

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places

New Albany Downtown Historic District

DESCRIPTION

The New Albany Downtown Historic District is located on a plateau which extends northward from the Ohio River. The downtown area has always been associated with the river and the present district comprises much of the original plat, although the southern boundary is slightly north of the river bank. The elevated land is reasonably flat, with little change in grade from east to west and north. There is a dramatic change in grade in the south, as the bluff descends to the river bank area. A few of the buildings on Main Street have lower floors which are built into this bank, with openings on the southern side. Occasionally, the boundary of the district has descended to the lower grade, to include a notable building closer to the river's edge.

The streets of the district are aligned in a grid, generally in a north-south direction. East-west streets include Main, Market and Spring Streets. On each of these streets the dividing line between east and west is State Street, although only properties on West Main are included within the district boundaries. North-south streets include West First, State, Pearl, and Bank Streets, as well as East Third, Fourth and Fifth Streets. In the original plat and for many years thereafter, the numbered north-south streets west of State Street were differentiated as "Upper" (east of State) or "Lower" (west of State). In recent time, this was changed to "East" and "West", although this is somewhat confusing for streets which run north and south.

The north-south streets are somewhat narrower than those running east and west, except for State Street. This gives the commercial area an intimate appearance, although provides only limited parking for modern vehicles. Occasional parking lots have been made available, on Main and Spring Streets, to accommodate the needs of the shopping public. Local citizens have re-created an open "farmers market" on East Market Street, with a large asphalt parking area adjacent. There are modern plantings of street trees along many of the streets and comfortable street furniture has been installed. The western part of East Market Street contains a section of angled parking, separated from the balance of the street by a planted median. Several of the major streets in the downtown are one-way, although both Main and State Streets are two-way.

The district is primarily comprised of institutional or commercial buildings. A few residences have survived from the earliest era of the town's development, during the first half of the nineteenth century when a mix of residential and commercial was the norm. Other houses are related to adjacent institutions (church rectories, for example). Only a scant number were built during the latter half of the nineteenth century or the early part of the twentieth solely as residential structures.

The range of contributing commercial and institutional structures represents every era of the town's founding and development, from the earliest period, when New Albany flourished as a river port, to the age of automobile preeminence in the 1930s and '40s. Similarly, there are good examples of many architectural styles, including Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, and Art Deco, to name a few. The rhythm of the streetscape has been preserved in most places throughout the district and is best demonstrated on Pearl and East or Upper Main Streets. Here, many tightly-built historic structures combine to enhance the interest of the commercial district.

Several important contributing buildings highlight the district, including the 1814 Scribner House at 106 East Main Street, the former New Albany Free Public Library (Carnegie Library) at 201 East Spring Street, the 1837 Indiana State Bank at 203 East Main Street and the Second Presbyterian Church at 300 East Main Street, to name a few. Many notable historic commercial blocks demonstrate evidence of the flourishing commerce of the late nineteenth century, including the Heib Building, and others along Pearl Street. Some have experienced changes on the ground floor, but retain a high degree of integrity on the upper floors, while others have remained nearly intact, like the commercial building at 326 Pearl Street.

The commercial buildings of the district are invariably of brick, with most being two or three stories tall. Limestone is a common material for façade adornment, with a few buildings containing entire front facades of this native Indiana stone. Other trim materials include pressed metal and wood. Those buildings constructed around the turn of the century are often of a lighter, tan brick, rather than the usual red or red-brown variety. Many of the earliest buildings have been painted to preserve the fragile, soft-fired brick of the era. Buildings of the Art Deco and Art Moderne styles often have enameled metal units as part of the facade. The frame Scribner house is unusual for its stone and brick foundation and lower basement which opens on the river side of the property.

