used, its bedroom furniture was sold all over the county, I suppose. I still have one of its marble-topped walnut dressers.

"Across the street from Wells Fargo was the Louder store, and the Miller Saloon, with a dance hall adjoining, was just north of the Louder store. Stores and saloons lined the street. Down the street a distance, on the east, was an office, the assaying office for the Christy Mill, which was on a lower level, a little farther to the east. It was the Christy Mill that built up that immense deposit of gleaming, white sand, the tailings dump that testified visually of the enormous amount of sand stone crushed in that mill. Few who live here now ever saw it, and not seeing it, could never comprehend it. The winds and the rains have scattered them far and wide, from Silver Reef to the Pacific Ocean.

"Dwellings were everywhere, but the finest of them as I remembered it, followed the course of the Harrisburg water ditch, and had fine shade trees, lawn and flower gardens. Miners' cabins and cottages extended clear up to where the water for the three towns was taken out of the original Quail Creek Channel. This was the picturesque part of the camp, cottages being just built among clumps of cottonwood and cedar trees, near ditches when they could get there, distant if necessary."

The fluctuating price of silver and depletion of high grade ore cut the boom short, and the last mill run was made in 1908. In 1916 Alec W. Colbath raised \$160,000 to buy most of the mine properties to take advantage of the World War I rise in silver prices. He leased part of the property to a New York company in 1920, which planned to build a mill, but cancelled their plans when silver prices again dropped.

In 1928 American Smelting and Refining Company purchased 51 per cent of Colbath's stock and did a great deal of development work. When the price of silver dropped to 26 cents work came to a standstill. Alec Colbath sold his properties to Western Gold and Uranium Inc. in 1950. They worked the claims for uranium and in 1957 built a mill for processing the silver-uranium ore. It is still in operation (July, 1968).

The Wells, Fargo building was later used as a mercantile and mine supply store by Woolley, Lund and Judd, c. 1886. Later it served as a residence for the Colbath Family and then was partitioned into offices and laboratories for the Western Gold and Uranium Company. It is now vacant and reportedly has been acquired by Washington County for a museum.

C. Sources of Information

Bibliography

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Prepared by John L. Giusti, AIA  
July 25, 1968

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural interest: This is a quality stone business building which is almost the lone surviving structure of a thriving mining town of the late 1870's.
2. Condition of fabric. Excellent stone masonry. Some broken glass and fallen plaster.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: This rectangular building, 42' x 60'5", is one story over a basement
2. Foundations: Red sandstone
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Red sandstone cut and tooled range ashlar at front, coursed rubble at sides.
4. Structural system, framing: Stone masonry. Wood framed roof and floor.
5. Porches and stoops: A wooden porch or platform has always been necessary at the rear doors but the present porch is recent.
6. Chimneys: Two of brick, neither probably original.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Four segmental arched doorways at front - two at rear of first floor. Two doorways at basement rear. All first floor doors are pairs of glazed (six light) doors with rectangular transoms above. Transoms in pairs - two or four lights each leaf. Above the rectangular transom the arched opening is filled with glass cut to fit but without wood framing, a very "modern" detail. Basement doors: pairs of new plank doors on strap hinges. All openings could be closed with heavy steel shutters most of which remain in place.
  - b. Windows: No windows except a recent one in north wall probably dating from residential use and basement openings into front area ways.

8. Roof - shape, covering: Single slope with parapet front and sides. Composition roofing.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor - divided into two equal rooms, each having two front entrances and a rear door. The northern room has a vault a little more than halfway back.
- b. The basement, originally a stable, is divided similarly but the halves are not connected by openings. The wall supporting the north wall of the vault connects diagonally to the center dividing wall; the trapezoidal area between these walls is totally inaccessible.

2. Stairways: There is no internal connection between basement and first floor. The south half of the first floor is one step lower than the north.
3. Flooring: 3" pine boards running the long way, east and west.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster
5. Doorways and doors: Very simple 4-panel steel vault door with pedimented opening. Lettering in pediment - "Wells, Fargo and Co."
6. Lighting, type of fixture: Electric
7. Heating: No stoves remain.

D. Site and Surroundings:

1. Orientation: Faces east on what once was Main Street.
2. Outbuildings: Ruins of other stone business buildings extend to the north and west: the Rice Bank, an adobe structure to the south, has been made into a residence.
3. Landscaping and walks, enclosures: A large red sandstone block in front was for stepping into stagecoaches. At the base of a mulberry tree near the southeast corner of the building there is a flowing spring.