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Archaeology of the Boston Saloon

By Kelly J. Dixon

Abstract: Buffalo soldiers and Black cowboys are popular symbols of African American heritage in the West. The archaeological remains of the African American owned Boston Saloon provide yet another example of this legacy in the context of mining boomtowns. The Boston Saloon operated during the 1860s and 1870s in Virginia City, Nevada to serve that community's African Americans. Hollywood portrayals and western historical literature tend to present saloons and mining boomtowns as sordid places populated primarily by European Americans, with Chinese and Native Americans on the margins. Yet African Americans rarely enter this popular imagery. When synthesized with insights from documentary records, the Boston Saloon's archaeological remnants enhance an understanding of the cosmopolitan dimensions of the so-called, "wild West."

Introduction

A gunshot pierced the smoky air in the small, boomtown saloon. It came from the poker table, where all but one the players sprang to their feet. One of the players writhed on the floor as blood spilled from his leg. The shot was an accident, caused by a pistol falling from someone's lap and discharging when it hit the floor. Although his leg was sore for a while, the victim survived. Except for the man shot in the leg, who happened to be the only white man in the saloon at the moment, all the participants in this scene were of people of color.

The *Territorial Enterprise*, a northern Nevada newspaper that once employed writers such as Samuel Clemens, reported the accidental shooting summarized above (*Territorial Enterprise* 7 August, 1866). The event occurred in the Boston Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada, shortly after the American Civil War. Upon telling this story to friends and colleagues, I initially did not indicate that African Americans filled the saloon. I then proceeded to ask these individuals to describe how they imagined the characters in the scene. They gave Hollywood-inspired answers like "Gene Hackman, Clint Eastwood, and John Wayne." Although Hollywood's popular depictions forge a common, monotonous misperception of saloons that ignore their diversity, historical and archaeological records demonstrate the variety of these leisure institutions, including saloons that served as "popular resorts" for people of color living in mining communities (*Territorial Enterprise* 7 August, 1866).



The Boston Saloon represents one such establishment that operated between the 1860s and the 1870s in the mining boomtown of Virginia City, Nevada. Indeed, Hollywood portrayals and western historical literature tend to present saloons and mining boomtowns as sordid places primarily populated by European Americans, with Chinese and Native Americans on the margins. Even though they rarely enter

the story of the diverse populations of mining boomtowns, people of African ancestry were there, and the Boston Saloon is but one instance that provides an opportunity to overcome the more Eurocentric stereotype of the mining West in places like Virginia City, the heart of Nevada's Comstock Mining District.

Founded in 1859, the Comstock Mining District produced millions of dollars in silver and gold and inspired the invention of technologies and mining methods used throughout the world. Virginia City (Figure 1; click on the images below to see larger illustrations by the author) was the heart of the Comstock Mining District. The Bonanza television series popularly presented Virginia as a rustic town. Yet the people of the Comstock, particularly those in Virginia City, lived in an urbanized, cosmopolitan, industrial setting. At its peak of about 20,000 to 25,000 people, Virginia City and its sister community of Gold Hill merged into one of the larger cities west of the Mississippi (James 1998: 143-166; Johnson 2000). From around 1860 to the late 1870s, the Comstock's mining wealth captured international headlines and Virginia City developed a complex, cosmopolitan community, attracting immigrants from all over the globe. People from North, South, and Central America, Europe, Asia, and Africa came to the mining district, hoping to harness some of its globally renowned glitter of silver and gold. The silver and gold did not last, however, and beginning in the late 1870s, the Comstock mines began to fail. The ensuing exodus caused Virginia City to decline to a "ghost town" of fewer than 500 people by the 1930s. Today, multi generation residents, "Comstockers," and several entrepreneurial newcomers operate a series of shops, saloons, ice cream parlors, hotels, and restaurants that cater to droves of tourists seeking to experience vestiges of the "wild" West.



Virginia City's modern saloons engage the sensationalism of the region's legendarily notorious character, sporting names such as "The Bucket of Blood Saloon" and boasting roadside attractions, such as the "Suicide Poker Table" at the Delta Saloon (Figure 2). While networks of mine shafts and tunnels lay deep beneath Virginia City's streets, hundreds of thousands of artifacts lay much closer to the surface, beneath cracked boardwalks, creaking floorboard, and modern parking lots. For anyone interested in understanding the authenticity behind the mining West's mythic and complex history, Virginia City is an archaeological goldmine.