The district is distinguishable from the surrounding area for its collection of nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings. While there are a few interesting individual residential structures, for the most part, the resources are all commercial/industrial in nature. To the east are a series of residential districts, including the Mansion Row Historic District, which was listed on the National Register in 1983. A portion of the New Albany Downtown Historic District is

listed in this district: This includes 52 properties shown on the district map and located on the north and south sides of Main Street, from the east side of State to the west side of E. Fifth Street, as well as several properties south of Main Street (see boundary justification). The Mansion Row Historic District contains a collection of outstanding historic homes of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. To the north and east of this district are additional areas, of a primarily residential nature. To the west, a mix of structures presents a different appeal and to the south, the river is a natural element, with a few parking lots, modern structures or non-contributing buildings in between the river and the district boundaries. Thus, the district is distinguished from its surroundings by the distinctive tight rhythm of its buildings and their rather uniform commercial nature.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

When three adventurous brothers, Joel, Nathaniel and Abner Scribner, ventured down the Ohio in 1812-1813 on a town-site hunting trip, the area around the Falls of the Ohio River was already well known. George Rogers Clark had established the first settlement in 1778. From his base at Corn Island, pioneers moved inland to establish Louisville, Kentucky across the Ohio River in 1780. On the Indiana side, Clarksville was the first to be settled, in 1794, after Clark and his men were awarded 150,000 acres of the Northwest Territory in return for their military service against the British. By 1802, nearby Jeffersonville had been laid out as well.

Nonetheless, the New England trio saw great potential in the land down river of the Falls. This natural barrier forced boats to await high water before venturing up or down the waterway. Later, a canal would be constructed on the Louisville side of the river, but the New Albany site, down river of the canal, still stood to benefit.

The brothers visited Colonel John Paul who had purchased the 822-1/2 acre site in 1807. He wanted nearly \$10 an acre for the property, an exorbitant price when undeveloped government land was still available from the land office at \$2 an acre. The Scribners had high hopes for the place, though, and they scrimped and borrowed from family to meet the asking price of \$8,000 for the site.

They foresaw a New England town along the Ohio, but much work and sacrifice would be required before their dream became a reality. Fifty years after the Scribner family traveled to the site in the spring of 1813, Joel Scribner's son remembered that they landed at the foot of Upper (East) Fifth Street, later to be a ferry landing. He recalled: "There were occupied cabins in the place . . . The first ground cleared was on the south side of Main between Pearl and Bank on which four cabins were built . . . The surface of the new town presented a very uninviting

appearance. The timber was very heavy, the undergrowth very thick and the ground terribly uneven.”

The Scribners named their new town New Albany after the capital of New York State, near their former home. The village was laid out on the high ground above the river, and the first plat included the area from East Fifth Street to West Fifth Street and from the river north to Oak Street (above Spring). Main (High) Street and Market Street were 80 feet wide and there was a 100-foot street along the river, Water Street. State Street, then as now, bisected the plat and formed the dividing line between East and West (then Upper and Lower) streets. Four squares were allowed for public purposes and an additional as a parade ground, with ten lots for churches and three for schools.

In addition to the advantages of their location on the major water way of the new region, the Scribners hoped that the newly surveyed road which would connect to the old Buffalo Trace would give them an edge for travelers seeking a route to the territorial capital at Vincennes (to the northwest). While the heavily wooded site presented challenges to the developers, the ready availability of material for cabins, buildings and boats was a definite advantage. A newspaper advertisement placed by the Scribners in all the major eastern cities during the summer of 1813 boasted: “The town . . . affords a beautiful and commodious harbor . . . The bank adjoining the river is high and not subject to inundations . . . [with] an extensive view up and down the river. There is a sufficient number of excellent and never-failing springs . . . the advantages New Albany has . . . are perhaps unrivaled by any on the Ohio, as it is immediately below all the dangers which boats and ships are subject to in passing over the Falls, and is the only eligible situation for a depot for all the exports and imports of a great part of the Territory and . . . while the river is low and the markets good, as well as when the water is high. From the vast quantity of excellent ship timber, the great abundance of iron ore, . . . and the facility with which hemp is raised, . . . this will be one of the best ports in the United States for the building of vessels as well as the loading them.”

In spite of the enthusiasm that the developers evinced for their new town, growth was slow at first, but steady. But the location was indeed strategic. For at least seven months of the year, the town was the head of navigation for the lower river, (still true in the late nineteenth century, according to an 1873 commentator). The Falls provided a barrier to navigation by steam boats except during periods of high water. During the first half of the nineteenth century, when much of Indiana was still densely forested, the rivers were the major traffic arteries.

