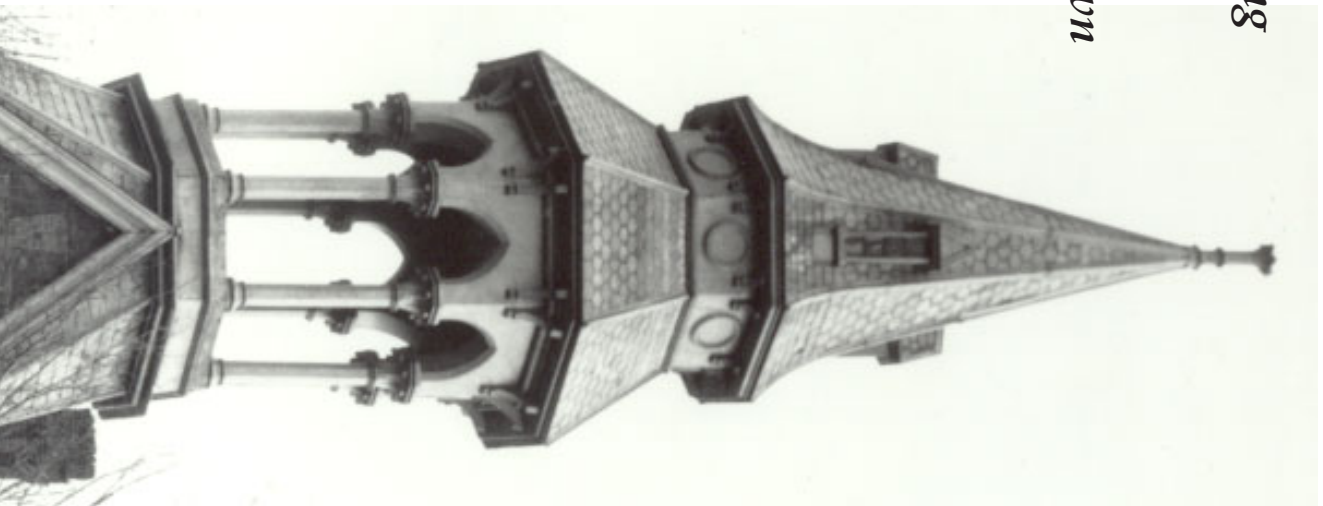


A Walking Tour of Oberlin's Downtown Historic District



Downtown Oberlin: An Historic District

National Register of Historic Places

Located in a college town of some eight thousand residents and college students in the center of Lorain County, the Downtown Oberlin Historic District is the central core of the community's business district. It contains a rich assortment of 19th- and early 20th-century commercial and public buildings, as well as a school building. The district contains an almost continuous streetscape of one-to-three-story small-scale commercial structures along the south side of College Street, which runs east and west, and along Main Street, which runs south from College Street to Vine Street. The district is roughly T-shaped, with College Street as the top bar of the T.

The downtown area is directly south and southeast of Tappan Square, a large open green space owned by Oberlin College and enjoyed by both the college students and the community. The square was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1985, and many of the college's historic buildings around the square were listed on the National Register in 1978. The Union School (now the New Union Center for the Arts) at 39 South Main Street was listed on the National Register in 1973.

Main and College Streets have served as the town and college's primary business district since 1833, when the college and town were founded. Most have first-floor storefronts with second and third floors designed for apartments, offices, and meeting rooms. The architecture of the district is varied, though much of it is of brick construction. Many of the buildings typify vernacular commercial architecture of the time period and incorporate elements of high styles such as the Victorian Gothic, Queen Anne, Classical Revival, and Art Moderne. Though some storefronts have been altered, most of the buildings retain considerable design integrity and the ensemble is a typical early 20th-century small-town Ohio business district.

Along the streets there are trees, concrete flower planters, street lights, hitching posts, and other streetscape and sidewalk enhancements that date from the mid-1980s. To the north of the district is the Oberlin College campus, to the east and south residential neighborhoods, and to the west of the South Main Street portion is the Oberlin Heritage Center, a complex of historic sites open to the public.