Archaeologists and historians working in Virginia City joke about the excellent chances one has to place a shovel into the ground in this community and hit a saloon. The African American owned Boston Saloon was among these, and its remains lay in a parking lot behind the Bucket of Blood Saloon. An archaeological excavation (Figure 3) during the summer of 2000 recovered bottles, glassware, tobacco pipes, and animal bones from remains of the Boston Saloon beneath the Bucket of Blood Saloon's parking lot. This project represented a cooperative venture between the University of Nevada, Reno Department of Anthropology's Archaeological Field School, the Comstock Archaeology Center, the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Reno-Sparks Chapter, the National Endowment for the Humanities, AmArcs of Nevada, and the Bucket of Blood Saloon.

Virginia City Saloons and the Archaeology of the Boston Saloon

Saloons were quite common along Virginia City's sprawling urban landscape and usually outnumbered all other retail establishments in mining boomtowns. Over 100 saloons reportedly operated in and around Virginia City during the 1870s (Lord 1883: 377; West 1979: xiv-xv; Duis 1983: 1). Public drinking houses clearly outnumbered many other business enterprises in that community. Numerous advertisements in historic newspapers portray the assortment of Virginia City saloons, including those that offered customers billiards, poker games, bowling alleys, reading rooms, meals, Havana cigars, female entertainment, female companionship, dancing, coffee, cock fights, "chicken arguments," dog fights, shooting galleries, and, of course, a range of alcoholic beverages (e.g., *Territorial Enterprise*, January-April, 1867 and September and February 1870; *Virginia Evening Chronicle*, November 1872; *Daily Stage*, September-October 1880; *The Footlight* March 1, 1880; Lord 1883: 93; Hardesty and James 1995: 4-5; Hardesty, et al. 1996).

This variety suggests the myriad ways shrewd entrepreneurs tried to fill niches in a saturated market. Well-paid miners worked in eight-hour shifts, 24 hours a day, in a physically and mentally challenging underground environment (James 1998: 58, 126, 140-142). Many Virginia City businesses, especially saloons, operated at all hours to cater to those getting off work at various times. It was common and wise business practice to mine the miners, as they tended to have disposable income, and because of a shorter-than-usual work day, they had free time, especially during mining bonanzas. Saloons were common places to while away free time, drink, get a hot meal, and spend money.

As boomtowns such as Virginia City expanded and became internationally famous, more people arrived from all over the world, amplifying the cultural and ethnic diversity of these communities (James 1998: 143-166; Johnson 2000). Well-established cities therefore supported saloons that filled additional entertainment niches by catering to specific cultural affiliations. Saloons came to reflect the diversity of these and other urban American centers more than any other social institution. As the variety of cultures and subcultures increased so did the need for drinking houses to service the needs of each group (West 1979: 43; Duis 1983: 143, 169). Upon arrival in the region's bustling boomtowns, immigrants frequently found a foreign, intimidating, and often hostile environment (e.g., Captain 1995), comprised of distinct groups of people living, working,

and socializing in a setting of intense cultural contact. Saloons owned by a specific cultural group often accommodated customers of similar backgrounds and provided places of refuge and solidarity.

The Boston Saloon operated from the heart of the internationally-famous, mining boomtown, Virginia City, Nevada during the 1860s and 1870s. The mere existence of an archaeological site that once held an African American saloon has the power to revise more traditional, western historical stories that are overly Eurocentric and that have focused on the contributions of "English speaking white men" (Limerick 1987: 58; see also, Dixon 2005: 164). Upon perusing the literature related to the archaeology of free African Americans in the West, it became clear that there were only a few archaeological investigations related to this topic (e.g., Guenther 1988; Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1992; Wood, et al. 1999; Praetzellis and Praetzellis 2001). Thus, archaeological descriptions of these individuals are rather scarce west of the 100th meridian and absolutely lacking in the context of the mining West. The discovery of the Boston Saloon provided the opportunity to change that.

