

DOWNTOWN ROCK ISLAND ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

On June 28, the Illinois Sites Advisory Council unanimously recommended that the downtown Rock Island application for National Register of Historic Places be signed by the State Historic Preservation Officer and forwarded to the National Park Service. While states review such applications and make recommendations, the National Park Service serves as the Keeper of the National Register.

It may be a couple of months before the listing is complete, but the main hurdle has been overcome. The application was prepared by Architectural Historian Erica Ruggiero under the auspices of the Rock Island Preservation Commission. The Commission received a Certified Local Government Grant to pay 70 percent of the cost of the application, with the City picking up the rest of the tab.

The boundaries of the National Register area are not smooth, but in general extend from 14th to 21st Streets and 1st through 5th Avenues. The area contains 119 structures listed as ‘contributing’ and 28 ‘non-contributing.’ The contributing buildings are those which are at least 50 years old (pre-1969) and which are recognizable as historic – they have kept most of their original exterior features, or as usually said, “retain a high degree of integrity.” Non-contributing buildings may be very attractive and appropriate infill, but they are newer and therefore do not qualify as historic. Several downtown buildings are already individually listed on the National Register.

Among the diverse contributing structures, representing many styles, are the Safety Building, old First National Bank, the WHBF tower, the Brutalist style US Bank branch in flatiron square (south side of 5th Avenue at 17th Street), and, yes, the Courthouse. A major accomplishment is including the Centennial Bridge in the district. Some of the non-contributing but attractive buildings that complement the vintage structures and that will be historic in the future are the barrel-roofed Illinois Casualty Company on 20th Street & 3rd Avenue and The Paddock office building on the north side of 2nd Avenue in the 1600 block.



Downtown Rock Island: An Historical Perspective

The first actual town in Rock Island County was platted in 1835 on 61.95 acres of rather swampy lowland between what are today 10th and 17th Streets in Rock Island. It bore the name Davenport. However, a state legislator objected because of derogatory remarks George Davenport had made about him. After much debate, the new town was called Stephenson.

Rapid growth followed and one year before the town incorporated and changed its name to Rock Island, *The Argus* described the town as it appeared in 1840: *“The inhabitants of the town and its environs could not be surpassed, if equaled, by any city in the west, for men of intelligence-courteous and kind in everything...Our medical provided by Doctor Gregg alone, a man eminent in his profession. There were three stores in the place, kept by John Meller, Lemuel Andrews and a Mr. Kauffman. Two more came afterwards, viz: Mr. Bond and Mr. Moore. There was one tinning establishment, Lee & Chamberlin’s; one saddler shop, J. M. Frizzell’s; one cabinet maker’s and one gunsmith’s shop; three taverns, Mr. Bently’s on the river bank; Buffum’s, back of the Court House Square; and the Rock Island House on Main St, kept by VanCourt & Brothers. This was the leading hotel at that day. There was one restaurant, and one other, called a saloon for the want of a more appropriate name. One minister of the gospel (Presbyterian), Reverend Mr. Stewart, preached in a little schoolhouse back of Doctor Gregg’s residence on Main St-our only church, lyceum (school) and town hall.”*

The Mississippi and Rock Rivers contributed to Rock Island’s rapid growth. Steamboats brought goods and immigrants from the industrialized southeast to the rapidly expanding northwest. The town benefitted from being at the foot of the Rock Island rapids. Boats going upstream stopped here to take on a pilot to help navigate the treacherous rapids. In low water, goods and passengers were transferred to flat boats or hauled by wagon around the rapids. The fees for such services were high and brought much needed revenue to the community.

Steamboat traffic reached its peak during the 1850s. As many as 1,900 boats carrying supplies, livestock, and passengers docked annually at the city’s wharves. But traffic continued to be interrupted by river conditions. So, the community celebrated when the first “iron horse” rolled into town in 1854 and again when it was decided to bridge the Mississippi using Arsenal Island as a stepping stone. The impact of the railroads was immediate. The price of land soared from 87.5 cents per acre in 1852, to \$5-\$10 per acre in 1853. Warehouses sprang up

continued next page

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

An Historical Perspective, continued: along the railroad tracks to hold goods shipped from Chicago or St. Louis awaiting shipment to the fast-developing communities west of the Mississippi. By 1860, Rock Island had a population of over 6,000 making it the fifth largest city in Illinois.

Several local aldermen attended the 1876 World's Fair in Philadelphia. Upon return they inspired 100 influential businessmen to form a Citizen's Improvement Association to address community concerns. The modern practice of numbering Streets and Avenues was adopted. A special tax assessment was used to brick the commercial section of 2nd Ave and construction of solid, uniform sidewalks followed.