Downtown Oberlin was designated a National Register Historic District in 2003. This tour brochure does not include all the buildings contributing to the historic district.

Walking Tour of Downtown Oberlin's National Register District

- 1** 29 West College (Bead Paradise)
 Builder: Emelle Royce
 (later Mrs. A.G. Comings), 1900

This flat-roof, rectangular building has a first-floor storefront with a recessed central entrance. The second floor, built for office and storage space, has two oriel windows and decorative brick detailing at the cornice level and around the windows. Renovated circa 1990, the building retains much of its original character. Since 1900 it has housed a succession of dry-goods and clothing stores. The original building on this site was the home of West College Street's principal developer, John D. Carpenter, who, when he died in 1906, was considered the wealthiest man in Oberlin.

- 5** 5-13 West College (Ben Franklin)
 Architect: Weary & Kramer, Akron
 Contractor: H.G. Carpenter,
 1887-1890

Known as the Carpenter Block, this Queen Anne-style Victorian two-story pressed-brick commercial building originally had four first-floor storefronts. In 1891 the occupants were the Oberlin Pharmacy on the east corner, the Oberlin Bank, E.H. Holter Jewelry, and August Straus Clothing and Tailoring. Drugstores continued to occupy the corner until the mid-1990s. Present long-term occupants are Herrick Jewelry (with a circa 1930s black vitrolite Moderne storefront), in business since 1914, and the Ben Franklin Store (with a circa 1960s storefront). Previously on this site stood Oberlin Hall, Oberlin College's first building.

- 6** 16 South Main (Campus Video)
 Contractor: Bonsor Brothers,
 Lorain, 1888

This two-story brick Queen Anne-style building has a first-floor storefront (altered circa 1970) and second-floor apartments. It adjoins the Carpenter Block on the southwest corner of Main and West College streets and continues the corner building's stringcourse and other design details. It replaced a frame building, destroyed by fire in 1882, that was owned by John Watson, a prominent African-American resident and one of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescuers of 1858.

- 2** 27 West College (Tooo Chinese)
 Contractor: W.A. Westervelt and Son, 1869

This two-story brick structure is Oberlin's oldest commercial building. On the second floor are three bays with segmental arched windows, keystones, and stone sills. The parapet has brick corbeling and dentils with stone coping. The storefront was altered circa 1950 and modified later. Wright and Parsons Grocery Store occupied the building from 1907 to 1940 and Haylor Bookstore from 1941 to 1960.

- 3** 23 West College (Gibson's)
 Contractor: Gibson Bros., 1905

This three-story brown pressed-brick building houses Oberlin's oldest family business, a bakery and market that is still owned and operated by descendants of the original owners. A date plaque at the parapet reads "1905 Gibson Block." The Art Moderne black vitrolite storefront was part of a 1940s remodel that included aluminum lettering and molding. The bay window clad in aluminum siding appears to be circa 1970.