Historical records were essential to locate this nearly-forgotten business and to hone in on the locations of African American households and businesses in Virginia City. Elmer Rusco (1975) started this process. More recently, historian and Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer, Ron James, proceeded to examine a series of historical records, including directories and census manuscripts, to figure out how many people of African descent lived in Virginia City during the mining boom and to identify where they were living in that community (e.g., Kelly 1863; Collins 1865; Virginia & Truckee Railroad Directory 1873-1874). Significantly, James discovered that integration was the rule (James 1998: 152). In other words, African Americans in Virginia City did not appear to have lived in a distinct or designated community as did people of Asian ancestry, with their neighborhood of Chinatown. Instead, people of African descent were living in locations scattered throughout town and incorporated within Virginia City's diverse, international community.

People of color who lived in Virginia City and who visited the surrounding Comstock Mining District during the latter portion of the nineteenth century found themselves amidst a complex political climate that overtly and subtly pervaded many aspects of their lives and demonstrating an intriguing pattern of integration, marginal survival, and success (James 1998: 7, 152-153). On the one hand, they appeared to have more freedom and opportunity there than in many other parts of the country in terms of economic successes and an overall tone of integrated living. On the other hand, they consistently experienced racist undertones and overtly restrictive attitudes and laws. Their lives were composed of a complex juxtaposition of integration and prejudice and of neighborly acceptance and ill treatment. Such variation in treatment of African Americans in the West was common, and experienced by African American soldiers stationed all over that region (Schubert 1971: 411).

Ironically, this fact initially hindered attempts to carry out an archaeology of the African Diaspora in this boomtown because of the probability for mixed cultural deposits. That is,

integration rendered it impossible to locate archaeological remains that could accurately be linked with people of African ancestry. Furthermore, their business enterprises left few traces of their presence from an archaeological point of view because they, like many boomtown entrepreneurs, frequently changed locations. Given this, it initially appeared to be impossible to locate archaeological remains that could accurately be linked with their life and work in this community.

Then Ron James correlated several historical references to deduce the historic location of the Boston Saloon. Multiple lines of evidence, including historical newspaper articles from the *Territorial Enterprise*, the *Virginia & Truckee Railroad Directory* (1873-1874), and Nevada State Census records (1875) all pointed to the location of a saloon that was owned by African American William A. G. Brown and that catered to a clientele of comprised of people of color (e.g., *Territorial Enterprise* August 7, 1866). The long-lived Boston Saloon stayed at a single location, the southwest corner of D and Union Streets in Virginia City, for nine years (1866-1875).



William A.G. Brown, an African American from Massachusetts, owned the Boston Saloon and catered to people of African ancestry. Brown arrived in Virginia City by 1863, at which time he worked as a street shoe polisher. By 1864, he went into business for himself and founded the Boston Saloon on B Street, an upslope location along Virginia City's mountainside setting and well beyond the center of town. Sometime between 1864 and 1866, Brown moved his saloon from the B Street setting to a second locality at the southwest corner of D and Union Streets, where his business thrived until 1875, at which time it disappeared from historical records (Figure 4). The saloon's new and final setting at the corner of D and Union Streets happened to be the heart of Virginia City's entertainment and red light district. Historical records indicate that, in addition to cribs and brothels, this area housed Virginia City's finest opera houses and theatres, and many of the nearby saloons were considered respectable establishments. The Boston Saloon flourished at this location until 1875 (Kelly 1863; Collins 1865; James 1998: 154; *Territorial Enterprise*, August 7, 1866).

Entrepreneurial enterprises in Virginia City were at the mercy of mining boom and bust cycles -- or the mere threat of the latter. Given this economic reality, such business endeavors were fortunate to last a few months. In this context, William Brown's enterprise represents a major success. This success is perhaps even more profound when considering entrepreneurial discrimination of drinking houses in Massachusetts, where Brown was born. He named his Virginia City establishment the "Boston Saloon." Whether the paradox was intentional is unknown, but it is important to point out that in Brown's home state African Americans suffered major entrepreneurial discrimination that "all but eliminated their participation in the Boston liquor business" by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Duis 1983: 170).

Historical documents described the Boston Saloon as "the popular resort of many of the colored population," and African American writers lamented the loss of "a place of recreation of our own" in Virginia City after the Boston Saloon closed (*Pacific Appeal* October 26, 1875; *Territorial Enterprise* August 7, 1866). Wording in such sources suggests that the Boston Saloon catered to people of African ancestry, and it is quite likely that the drinking house served various socioeconomic segments of that group. African American men and women in Virginia City occupied an array of occupational statuses, including bootblacks, servants, boarding house operators, and physicians (e.g., James 1998: 97-98, 153-154; Rusco 1975: 73-80). The Boston Saloon likely catered to the socioeconomic range of these individuals, whereas other Virginia City saloons catered to distinct socioeconomic segments of European and European American populations (Hardesty and James 1995: 3-5). Information from historical records helps shed light on people and events associated with the Boston Saloon, and this is outlined in Dixon (2005).