Shipbuilding soon became an important industry along the banks of the Ohio at New Albany. As early as 1819, three steamboats were said to have been launched from the yards with three more in the stocks. One hundred and fifty houses, most of wood frame, had been built and the

population was purportedly 1,000 souls, with a rapid growth projected, to meet the needs of the ship yards. Among the houses which could be seen from the wharf was the one on East Main Street belonging to the Scribner family, still present. Only a few brick buildings were constructed in the early years of the town, their number increasing with the town's prosperity.

Floyd County was first organized in 1819, and New Albany became the county seat. Later adjustments to the county boundaries increased its size, but New Albany retained its distinction as the center of county government. Between 1814 and 1830, the town mushroomed and the population doubled. Several brick buildings along E. Main Street remain from this era, sturdy brick structures. The Israel House Hotel, on W. Main Street dates to 1830, the beginning of a period of high prosperity for New Albany and its founding fathers. The 1837 State Bank Building also demonstrates the power of New Albany's economic muscle. Built as the New Albany branch of Indiana's State Bank system, it was constructed of local limestone in a stately Greek Revival style and is still considered to be one of the best buildings of its type in the region and the state.

Between 1830 and 1867, the shipbuilding industry in New Albany fueled the town's growth, along with the increased economic activity generated by its shipping industry. The town had a bustling Market House during this era, with stalls leased from \$10 up. Steamboat traffic along the Ohio generated considerable business for the farmers as well as for other various merchants who had built stores in the downtown area. Both Main and State streets contained general and dry goods stores. Commercial buildings along West Main and East Main Streets attest to the vitality of this period. The brick and limestone Greek Revival Second Presbyterian Church at 300 E. Main also speaks of the community's prosperity. Boat building was in full swing, with 32 steamboats credited to the yards at New Albany up to the year 1836 (compared to 33 for Louisville and 10 for Jeffersonville during the same period). The foundry of Morton & Cox was located near the shipyards to repair engines. The original establishment dated back to 1825. By 1843, it had been taken over by Lent, South and Shipman (later to be known as the "Phoenix"). Later, in the 1850s, this foundry turned out two steamboat engines every month, as well as other types of iron equipment. During the period of steamboat building, other foundries also prospered along the Ohio at New Albany. The City Directory of 1856 indicated that 33 steamboats were built at the town between 1835 and 1840 (compared to 17 during the previous five years). Between 1840 and 1845, 54 were built; the five years to 1850 saw 69 constructed and 59 between 1850 and 1854, with an additional 37 in the two years to June of 1856. While virtually no fabric of these boat yards remains today, the ripple effect on the town of such activity was surely intense.

New Albany in 1845 had two fire companies and a hook and ladder company. City Hall was located on Main (High) Street between State and Pearl, the Courthouse on State Street

between Spring & Market. There were eight churches (including two African-American churches), a Masonic lodge and Odd Fellows, several banks and institutions of higher learning. By 1856-7, the town had five fire houses plus a hook and ladder company. One of these, a sturdy brick building on E. Spring and E. Fourth Streets was constructed in 1857 and still remains within the district. There were seven social or fraternal clubs and three public halls for meetings and performances in addition to the City Hall. Two daily and weekly newspapers served the community and a plethora of churches, seven of which were once located within the boundaries of the Downtown Historic District. Two of these buildings, the Second Presbyterian and Centenary Methodist churches remain today on their original locations within the district.

Plucky New Albany! It survived the Panic of 1837, the nation's first major economic crisis, as well as several cholera episodes which had devastated other river towns. During its golden years at the mid-century, the village on the Indiana side of the Ohio became a truly proud city. Incorporated in 1839, by 1850 it had become among the first 100 cities in America. The same year, with a population of over 8,000 people it was the largest city in the state. One of Indiana's first railroads, the New Albany and Salem (later part of the Monon Line) was completed from the town in 1851. Railroad shops for service and construction were located in the community. Plank roads linked Corydon to the west and Jeffersonville to the east and the road over the hills to the northwest was macadamized.

While the city limits nearly doubled, the downtown continued to be the focus of commercial enterprise. The New Albany and Salem Railroad had been completed to Lake Michigan by 1856 and work on a direct line to Ohio was underway. The wharves and streets were paved and ship yards, foundries, mills and other manufacturing activities were thriving.