- 4** 19-21 West College (Green Iguana)
 Builder: J.D. Carpenter, 1860-61

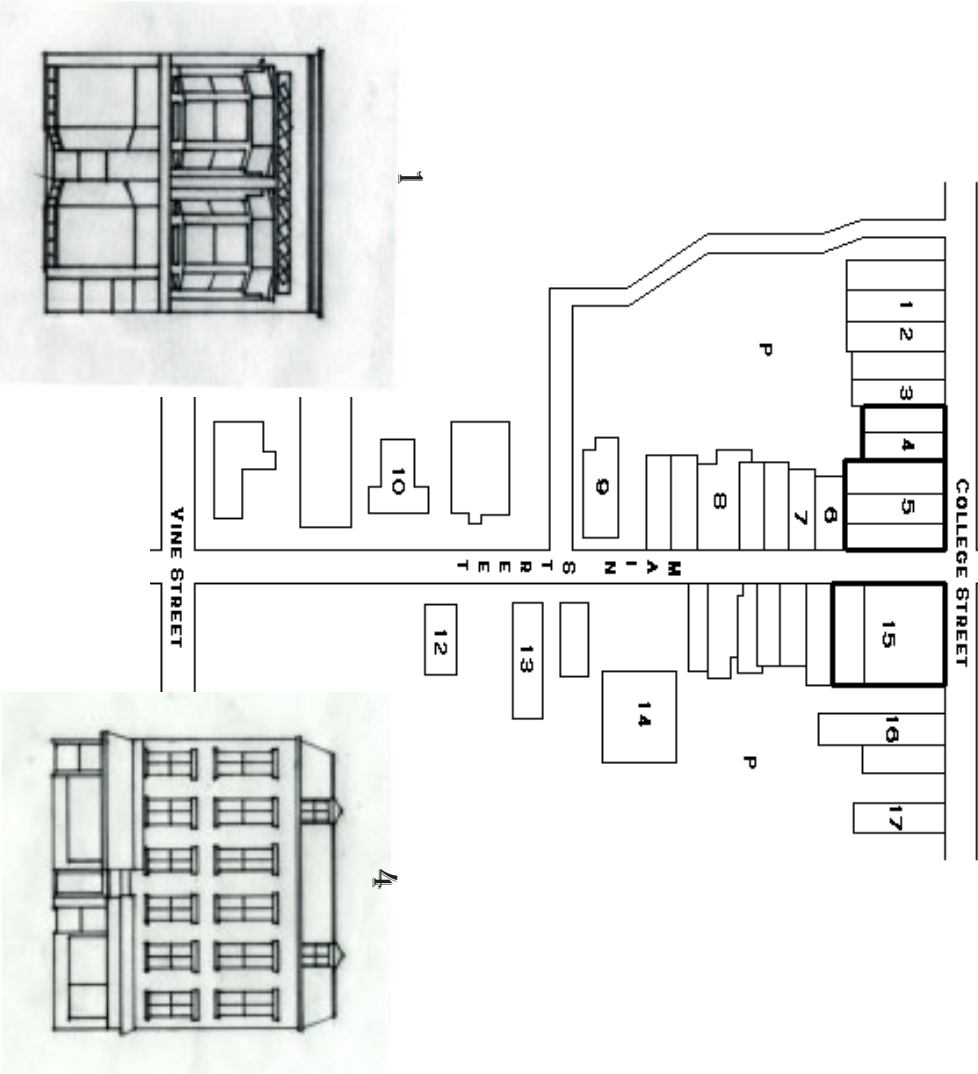
This three-story brick building has a fish-scale slate-clad mansard roof with dormers. There are two circa 1970s first-floor storefronts divided by a doorway leading to upper-floor apartments. Early ground-floor businesses included several grocers, a dry-goods store, and a bookstore; upstairs there were a telegraph office, photographers' galleries, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, and the Oberlin YMCA.

- 7** 18 South Main (Subway)
 Contractor: T.H. Rowland,
 1930

This one-story variegated pressed-brick building has a symmetrical facade with a round-arched recessed entrance. The brick panels under the plate-glass storefront windows appear to be a circa 1970 alteration. Until the 1990s the building accommodated two separate storefronts, one of them the long-time home of the popular Pettiford Bakery, owned and operated by a local African-American family.

- 8** 26 South Main (Watson's Hardware)
 Contractor: Albert Gilchrist,
 1874, 1898

This three-story brick structure with a first-floor storefront and upper-floor shops and apartments was rebuilt following a fire in January 1898. The present storefront appears to date from 1946, when the building was extensively remodeled. The building has been home to hardware stores for more than 130 years — the only business in Oberlin to survive in the same building since 1900. During most of that time the Watson and Moynaux family owned the business.



