

some of the stone houses in the Newlands neighborhood. I've heard that some were constructed by Native American stone masons from the Stewart Indian School, but none of the local historians with whom I've spoken have been able to confirm this."

I hadn't remembered that among the homes Gilbert owns were two constructed with rock. She referred me back to Hinman in her response:

"Deb Hinman, who lives a few blocks away ... maintains much of the information on all of these homes and others within Newlands Manor," she wrote.

Hinman explained that three of the Gilbert's homes, including the rock homes, were built by Nevada Developers, Inc., a company headed by a man named W. E. Barnard who lived in Reno for just a decade starting in 1926.

"But I never found the particulars of who designed the homes or specifically who built them," Hinman told me. "Could Barnard have contacted the Stewart School and asked to hire some students to build his homes? Of course. Is there any proof he did so? Not that I ever found. ... I really wish I could help you but I honestly don't know more than I've told you."

An article Hinman wrote about Barnard explains how he developed large tracts of Reno's old southwest and Newlands Heights and reveals that his rock homes—on Joaquin Miller Drive—were built in 1930. But there isn't much else, and Hinman has never discovered a lot about Reno's other rock homes. To learn more about these, I figured I'd try checking with the county assessor's and recorder's offices, though tracing ownership of the properties back past the '50s would likely be difficult as what are individual properties today were often part of larger parcels in the past.

I'd looked through some old Sanborn Insurance Maps at Special Collections, but most dated from years when the neighborhoods with rock homes had not yet been annexed into the city proper. I was running out of research avenues and contemplating who among the local historians I'd yet ask. Searching for a different email address for Alicia Barber, I realized my email to her remained in my drafts folder, so I sent it off and crossed my fingers. She responded:

"I checked around, and the State Historic Preservation Office has this in their files—it was written by some UNR students many years ago and seems to have some good information as well as lists of some relevant houses and other structures."

## Rock hounds

It was a report written by two undergraduates for a historical preservation class—in 1984. They'd photographed rock houses and then sought to discover their histories. Their goal was to gather enough information to nominate the homes to the National Register of Historic Places. They photographed 24 rock homes in the valley and then tried the usual research routes to learn about them—the assessor's offices, the recorder's office, the Sanborn Maps—all to no avail. They had a bit more luck using Reno City Directories published between 1929 and 1950 and reported they believed many of the homes were built in the 1930s and '40s.

The report was interesting but it didn't reveal much new information. Well known rock homes, like Barnard's creations and the Redfield Mansion, are easier to research. But even the exact date of construction of the Redfield Mansion—originally owned by a man named August Hill—is hard to pin down. Late '20s is as close as historians get.

Lesser known homes can be hit or miss, although the internet offers a lot of resources these days. Real estate websites like Zillow that forecast home values have been criticized for inaccurate estimates, but they do contain other useful information gathered from counties and users that would otherwise be time consuming to hunt down. Comparing the students' list of rock homes with my own and the Zillow website, I discovered they were correct—a home on Ralston Street built in 1942, two on Lander Street built in 1939. Farther north on Lander another is reported to date way back to 1918, but most went up during Barnard's era and shortly thereafter.

The internet also turns up interesting research leads sometimes. I'd heard from people that rock homes can be hard to insure or get loans on because they don't perform well in earthquakes, but my sources had told me this had not been the case for them. I'd basically dropped that line of inquiry until I came across several posts on the Reno Realty Blog and the Downtown Reno Makeover website from a user with the handle "geopower." This person had commented in response to stories about rock homes, calling them by a more technical name—"unreinforced masonry"—and calling them dangerous, particularly in earthquakes. My interest was piqued again. □

**"Could Barnard have contacted the Stewart School and asked to hire some students to build his homes? Of course. Is there any proof he did so? Not that I ever found."**

**Deb Hinman**  
Historian

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