The city of Prescott was carved out of the wilderness of Arizona’s central highlands in May, 1864. The events that led to its creation and subsequent establishment as the first capital of the Arizona Territory can be summed up in one word: Gold!

In February, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, the U.S. Congress enacted legislation, that was signed by President Abraham Lincoln, which created the Arizona Territory. The War was costly to the federal government and these Union leaders were most likely influenced by the prospect of mineral wealth in the area that became the Arizona Territory.

A few months later, in May, 1863, that promise came to fruition as an exploration party led by Captain Joseph R. Walker discovered gold in the Bradshaw Mountains, just south and east of present-day Prescott. A subsequent discovery of gold in the Antelope Mountains set in motion a chain of events which led to:
- establishment of Fort Whipple along the Granite Creek,
- founding, on May 30, 1864, of the town of Prescott, and
- its designation as the first capital of Arizona Territory, plus
- the seat of government for Yavapai County.

Adventurers, miners in search of gold, farmers and ranchers seeking a new beginning on land made available through the federal Homestead Act, merchants, lawyers, and others simply seeking a new opportunity came to Prescott, where together they created a community with business establishments, schools, churches, and other social organizations—and, of course, saloons and brothels.

Eventually came the railroads and other indicia of 19th century modernization, such as electricity and public water service. To be sure, Prescott in its territorial years was a frontier town and had its share of crime, rowdiness and an occasional gunfight on Whisky Row, but over time it matured and developed into a commercial center for the central highlands.

Prescott lost its status as the territorial capital in 1867 when the legislature move itself to Tucson, but regained it in 1877. Ultimately, as the population and political influence shifted to Phoenix, the capital was permanently relocated to that city in 1889. Prescott, nevertheless, continues to serve as the center of government for the county of Yavapai.

Today, Prescott is a modern city of approximately 40,000. Mining, ranching and railroading no longer drive the area’s economy, having been replaced by government and tourism.

While Prescott’s history as a western frontier town is a thing of the past, that Past, nevertheless, is preserved today for all future generations in the exhibits, collections and archival records of the Sharlot Hall Museum in downtown Prescott, two blocks west of the courthouse plaza.