William Brown disappears from all records until 1893; he died on the Comstock on April 29, 1893 of that year, at the age of 63 (Storey County Death Vitals 1882-1911). John Martin, who served as a trustee of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Virginia City as early as 1867 and who worked as a bootblack in Virginia City during the mining boom, was among the witnesses to Brown's death (Rusco 1975: 177; V&TRR Directory 1874). Martin was an African American who had been in town just as long as William Brown himself.

Archaeology at the Boston Saloon

The above historical information on William Brown's Boston Saloon becomes even richer when one integrates archaeological discoveries into the story. Today, an asphalt parking lot covers the Boston Saloon's D Street location (Figure 5). This seemed a minor obstacle to carry out the first known archaeological excavation of an African American saloon in the American West, as well as the first known archaeological investigation of an African American site within the State of Nevada.



Once the backhoe removed the parking lot's asphalt barrier, the crew used a "Bobcat" to remove additional parking lot fill. After commencing with hand excavation, crew knew they reached the Boston Saloon's buried deposits by observing a distinct grayish-black-colored layer of ash and charred wood. This layer represented a blatant reminder of Virginia City's Great Fire of 1875. In the case of the Boston Saloon, that ashy temporal marker took on deeper meaning because, according to information from the historical overview described above, the establishment's proprietor, William Brown, closed his saloon in 1875, just months before the well-documented, devastating blaze. Due to his establishment's nine year operation at that single location, material traces of the saloon

accumulated in tiny layers until they were capped by the charred wood, ash, and other debris associated with the 1875 fire.

After recording and processing the Boston Saloon collection, it became clear that the project had yielded an impressive array of late-nineteenth-century materials from a bustling corner of Virginia City's Red Light District. Even so, without comparing this collection to other Virginia City saloon collections, it would be difficult to make meaningful observations and interpretations about the Boston Saloon collection. Due to a series of previous historical archaeological endeavors in Virginia City (e.g., Hardesty and James 1995; Hardesty, et al. 1996; James 1998; Dixon, et al. 1999; Dixon 2005), three other contemporaneous Virginia City saloon collections had been recovered: an Irish-owned saloon and shooting gallery; a German-owned Opera House's "theater saloon"; and an Irish-owned drinking house in a notorious neighborhood. Considering the fact that there were at least 100 saloons operating in Virginia City at one time, these four are too small a sample to develop grandiose statements about the West's public drinking culture and about the Boston Saloon's role in that broader context. Still, this is a start. And the history associated with each archaeological collection establishes the framework for a study of diversity using an iconic characteristic of a cosmopolitan western boomtown -- the saloon.

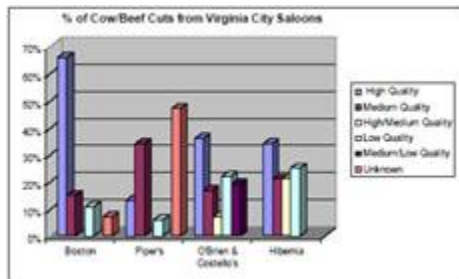


Unsurprisingly, archaeological excavations at the Boston Saloon and other Virginia City drinking establishments turned up a profusion of bottles and bottle fragments. The majority of these include dark green glass wine, champagne, and ale bottles. Mostly recovered in thousands of fragments, these beverage containers were the most common and abundant bottle type represented in the Boston Saloon assemblage, as well as in the other three saloons, suggesting a similarity in basic, mass-produced menu items across cultural and socioeconomic lines.

