



Milwaukie History Series #2: DOWNTOWN MILWAUKIE ARCHITECTURE

INTRODUCTION

Many of Milwaukie's most well-loved downtown buildings are now gone, but their ghosts, along with historic buildings that still stand, provide a context for the architectural history of the community. In that spirit, this memo focuses on the buildings that no longer exist or have been significantly altered, but continue as objects of shared affection and memory for the residents of the community.

OVERVIEW

The architectural character of today's downtown Milwaukie is best described as eclectic, and includes a wide variety of styles and building materials that reflect the incremental development of the city and its various periods of prosperity and decline. Popular architectural styles reached Milwaukie years after they reached Portland, which in turn was about a decade behind the cities of the east.

Due to the isolated nature of the town and the ready availability of lumber from the local mills, early residential and commercial buildings were simple, vernacular wood structures with limited ornamentation. In the 1870s, a brick kiln was founded in the city and masonry buildings became more common; however, wood was the building material of choice into the early 1900s.

Many of the wood-frame buildings from the early 1900s were influenced by the Gothic and Italianate styles, while buildings of the 1920s and 1930s reflect more fanciful styles such as Mediterranean and Gothic Revival. Civic buildings of the 1930s were constructed of masonry in the Georgian Revival and Half Modern styles, reflecting the gravity of their purpose. Later buildings from the 1950s and 1960s followed the trends of the period and display Mid-Century Modern, International, and Brutalist influences.

DOWNTOWN BUILDINGS

Many of Milwaukie's earliest buildings no longer exist, and the many vacant lots in the heart of downtown mark their loss. However, both existing and former downtown buildings tell a story of the people who lived, worked, and worshipped here.

Bursts of downtown building activity coincide with three periods of the city's growth:

- Pioneer Village (1850 – 1860): The “golden period,” fueled by the success of the shipbuilding, timber, and milling industries.
- Small Town (1893 – 1930): Electric interurban rail began service between Portland and Oregon City in 1893; this new accessibility brought growth to Milwaukie. The railroad reached Milwaukie in 1910, bringing with it an influx of goods and industry.
- Suburb (1950 – Present): Through a combination of orderly annexations and Milwaukie’s increasing popularity as a Portland suburb, the population has quadrupled since the 1950s.

See *Milwaukie History Memo #1: Downtown Development Patterns* for more information about the development pattern of these eras. An overview of the buildings of the city’s past follows.

Pioneer Village (1850 – 1860)

Milwaukie was founded in 1848, and grew quickly due to its strategic location on the Willamette River and the entrepreneurial spirit of its early residents. Buildings of the Pioneer Village period were constructed of lumber; available records indicate that residential buildings were generally designed in the vernacular style, with simple designs and minimal decoration, while commercial buildings were often constructed with false fronts in the popular “frontier” style of the day. Residences were interspersed with blacksmiths, hotels, shops, and churches, and the riverfront was lined with mills.

Unfortunately, there are no known remaining buildings from this period of Milwaukie’s history, but many images remain:



Source: *History American Buildings Survey (HABS)*, 1938

Seth Lewelling House
10966 SE McLoughlin Blvd
Date: 1849 – 1940
Style: Greek Revival

Seth Lewelling was one of the early residents of Milwaukie, as well as one of the original nurserymen in the city and the country, and was a prominent citizen of the community. He moved into this house upon his arrival from Illinois in 1850.

The house served as a center of the Populist political movement, and was the birthplace of the 1902 Initiative and Referendum law. It was demolished in 1940 and is now the site of a gas station.



Source: *Oregon Historical Society*

Downtown Residences
Main Street
Date: 1850s
Style: Greek Revival, vernacular

These wood-frame buildings were grand homes in Milwaukie’s early days, and likely belonged to owners of the City’s mills. The location of the homes is unknown, but it’s likely they were located along Main Street.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

St. John's Episcopal Church
2038 SE Jefferson St
Date: 1851 – 1961
Style: Gothic Revival

The city's first Episcopal church was built in 1851 on land donated by town founder Lot Whitcomb; the original location was on Washington Street. It was moved from that location to the northeast corner of Jefferson and 21st in 1862. The steeple, gothic-style windows and enclosed vestibule were added in 1883.

In 1961, the church was in disrepair and scheduled for demolition. Funds were raised to move the church to Portland by barge in 1961.¹ Once it arrived in Portland, it was renamed the Oaks Pioneer Church and restored by volunteers. Today, it is a popular site for weddings and events.



Source: Oregon Historical Society

Veranda Hotel / Spencer Hall
NE corner of Jefferson St & McLoughlin Blvd
Date: ca. 1856 – ca. 1920
Style: Vernacular

The building was constructed as the Verandah Hotel ca. 1856. The Spencer Hall boarding school, an Episcopal school for girls, was established in the building in 1861. In 1866, the school relocated to Portland.