9 38 - 42 South Main
(Oberlin News Tribune)
Contractor: J. D. Carpenter,
c.1877 (north); 1895 (south)

This two-story Victorian brick building has three first-floor storefronts divided by brick piers. The Queen Anne double-hung windows include colored glass panes, and within the segmental arches above the second-floor windows there is herringbone patterning. The present storefronts appear to date from circa 1980. The building was built in two phases, the northern section about 1877, the two southern sections in 1895. The Oberlin Grange met on the second floor from 1919 until circa 1970.

10 68 South Main (Post Office)
Architect: Alfred Hahn, Toledo
Contractor: A.J. Dekoning,
Kalamazoo, 1934

This finely detailed, one-story, neoclassical building has a central block flanked by smaller side wings. The interior retains nearly all its original woodwork and marble paneling. A disabled-access ramp was added to the main facade circa 1998. Attending the post office's dedication in 1937 was James Farley, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's postmaster general.

11 90 South Main (Midas Muffler)
Architect: William Durand, Oberlin
Contractors: George Jackson,
George Broadwell, 1930

Oberlin's first modern gas station, this one-story Tudor Revival building has simulated half-timbering in the gable ends of the roof. According to Barry Jones, the present owner, the building was the first canopied gas station between Pittsburgh and Detroit. The service-bay wing on the west side, along Vine Street, is a later addition. The first proprietors, Jackson and Broadwell, named their business "J and B," which quickly became Jarby. Their families operated the business until independent Oil bought it in 1963. The building continued as a filling station until 1981, and then was adapted for use by Midas Muffler.

12 69 South Main Street
(Oberlin Town Hall)
Architect: Mr. Walters, Cleveland
probably George Charles Walters

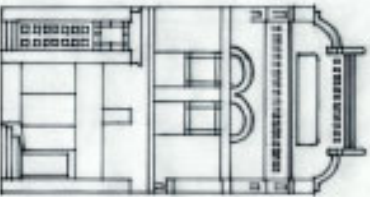
This Prairie Style-inspired brown brick building cost approximately \$40,000 to build. The Oberlin News reported (May 28, 1919) that the town council wished to use stone for the building's trim rather than terra cotta, as the terra cotta had to be custom-made. The building originally housed the fire department (first floor north side), the city clerk and other offices (first floor south side), the council chamber and mayor's office (second floor), the offices and laboratory of the waterworks superintendent, Russia Township offices, and others. It served as city hall until the present city hall building to the south opened in 1977.

13 51 - 53 South Main
(Yesterday's Ice Cream)
Contractor: S.S. Hobbs, 1914

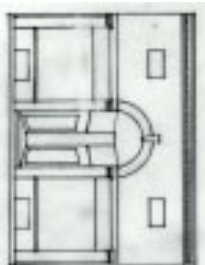
This two-story brick building with a one-story rear addition has two storefronts, fixed glass aluminum windows, and a recessed entrance. There are stone belt courses above and below the second-floor windows and a date plaque at the parapet level reading "S. S. Hobbs, 1914." The southern half of the building originally housed the Rex Theater (movies) and later a bowling alley. The northern storefront housed the Oberlin Tribune from 1914 to 1931 and then the Oberlin Laundry. The Oberlin School of Commerce/Oberlin Business College classrooms were on the second floor.

14 39 South Main
(New Union Center for the Arts)
Architect: Walter Blythe, Cleveland
Contractor: John Berg, 1874

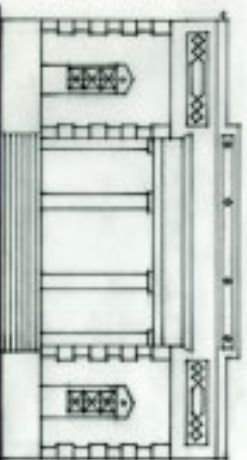
This three-story brick Victorian Gothic building was Oberlin's public school. First it housed all twelve grades, then the high school alone, until 1923. From then until 1961 it was the Oberlin College classroom building known as Westervelt Hall. After standing vacant and being threatened with demolition, it was renovated in the 1980s by then-owner A.H. Clark. The Nord Family Foundation purchased it in 1995 and renovated it for use as the New Union Center for the Arts. The architectural firm for the renovation was Clark and Post of Lorain. The original bell tower, made of wood and slate, was removed in 1940. In 1997, O.H.I.O. led a community project to install an aluminum and microzinc reproduction of the tower and its bell. The detailing is as close as possible to that shown in historic photographs.