Artifact quantities provided the best evidence for distinctions among these establishments. For example, the highest quantities of intact bottles unearthed during the Boston Saloon dig were aqua blue "Essence of Jamaica Ginger" bottles (Figure 6). This product consisted of a certain type of ginger, known as white ginger, and was prepared in Jamaica (Bradley 1901: 169). Historical newspaper advertisements describe this product as a cure for nausea and other "diseases" of the stomach and digestive organs (*Territorial Enterprise*, November 24, 1866). It also may have provided a substitute for alcoholic beverages (Kallet and Schlink 1933: 151). Additionally, ginger might have been added to ale to make a flavored beer, or it could have been combined with soda water to make a non alcoholic, ginger flavored drink. Although it is not currently possible to prove this product's use in such mixtures, there is



evidence of soda water bottles and ale bottles at the Boston Saloon, suggesting that all of the above could have been menu options at that establishment. Whether those menu items were mixed in any way, however, is open to speculation.



Advertisements for saloon lunches in Virginia City were quite common (e.g., *Territorial Enterprise*, 1 January 1867: 4; *Virginia Evening Chronicle*, 4 November 1872: 1). Meals were common among the various saloon offerings, and the "saloon-restaurant combination was a fixture in the mining camps" (Conlin 1986: 174, 176).

Faunal remains, condiment containers, and trace elements of food residues indicate that the Boston Saloon was among those drinking houses that offered meals, and this is where William Brown's establishment appears to stand out from the other three establishments. A comparative faunal analysis indicated that the Boston Saloon served more expensive cuts of meat than the three other Virginia City saloons (Figures 7 and 8), with a much larger percentage of high-quality cuts of beef and lamb associated with the Boston than the others (Dixon 2002: 147-158; Dixon 2005: 87-95).

Excavations at the Boston Saloon also unearthed fragments of a colorless glass bottle, with an embossed label, reading, "TABASCO//*PEPPER*//SAUCE." This bottle, with its thin lip, angular shoulder, and label, turned out to be something of a "missing link" in the pepper sauce company's bottle chronology, becoming the only known example of a transitional form of Tabasco® bottles from the company's earliest years of operation (Figure 9). The bottle's angular shoulder and its embossed basal mark with embossed six-pointed stars were not unusual, but the Boston Saloon's bottle stood out because it had those traits in



combination with a relatively thin lip. Up to that point, Tabasco® historians believed that the earliest bottles made especially for the pepper sauce had much thicker lips (Shane Bernard and Ashley Dumas, 2002, personal communication).



In 1868, Edmund McIlhenny produced his first commercial batch of pepper sauce on Avery Island, Louisiana using the pepper *Capsicum frutescens*, bottled in second-hand cologne bottles (Orser and Babson 1990: 107). By 1869, McIlhenny made bottles especially for his pepper sauce; the bottle type at the Boston Saloon may represent one of the earliest of these special-made containers for the product. The archaeology crew unearthed the bottle from the buried deposits affiliated

with the 1875 fire. This provides a chronological control that places the bottle's appearance in the Boston Saloon sometime between 1869 and the Great Fire of 1875. The pepper sauce company, however, has no records of their product being shipped to Nevada during that period.

The Tabasco® bottle's presence at the Boston Saloon and absence from the other Virginia City saloons may suggest an affiliation with African American cuisine or beverages, given the evidence for pepper sauces in many traditional African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American dishes (Shange 1998: 29). This cannot be proven, however, and is an example of the ways in which artifacts can lead archaeologists only so far before their interpretations become mere speculation. In certain cases, oral history may be able to shed light on the meanings and used of certain products (e.g., Mullins 1999). Yet oral histories were not an option for the Boston Saloon project, since African American descendants, who could provide such insights, could not be found. They, like many others living in western boomtowns, moved away from these urban centers once the bustle and commerce associated with mining bonanzas.

Despite the uncertainties of interpretations associated with the Tabasco® bottle, one fact remained certain -- the sauce was actually used in a meat-based meal. This was indicated by gas chromatograph-mass spectrometer (GC/MS) testing on a red colored stain marking the surface of one of the artifacts recovered during the Boston Saloon excavation. GC/MS testing on that stain detected a mix of this red pepper sauce and lipids from animal fat (Dixon 2006).

Archaeological remains of fine meals and early Tabasco® use at the Boston Saloon are only segments of this establishment's story. Other artifacts enrich an understanding of this drinking house's daily operations. For instance, an array of tobacco pipes reveals an indulgent, smoky complement to the saloon's social atmosphere. While some were made of white clay in Glasgow, Scotland and represented a common find on nineteenth-century archaeological sites, a handful of others were made of red clay and are rather unique in that no other pipe styles of their kind have been found from this period for comparison (Figure 10).