Although shipbuilding declined after the Civil War, New Albany's railroad connections and active shipping continued its economic development. New industries were founded. One of the most interesting was the early plate glass factory, the New Albany Glass Works, founded by John B. Ford and later purchased by a rival, the Star Glass Works of Washington C. DePauw. Mr. Ford moved to Pittsburgh and founded a company there which later became renown as the Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Company. But New Albany retained the distinction of having the first large plate glass installed in a show window at 318 Pearl Street, in the downtown commercial sector. The plant in New Albany continued to grow along the river bank, under DePauw's direction.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the city of New Albany continued to grow. In 1873, a promotional booklet declared that the dollar value of the river trade at New Albany could be estimated at about seventeen million dollars (for 1872). In addition, the city could count railroad, manufacturing, mechanical, mercantile, livestock and produce as well as coal, minerals and other general trade among its economic assets. Two former hotel/lodgings

remain to attest to the passenger needs of river traffic, The Israel House Hotel of 1830 and the Italianate hotel on E. Market which dates to 1873. At this time New Albany was the terminus for three railroads, with several more granted right-of-way or under construction. The population had grown to 20,000 people, many employed in the busy manufacturing sector which prospered thanks to the ready market access provided by easy river and rail transport. The city promoters touted the low taxes, reasonable rents and healthful climate as good reasons to locate in New Albany. The latter was the result, according to the promoters, of the absence of “ponds, swamps and stagnant water, the diversity of the soil, the high hills, open timber and living streams of pure water, and the generally equitable climate.”

Many of the commercial structures, especially those built in the Italianate style, date from this period and from the next decade. The wholesale business in the town was estimated at about six million dollars a year in 1873 and the retail trade at about 3 million dollars. Thanks to steam and street cars, and improved river crossings, New Albany was becoming a commuter home to those whose business interests were in Louisville, a practice which continues to this day.

The amenities of the town, in the downtown district, continued to grow. Of the thirteen public and fraternal halls in the town, twelve were located in the Downtown Historic District. Today, the I.O.O.F. Building, constructed in 1878 stands out as a nearly intact reminder of these important social gathering places. The Fire Department had become a professional organization in 1865, with a paid staff with three steam engines and a hook and ladder truck. Washington No. 1, at the southeast corner of E. Spring and E. Fourth Streets, now housed one of these engines and a staff of eleven men. There were twenty-two churches in the town, several of them in the downtown area, like the German Methodist Church on E. Fourth Street, which was constructed in 1861. The First Universalist Church had a building on the south side of Spring Street, between E. Third and E. Fourth during this era, which later would be purchased and remodeled by the New Albany Maennerchor Society, and which is still present today. As these institutions indicate, the population of the city was diverse, and featured German, Irish, and African-American groups, to name a few. There were now four banks in town, including the First National Bank (previously the Indiana State Bank, constructed in 1837) and the Merchants National Bank on Main Street at the northeast corner of Pearl Street, constructed in 1869. Most manufacturing activity took place outside the Downtown Historic District, although one, the New Albany Woolen Mills, maintained an office at 282 Main Street. Nonetheless, the economic activity generated by the mills and foundries affected the fabric of the district through the lavish construction of brick and limestone commercial buildings, including the various financial institutions. Also located prominently downtown, on Main Street at the corner of State was the New Albany Ledger-Standard, which had an active print shop in addition to the publication of daily and weekly newspapers.

By the 1880s, New Albany was experiencing a “building boom”. The New Albany Daily Ledger of March 3, 1887, enthused: “There is a genuine building boom in New Albany . . . and piles of lumber and brick are scattered along the streets in all parts of the city.” Downtown New Albany shared in the activity, with the “fine three-story stone-front business house” of Joseph Reibel, sen., to be erected on the site of his present building on the north side of E. Market Street. The new building would have a large hall on the third floor, and would be “. . . the handsomest business house on Market Street, when completed.” A similar article the previous year had announced that Jacob Goodbub would build an elegant three-story business house on the west side of Pearl Street adjacent to his present building between E. Main and E. Market Streets (about in the middle of the block). W. C. DePauw was adding a gas works on the grounds of his plate glass company and Mrs. Josephine Kaiser was building a brick business building on a lot adjacent on the south to the New Albany Daily Ledger printing shop. The Kaiser building survives today in nearly pristine condition (326 Pearl Street), although the Ledger building has long since been replaced. Many of the buildings, especially along Pearl, Market and Main Streets date from this late nineteenth century building era. They often expressed the Italianate design or one of its variations.