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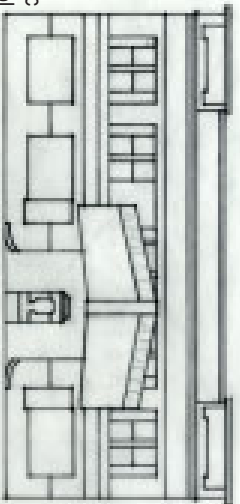


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17

35 East College
Contractor: George Bailey,
1927-1929

This two-story, flat-roof brick commercial building has two plate-glass first-floor storefronts divided by a central entrance. Its central date plaque reads "G. H. Bailey, 1928." The second-floor windows were replaced with casement and fixed-pane sash circa 1997. Some of the bricks came from Spear Laboratory, an early Oberlin College building on Tappan Square, according to G. H. Bailey's daughter. Sedgeman Furniture and Undertaking occupied the building for about 40 years, followed by Schultz Furniture. The building is now studios and a residence for two Oberlin artists.

15 5 - 13 South Main (First Merit Bank)
Architect: Walter Blythe,
Cleveland, 1882

Built following a disastrous fire in 1882, this was the first commercial building in Oberlin with an iron frame. A portion of the original cast-iron storefront remains, with piers embossed with the name of the manufacturer, the "Union Foundry Co. Cleved., O." The E.J. Goodrich Bookstore was among the first occupants of the first floor, and since 1904 there has been a succession of banks in the corner unit. Behind the one facade are two buildings: number 13 was built as a separate structure, and the Carter and Wood Hardware Store there had Oberlin's first elevator. Various hardware stores occupied this site from 1850 to 1976. All the storefronts have been altered, probably since 1960.

16 17 - 21 East College
(Apollo Theater)
Contractor: William Hobbs,
1903-1913

This two-story brown pressed-brick commercial building with a movie theater and two storefronts has a flat roof and a sandstone date stone reading "19Hobbs'13," indicating it was built by Oberlin resident William Dayton Hobbs in 1913. It may include portions of a 1903 structure. The Steel family has owned the Apollo movie theater since 1923. The theater showed the first "talkies" in Oberlin on May 11, 1928. The first floor was remodeled in the 1930s to its present Art Moderne appearance, with black vitrolite, aluminum, and plate glass.

Take A Tour Around The Square (and More)...