The building was demolished sometime between 1900 and 1928.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

Elementary School
10722 SE Main St (City Hall block)
Date: 1849 – 1893
Style: Vernacular

This was the second school built in Milwaukie. The location and style of the first school is unknown.

The older part of the school (the left half) was built in 1849; the "newer" part of the school was built in 1859. The front entrance and bell tower are beyond the far right end of the photo and are not visible.

The school was demolished in 1893 to make way for the construction of a larger school building on the site.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

Wissinger's General Store
NE corner Washington St & Main St
Date: ca. 1870 – ca. 1920
Style: Frontier / Vernacular

The Wissingers acquired this general store in the 1890s from a woman who came to Milwaukie from San Francisco in the 1870s. At that time, this was the only store between Sellwood and Oregon City. It was also the location of the City's post office for a time. The Wissingers delivered goods to other shops in town via horse-drawn wagon.



Source: City of Milwaukie

Reverend Abraham Hager House
2115 SE Adams St
Date: 1888 - present
Style: Gothic Vernacular

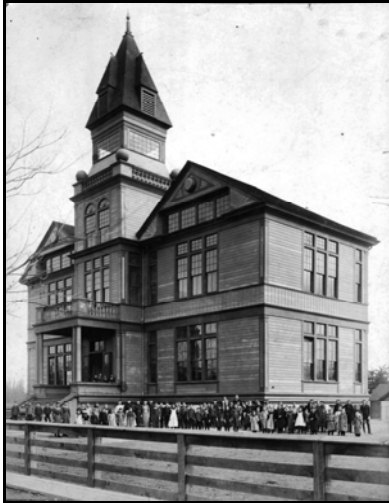
This is the last remaining residential building in the original town of Milwaukie.

Reverend Hager was a German Baptist minister in the area. He was born in Switzerland, and traveled throughout Europe and the United States before arriving in Milwaukie in the late 1880s. The house has been significantly altered and is no longer recognizable.

Small Town (1893-1930)

The Small Town period of the city's growth was launched by the arrival of the East Side Railway electric interurban line in 1893. The interurban brought railroad workers from Portland, who made their homes in the city. The arrival of the railroad in 1910 cemented Milwaukie's place as a center of industry.

Buildings of the early Small Town period were generally constructed of wood, though later buildings were constructed of masonry and stucco. Very few of the wood-frame buildings remain. A combination of the Flood of 1894 and a series of fires in the 1910s destroyed many of them; many of the surviving wood-frame buildings were replaced by newer buildings of masonry. As a result, most of downtown Milwaukie's extant historic buildings were constructed during the 1920s and 1930s, and are constructed of stucco and masonry.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

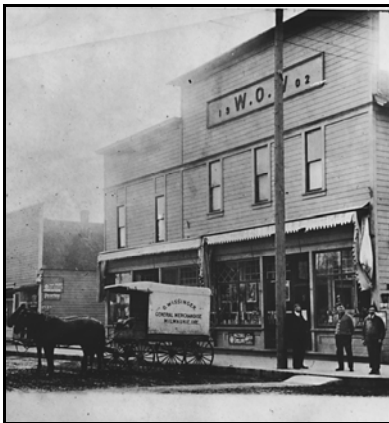
**Milwaukie Elementary School
10722 SE Main St (City Hall block)**

Date: 1893 – 1936

Style: Classical / Greek Revival

Milwaukie's third elementary school was constructed on today's City Hall block, at what was then the eastern edge of downtown. The architect is unknown.

When the Milwaukie Grammar School was constructed in 1916, the old school fell into disuse. It was demolished in 1936 to make way for the new City Hall.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

**Woodsmen of the World Hall
SW corner of Main & Washington streets**

Date: 1902 – 1910

Style: Frontier / Vernacular

This building stood where the Wunderland (Victory) Theater now stands. The upper story was the home of the first City Hall, and the lower level housed a general store.

This building and the entire block burned down in 1910. The site remained vacant until the Victory Theater was constructed in 1945.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

**First State Bank Building
10883 SE Main St**

Date: 1909

Style: Italianate

This brick building replaced an earlier wooden bank building south on Main St. The lower level originally consisted of 2 storefronts.

The building was significantly altered during the 1970s and 1980s. It was completely remodeled in 2007.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

Main and Jackson Building
10801 SE Main St
Date: ca. 1909
Style: Italianate

In 1916, this building housed a box factory, a shoe store, a motion picture show, a grocery store, and a number of other businesses. The building was renovated in 1962, and the windows were replaced and the cornice removed. The building still exists but is much-altered.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

Hotel Belle / Hotel Gratton
10949 SE McLoughlin Blvd
Date: 1912 – 2000
Style: Italianate

The Hotel Belle was located on the streetcar line and was a center of activity for the community. It became the Hotel Gratton prior to 1917. The building later became the Lowry Apartments. It was demolished in 2000 and the site is now part of Riverfront Park.