Among the various artifacts representative of smoking paraphernalia, one tobacco pipe stem fragment stood out, because it was marred with teeth clench marks. Teeth clench marks indicate that this object made contact with the inside of someone's mouth, and this provided the opportunity to carry out DNA tests to see if any microscopic biological remains lingered from the pipe user's saliva. Testing on this item recovered one female DNA profile from the area near the borehole and the tooth marks (Dixon 2006). This provides evidence that a woman used at least one tobacco pipe from the Boston Saloon. While one woman's DNA does not overturn powerful stereotypes, this discovery provides

an explicit incentive for rethinking the male-dominated imagery of the western saloon (West 1979: 145).

An array of fancy buttons and dress beads, also unearthed from the saloon, adds a bit more to this story (see Dixon 2005: 124-132). In light of the relatively small amount of women's clothing fasteners found at other Virginia City saloons, the quantity, diversity, and vividness of these objects at the Boston Saloon revealed a major distinction that set this place apart from the others: women -- and rather well-dressed women -- either patronized or worked in this establishment to a much greater degree than they did at the other places.



In addition to women, the saloon's atmosphere included the glow of gas lights. The pipes and fixtures emerged during excavations (Figure 11), but details about the gas lights became evident in the lab, with the observation of patent information on one of the light fixture fragments. Associated patent information indicates that the Boston Saloon's lighting represented a new technology that cut down on the fumes typically associated with such lighting (U.S. Patent Records, 24 December 1872). While some visitors to western saloons indicate a stale, fume-filled, dimly-lit atmosphere (e.g., West 1979: 42), the presence of these lights at least implies an attempt to provide a more clean ambiance within the Boston Saloon.

Other artifacts complement that setting, namely fine crystal stemware (Figure 12). Virginia City saloons spanned a range of decors, from simple pine bars to upscale drinking houses with velvet wallpaper and shiny decanters (Lord 1883: 93). It is clear the Boston Saloon was on the finer end of this scale.

Such elegant remains combat racist assumptions about African American saloons as described during the late nineteenth and twentieth century (e.g. Duis 1983: 160). Furthermore, an early journalist's description early version of William Brown's saloon as "a dead fall" (Hoff 1938: 52). As discussed sometime after this, by 1866, Brown moved establishment to the bustling intersection of D Street and Union Street. The archaeological record indicates that the new location was anything but a dead fall.



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Descriptions of places like the Boston Saloon provide fodder for sanguine conclusions about life for African Americans in the West. Although racial prejudice was not as

widespread in the nineteenth century West as it was in the Jim Crow South, it is important to bear in mind that the West was not a "utopian promised land" for people of African descent (Woods 1998: 182-183; see also James 1998: 152-153; Dixon 2002: 40-41; Schubert 1971: 411; Rusco 1975: 56-58). Even so, African American families worked together to make better lives for themselves, as did groups, or communities of African Americans in the West. The chronicles of these individuals are numerous and complex. The Boston Saloon is merely one of these stories, presenting an understanding of a place of leisure in Virginia City, Nevada.

Conclusion

Leisure studies call attention to the ways people developed and maintained self-ascribed ethnic, socioeconomic, and/or gender-based identity during their free, leisure time (Cunningham 1980: 10-12; Rosenzweig 1983: 152, 225; Peiss 1986: 4-10; Captain, 1995: 93-94; see also Murphy 1997). By providing opportunities to socialize with people with similar life experiences, leisure activities eased the transition for newcomers of various backgrounds to new and often hostile social settings and helped them maintain distinctions in those settings (e.g., Handlin 1941). As places of leisure, saloons encouraged such identity and became physical places which harbored the American West's cultural diversity and fostered its cosmopolitan culture.

Today, the site of the Boston Saloon is covered by a parking lot, which was replaced after excavations ended in the summer of 2000. A sign describing and dedicated to the Boston Saloon currently hangs on the main street, C Street, in Virginia City, on the south wall of the well-visited tourist location, the Bucket of Blood Saloon. This sign is intended to remind visitors that places like the Boston Saloon lay beneath the streets of this bustling town in the American West to cultivate a sense of mutual respect for the diverse cultures comprising the history and current character of the United States and of the rest of the modern world (e.g., Asante 1998: xi).

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