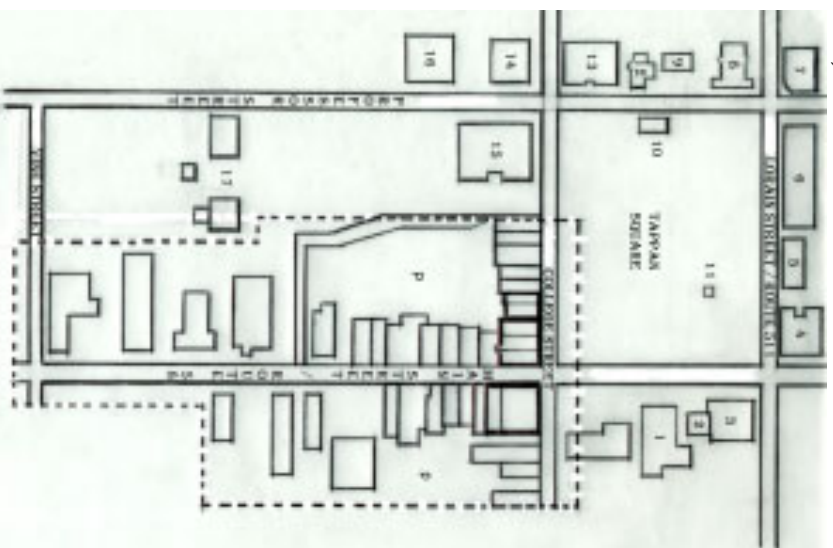
Buildings and their Architects

1. Hall Auditorium, Wallace Harrison, 1953
2. Allen Art Building addition, Robert Venturi, 1976*
3. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Cass Gilbert, 1917*
4. First Church in Oberlin, Richard Bond, 1834*
5. Bosworth Hall, Cass Gilbert, 1931
6. Carnegie Building, Normand Patton, 1908
7. Severance Hall, Howard Van Doren Shaw, 1900
8. Finney Chapel, Cass Gilbert, 1908
9. Cox Administration Building, Cass Gilbert, 1915
10. Memorial Arch, Joseph Lyman Silsbee, 1902
11. Clark Bandstand, Julian S. Smith, 1985
12. Peters Hall, Weary & Kramer, 1897
13. King Building, Minoru Yamasaki, 1966
14. Talcott Hall, Weary & Kramer, 1897
15. Conservatory of Music, Minoru Yamasaki, 1963
16. Baldwin Cottage, Weary & Kramer, 1886-1887
17. Oberlin Heritage Center: Monroe House, 1866;
Little Red Schoolhouse, 1836; Jewett House, 1884*

*Open to the Public; hours vary

P - Parking

--- National Register Historic District Boundary



Visit the Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O.

Start your visit to Oberlin with a 1 hour and 15 minute guided tour that showcases the nationally significant history of the community and college. Enjoy learning about abolition and the Underground Railroad, alumnim history, women's history, decorative arts, and more in two beautifully preserved historic houses and a one-room school. Tours are offered every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 10:30 a.m. & 1:30 p.m. Tours for groups of ten or more are available by appointment. For more information, a map, parking, and driving directions, a calendar of upcoming special events, and a restaurant and accommodations listing, call 440-774-1700 or visit the Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O. website at www.oberlinheritage.org. The Oberlin Heritage Center is located at 73 1/2 South Professor Street, one-half block from the Downtown Oberlin Historic District. The Oberlin Heritage Center/O.H.I.O. is part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Statewide and Local Partners Network.

Founding of the Town and College

The Oberlin Colony was founded by Elyria Pastor John Jay Shipherd (1802-1844) and his friend the Reverend Philo Stewart (1798-1868), who had served as a missionary to the Choctaws of Mississippi. They purchased a plot of swampy land upon which to found the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, a manual-labor school. In 1832 they traveled to what was to become Oberlin. Under an elm tree near what is now the northwest corner of College and Main streets, they talked about the community they would found. They set a tone of "Christian Perfectionism," aspiring to a pure devotion to God through hard work and simple living. They named their community after John Frederick Oberlin (1740-1826), a European minister and educator from the Alsace region. Many of the early colonists farmed the land and went to the small college that became a training ground for missionaries and teachers who went throughout the world. In 1846 the village was incorporated, and in 1850 the name of the college was changed from Oberlin Collegiate Institute to Oberlin College.

In the 19th and early 20th century both college and town participated in various reform movements, including antislavery, African-American rights, women's rights and suffrage, temperance, and progressive-era community improvement.

Acknowledgements

This text is adapted from the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization's application for downtown Oberlin's National Register designation. A complete copy of the nomination, including buildings not mentioned here, is available at O.H.I.O.

Edited by Jane Blodgett and Carol Ganzel

Graphic design by Maria Surovy

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Cover photo: Bell tower at the New Union Center for the Arts
The Oberlin Chamber of Commerce & the Main Street Program have more information about current downtown Oberlin businesses.

7 North Main Street, Suite 117
(440) 774-6262
www.oberlin.org