Source: City of Milwaukie

Milkiewa Feed Store and Mill
SW corner of 21st Ave and Adams St
Date: 1922 – 1969
Style: Vernacular

The Milwaukie Warehouse, later known as Milkiewa Feed Mills, was constructed in 1922 to the east of the railroad tracks, south of Adams St. The warehouse housed coal, and later grain. Farmers in and around the city purchased grain for their livestock.

The owners retired in 1969 and the building was demolished soon afterwards.



Source: Milwaukee Museum

**Emmanuel Evangelical Church
NE corner of Main St & Adams St**

Date: 1926 – 1956

Style: Byzantine Revival/Mission Revival

The Evangelical Church sat at the northeast corner of Main and Adams Streets. It was demolished in 1965 for the construction of a Montgomery Ward store.

Suburb (1950 to Present)

Change occurred quickly in the 1950s in the form of commercial and industrial development on the north side of town. As the city's boundary expanded to the north of Harrison St, formerly rural residences on the north end of town were replaced with new commercial buildings. These new buildings tended to be boxy and surrounded by surface parking. However, several of the buildings constructed during this period are architecturally daring and were designed by well-known architects of the time. Few of the buildings of the Suburban period have been demolished, but several have been substantially altered.



Source: City of Milwaukee archives

**First State Bank / Key Bank
10888 SE Main St at Monroe**

Date: 1948 - 1969

Style: International

This building was originally built in the glass-fronted International Style. It was expanded and significantly remodeled in 1969 in the current Brutalist style, and is now occupied by Key Bank. The architects of the original building and the remodel are unknown.



Source: City of Milwaukee archives

**Safeway
10554 SE Main St**

Date: 1967 - 2003

Style: Mid-Century Modern

This grocery store was designed in the popular "Marina" style developed by Safeway in the 1960s. It replaced a 1951 brick Safeway on the site. The building was demolished in 2003 after years of deterioration; the North Main Village mixed-use development was constructed on the site in 2005.

Several buildings from the Suburban period of Milwaukie's history display an adventurous spirit. These buildings still exist, but their unique designs warrants their inclusion in this memo.



Source: City of Milwaukie archives

Milwaukie Cleaners
10345 SE Main St
Date: 1959
Style: Modern Commercial

This modest building was designed by Joseph H. Rudd & Associates, a Portland architecture firm. The streamlined design and folded plate roof were commonly found on dry cleaners of the time.



Source: Osborne and Keeney

Kellogg Bowl
10306 SE Main St
Date: 1962
Style: Modern Commercial

This bowling alley was designed by Percy & Lathrop Architects, who designed buildings throughout Oregon, Alaska, and Montana. The striking fluorescent signs appear to be original to the building.



Source: City of Milwaukie archives

Willamette Savings and Loan / Washington Mutual
10900 SE 21st Ave at Jackson
Date: 1965
Style: Modern Commercial

This bank building was designed by Fletcher & Finch AIA. William (Bill) Fletcher later formed the architecture firm Fletcher Farr Ayotte, which has become internationally known for its streamlined and low-impact designs.



Source: Osborne and Keeney

Nelson's Nautilus
10466 SE Main St
Date: 1967
Style: Modern Commercial

This building was designed as a health club by Dale Haller, P.E. It appears that alternate banks of windows have been filled in, but it remains a striking visual presence today.



Source: Osborne and Keeney

Pietro's Pizza
10300 SE Main St
Date: 1969
Style: Faux Frontier

This unusual building was designed by Ralph Bonadurer, AIA, a Portland architect who designed many Art Moderne and Mid-Century Modern buildings in the area. The fluorescent signs appear to be original and complement the signs of the Kellogg Bowl building.



Source: Osborne and Keeney

Reliable Credit
10633 SE Main St
Date: 1976
Style: International

The Reliable Credit building was originally two separate buildings, which were connected and remodeled in 1976. The architects were The Kroker Partnership, a partnership between Mel Kroker, David Dunahugh, and Russell K. Hanson.

THE FUTURE

In recent years, Milwaukie has embraced its identity as a small city, both connected to and distinct from Portland. Downtown business owners are renovating their buildings, young families are moving to town for the Portland Waldorf School and the city's proximity to the bustle of Portland and the natural beauty of rural Clackamas County. Development has returned to downtown Milwaukie and the future light rail line promises a new architectural era for this resilient community.

ⁱ Heidi Cropsy for *The Bee*, January 1996. Available electronically at <http://www.oakspioneerchurch.org/>.