In the late 1880's a bird's-eye view of Rock Island showed a commercial district roughly between present day 16th and 19th Sts., and 1st and 3rd Aves. Stores that sold essentials, such as clothing, foodstuffs, furniture, drugs and hardware, shared the space with steam laundries, liquor dealers, harness and wagon makers, coal merchants, plumbers, dentists, and manufacturers of soaps, baby buggies, and cigars. There were also banks, telegraph and express companies, hotels, offices, livery stables, restaurants, and public buildings. Buildings we recognize today were in place including the Star Block at 1821-29 2nd Ave, the Fries Building at 1723 2nd Ave and the oldest still standing downtown building at 1810 3rd Ave that was originally Dauber's Blacksmith Shop and more recently Main Camera.

The turn of the century ushered in some raucous years in downtown Rock Island. The community seemed to have an appetite for drinking, gambling and prostitution, all of which were overseen by John Looney and his gang. But that did not stop construction. The Safety Building at 1800 3rd Ave when built in 1908 was the tallest building in the city. The Fort Theater at 1828 3rd Ave with its iconic terra cotta decorations was constructed in 1920. In 1925, citizens demonstrated their faith in restoring order to their downtown when they purchased over

\$450,000 in shares in seven days to build the Fort Armstrong Hotel at 1900 3rd Ave. In 1928, the gorgeous Art Deco Royal Neighbors of America building at 230 16th St was completed.

In 1935, *The Argus* reported that the city had attracted 93 new businesses, marking recovery from the Great Depression. This was also the era when car dealerships and gas stations were added to the edges of the commercial district. And 1940 brought the opening of the long awaited Centennial Bridge linking the downtowns of Rock Island and Davenport. Other evidence of a thriving downtown included the arrival of Montgomery Ward and Sears department stores.

Although shopping malls and changing shopping patterns resulted in vacant downtown store fronts in the decades that followed, it is fortunate that many important buildings remain and retain sufficient architectural integrity to be considered contributing to the new National Register Historic District. Newer construction such as the International Style bank building at 1639 2nd Ave and churches and public buildings are also considered contributing to the district. It is said that every building tells a story and we look forward to including the buildings in our downtown historic district in the story of Rock Island.

Note: much of the included history was adapted from Rock Island History: A Companion to the Architectural Walking Tours by Kathleen Seusy written for the Rock Island Preservation Commission in 1999.

*Photos, top to bottom
Star Block, c.1874 Italianate;
Fries Building, 1897 Classical Revival;
Fort Armstrong Theater, c.1921 Art Deco;
Royal Neighbors of America, 1928 Art Deco;
Centennial Bridge Building, 1941 Art Moderne;
First National Bank of Rock Island, 1960 International.
All photos courtesy of www.RIGov.org*



WHY IS THE NATIONAL REGISTER IMPORTANT?

Some folks, perhaps even some downtown building owners, may not recognize value in historic structures, so why should they care about the new National Register listing? First of all, the National Register is an official verification that our downtown is indeed historic. If nothing else, it reinforces our pride in our community – but it's also something that could be used in marketing businesses and rentals.

But there's another very pragmatic reason. Buildings that are listed as "contributing" are automatically eligible for both Federal and the new State income tax credits for rehab and restoration.

Tax credits come right off the income tax that you owe, so they are worth a great deal for businesses and individuals. The Federal tax credit is 20 percent, while the recently enacted Illinois state tax credit is 25 percent. State tax credits are one reason that so much historic development has taken place across the river in Iowa, which has had a state tax credit for many years. As an example, if you as a property owner spend \$1M on a qualified (approved) restoration or renovation, you would be eligible for \$200,000 in federal income tax credits and \$250,000 in state income tax credits. These credits can be spread out over several years if necessary. A professional tax accountant can advise you on specifics.

This is a somewhat over simplified explanation. There is a detailed process to receive tax credits, but the benefit is well worth it. Applications are submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office who evaluates the impact of the proposed work on the historic qualities of the building. Since the historic use and potential contemporary use are usually quite different, interior modifications are likely needed and are subject to review as well. Guidelines are actually quite simple: Follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, which you can read here. www.nps.gov/tps/standards/rehabilitation

While guidelines may be deceptively simple, their interpretation can be difficult, especially for a contractor with little or no experience in rehabbing historic structures. An architect experienced in implementing preservation requirements is a good investment for a property owner – and architectural fees count toward the tax credit. Owners don't need to go out of the area to find such an architect; most of our local firms have the experience and know-how to make a historically sensitive building adaptable to a modern use. A major benefit is that architectural input often can SAVE construction costs. Moreover, sensitive rehab ensures that a building will retain its value. For example, even amateur preservationists know that vinyl siding, new windows, and porch removal are costly items that actually devalue a house for future resale. On a larger scale, similarly insensitive but costly remodels can devalue a commercial structure.



Rock Island Preservation Society
P.O. Box 3261
Rock Island, Illinois 61204-3261

