Historic Significance of Historic District

Historical Development. The Monroe Commercial District has been the heart of Monroe activity since the settlement of the city in the 1840s. The commercial area has been the primary business and social focal point for both the Monroe community and much of Green County. The local businesses of the district, many of which are being operated by third and fourth generations of the same families, continue to offer their services in buildings that have been used for commerce since the city's incorporation. Monroe's historic commercial buildings are also visual landmarks, generally in a very good state of preservation, that represent a cross section of architectural styles prevalent during the years between 1840 and 1940.

Commerce. What was to become Monroe was first settled about 1834. Wheat farmers comprised the bulk of the early settlers in this part of Green County, and Monroe was one of several small towns that sprang up as a local service center for the farming interests. Thus, commerce played a central role in the town's development from the very first. Monroe benefited from good location and promotion, so that by 1840 a selection of small stores, inns and taverns, all of which featured a "general assortment of goods, making the sale of whiskey a specialty," formed the roots of business growth. By 1840, too, the city was the seat of Green County. This plum was won mainly through the labors of Jacob Lybrand, a Pennsylvania-born speculator and investor and a first-rate town promoter. One of the earliest businessmen in Monroe, who ran "an unusually good" general store, Lybrand gave 40 acres of his landholdings in Monroe to the city as a courthouse site. Since this land was already the area of most business growth, it naturally occurred that almost the entire commercial district is now in Lybrand's Donation to the city of Monroe. (2)

In the early years, the commercial district consisted mainly of stores offering hardware, dry goods, and medicines. Most stores were of frame construction and were concentrated on the four sides of the Courthouse Square, but as time progressed, events effected several changes in the area. The selection as county seat was important, for from that time on, "business began drifting [in] from Milwaukee." Soon the signs of prosperity were reflected in the growth of brick and stone construction. This trend accelerated after 1879 when a major fire consumed seven shops on the southwest part of the square. By 1884, brick was being seen more commonly than frame construction in the commercial district. (3)

The most significant change affecting the commercial district, however, was the decline of the plow and the rise of the dairy cow. The soil in southern Wisconsin was simply too poor to sustain a wheat economy for very long; by the end of the 1860s many Wisconsin wheat farmers began seeking new land further west. In their wake came Swiss dairy farmers, mainly from the New Glarus settlement north of Monroe. There, Swiss immigrants had become experts in the production of cheese, and found the vacated farmlands about Monroe to be ideal for the industry. Although initially not accepted by the Monroe merchants, the cheese industry grew, particularly after Arabut Ludlow, a leading director of the First National Bank of Monroe, WI 53566 endorsed the efforts of the Swiss. By 1882, Monroe marketed only 1731 bushels of wheat, but 173,250 pounds of cheese were produced. Soon Green County was the nation's leading producer of cheese in America, and Monroe led the way in Green County. (4)

As the change in economics took place, it (and general trends in the late 19th century) induced alterations in the operations and appearance of the commercial district. Shops that theretofore had carried general merchandise now became more specialized: one store might offer only crockery, another furniture. The appearance of photographers, booksellers, and jewelers testified to both growing diversity and increasing prosperity. (5) Manufacturing, too, had grown up in the commercial district. Monroe's earliest manufacturing had consisted of a small brewery and planning mill, both in the south part of the district. But with the growth of capital, made possible by the alliance between the early merchant and the Swiss dairyman, larger manufacturing concerns were established. Monroe business now included the manufacture of carriages, agricultural implements and even weapons, while the brewery slowly became a statewide supplier. Manufacturing in the south part of the district become so extensive that it paid the Illinois Central Railroad to build a spur line up to the brewery buildings. (6)

Finally, the economic success generated by commerce in the district naturally encouraged service industries and social centers to become established. Hotels had already dotted the district, due to the presence of the county courthouse. Many of these were quite elaborate structures, and a few still remain standing. Some churches also existed at edges of the district, but no social center gave cause for greater civic pride than the Turner Hall. Originally a small frame structure, the Turner Hall in Monroe is now an elaborately decorated symbol of the Swiss tradition, and continues to serve the entire community as a foremost site for social activities. (7)

Architecture. The Monroe Commercial District is easily discernible since it had been hemmed in by residential growth as early as 1900. It is quite fortunate for the heritage of the city that Monroe's citizens and merchants have consistently been able to adapt their older commercial structures to new use and retain the relative architectural appearance and merits of the buildings. Although there have been changes, most notably the disappearance of the larger old hotels, relatively few modern buildings have been erected in the district. The very wide streets of the square contributed to this result by making the advent of the automobile easier in Monroe than many Wisconsin cities: that is, parking facilities already existed without the removal of numerous buildings in the downtown area.