As the century drew to a close, New Albany continued to prosper, but not as dramatically. The American Plate Glass Works employed over 1,200 workers and covered 30 acres along the river, but the discovery of natural gas in the northern part of the state had begun to erode its business. While there was a slight increase of the population in 1890, by 1900 it had reverted to about 20,000 people. Although the “building boom” had slowed, several interesting projects were undertaken, including an ambitious remodeling of the building on E. Spring Street between Third and Fourth by the German singing society, the New Albany Maennerchor. With the addition of a stage, kitchen and new steam heating, as well as work on the exterior and windows, this building was said to provide the group with “the finest home in its comfortable arrangements, complete equipment and architectural beauty as well as interior finish of any singing society in Indiana.”

Seven plywood and veneer industries replaced the depleted glass works, to provide employment and economic vitality for the town between 1898 and 1923. With the still abundant sources of natural timber close by and excellent water and rail transportation, this growth is not surprising. A number of buildings were constructed in the downtown during this era, including the classically inspired, architect-designed Elsby Building, several others on E. Spring Street, a Renaissance Revival building on the northeast corner of E. Main and State Streets, as well as neo-Classical examples on the west side of Pearl Street near Spring, among others. An outstanding example of the way architects used classical forms and motifs in an eclectic manner during this time can be seen in the New Albany Free Public Library of 1902 on E. Spring Street. New Albany was eclipsed during the middle part of the century by growth in

other parts of the state, but in 1920, it still ranked as the second largest city in the southern sector.

The Great Depression, which ensued in the third decade of this century, caused a further decline in the city's economy, as it did for most of the country. Adding to these woes was the tragedy of the 1937 flood, which caused intensive damage up and down the river. The economic difficulties were somewhat relieved by the new jobs created by World War II production. A few buildings in the downtown district can be related to this era, including the remodeling of the Grand Theater, the Firestone Building and the automobile-related building at 140 E. Main Street, all of which reflect Art Deco or Art Moderne influences typical of this period. Following World War II, local interest in the construction of a flood wall resulted in the destruction of many old buildings along the river front (many had also been damaged in the flood).

New Albany's Downtown Historic District reflects the dynamic growth of the town during the nineteenth century, especially from the peak times between 1830 and 1890. The buildings which remain from these periods demonstrate in their construction and style the historic development of the town. Commerce flowed in a town with such good transportation and in such proximity to the major population center across the river. The primarily commercial nature of the district is typical of a river town, which served as a jumping off point for produce heading down river and up, and for river craft and their passengers heading to points both east and west. Thus the district is significant for its association with these historical trends, especially the development of commerce during the historic period.

ARCHITECTURE

The New Albany Downtown Historic District is graced with many examples of excellent architectural design, from high style Neo-Classical buildings like the library on E. Spring Street, to the temple-form purity of the Indiana State Bank's Greek Revival style to rhythmic patterns of stone or pressed metal hoods on the upper stories of its tightly-packed business blocks.

The most prevalent style represented in the district is Italianate, with about 40 contributing examples. These buildings took advantage of Indiana's wealth of limestone for trim, window sills and, often, window heads or entire facades. Cast iron parts for ground floor store fronts and pressed metal brackets, cornices and other ornamentation are also common. In addition, this offshoot of the Picturesque movement allowed entrepreneurs to add exuberant detail to their business structures at a reasonable cost. The ready availability of catalog parts made it easy for builders to import such features for their clients, especially since they could be shipped by water or rail directly to New Albany. Thus, one can observe the prevalence of round arched

window hoods of a similar style on a number of buildings of this era in the downtown, or bracketed projecting cornices of pressed metal with similar detailing, or similar elements in different combinations. While many excellent buildings in the downtown have been lost over the years, the district still retains a high degree of contributing buildings which demonstrate this popular late nineteenth century style. The quantity and quality of the existing fabric provide an excellent demonstration of the style and its many variants. Examples along Pearl, E. Market and E. Main Streets are especially helpful.