Architecturally, the district offers a wide variety of styles, and provides a good working example of stylistic change over time. Very few of the frame structures of the early district still stand, but of these that do, two early hotels suggest the predominance of Greek Revival decoration in the early construction. Both the City Hotel (1602-12th Street, now Suisse Haus) and the Green County House (1301-15th Avenue) have been altered over the years, as well as the old city jail (1404-12th Street, now Jailhouse Tap). By the last two decades of the 19th century, Greek Revival elements had combined with other styles in a large number of Victorian structures. Victorian architecture came to dominate the district and still does, except for functional modernizations and alterations that are now present to some degree in these buildings. The Caradine Block (NRHP, 5/8/79) which was constructed in 1869 is probably the most unusual example of Victorian design in the district, due to the decorative brickwork placed on the façade by the building's German designer. More typical examples would be the Syndicate Block (1502-11th Street) and the Schlitz Building (1114-17th Avenue) both of which were erected in 1888. The ultimate expression of the Victorian mode in Monroe was reached in 1910, with the completion of the F. F. White Block (NRHP, 1/31/79), while the style's antithesis had appeared in the Green County Courthouse (HRHP, 3/21/78). Completed in 1891, the Courthouse's central location, contrasting Romanesque features and sheer massive size were sufficient to make the building the most striking visual edifice in the district.

Since 1900, architectural innovations in Monroe's commercial district have usually been functionally oriented. The Ludlow Memorial Library (1505-9th Street) for example was built in 1904 on neoclassical designs so popular in public buildings of the early 20th century. Similarly, the new Post Office (1724-11th Street), built in 1932 and one of the last significant addition to the district, was a Neo-Georgian design. Three other visual landmarks of late construction within the district express unique and functional designs: the Goetz (1704-11th Street), which emphasizes Moorish influences; the present site of the Monroe Clinic (925-16th Avenue), now the Monroe Library), a functional three story block almost devoid of decoration; and Turner Hall (1217-17th Avenue), the Swiss chalet appearance of which began a trend in downtown renovations.

In downtown Monroe, then, architectural variety has been the key result of the district's development and continuation as the center of the city. General styles, specific decorations and building materials, and how all of this had changed over time can be traced by simply walking the streets of the commercial district.

Integrity of District. The district has been subject to intensive discussion by the citizens of Monroe (8), many of whom hold great hopes that a recognition of its historical and architectural merits will encourage building owners to continue with the upkeep and preservation of their structures. In the south part of the district, especially, it is hoped that new uses may be found for some of the old manufacturing buildings that are now vacant. As made clear in the remarks above, the district is quite cohesive as a visual history of the commercial and architectural development of the downtown area; intrusions, while noticeable, have been relatively limited within the district, but any loss of the historic structures, particularly some of the manufacturing ones, would inevitably increase the number of intrusions and harm a community that has been termed "one of the finest ones in the state…for its beautiful architecture and state of preservation."(9)

Regional Context. As can be understood from the remarks concerning the districts commercial development, Monroe played a major role in the economic development of southern Green County, particularly the growth of this area as a major dairy industry. The commercial district encouraged the development of transportation to and from Monroe, to that the city has acted as a service center and shipping point for the local farming area. Many cities in Wisconsin have acted in similar ways, the scale and reach of their operations depending on their relative size and growth. Concerning cities of comparable size to Monroe, a statewide survey has found few to compare with the visual effect of the Monroe commercial district. The abundance of late 19th century structures, the cohesiveness of the shops and the manufacturing sites, and above all the well ordered and easily comprehended layout of the district in almost exact rectangular patterns about the courthouse square, combine to justify the prior mentioned claim of Monroe's outstanding fortune. (10)

Boundary Justification. The simple grid pattern of the district's development and the fact that residential areas immediately frame off the commercial district together make the selection of boundaries almost self-explanatory (see enclosed sketch map). Three considerations were borne in mind in marking the boundary: The street plan was followed whenever possible to simplify the task, up to the beginning of residential areas; non-contributing buildings were, whenever possible, cut out of the boundary, mainly by following lot lines; and the boundary was framed so that at the edges of the district, buildings that regularly mark the blending of commercial and residential function, such as libraries or churches, were included within the district.

NOTES

1) Dates indicate the period in which the various buildings in the district were constructed. See section on description.

2) Bingham, p. 88-137, contains a sketch of early Monroe, including an account of the early businesses in the town.

3) A good source for tracing the growth of districts is the Sanborn maps of Monroe, seven of which were issued between 1884 and 1926. These maps indicate the change in construction materials, location of rail lines and the general change in the types of businesses in the district. A collection of these maps is in the archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

4) For accounts of the rise of the dairy industry see Richard Egan, Green County Wisconsin: A History of the Agricultural Development, 1929; Emery Odell, Swiss Cheese Industry, 1936. See also "The Story of a Dairy Barn," a non-published essay by Rosa Waelti Gruenewald of Monroe.

5) Again, see the Sandborn maps for Monroe. See also Butterfield, p. 929-930.

6) For the growth of railroads in and about Monroe, and their importance to business growth, see Butterfield, p. 386-391; Bingham, p. 132.

7) For early hotels in Monroe see Butterfield, p. 931-933.

8) Monroe Evening Times, November 12, 1977; February 17, September 22, October 8, December 3, 1979; January 3 1980.

9) Thomas J. Lutz, Assistant Director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, to Mrs. Franz Brand, October 19, 1977.

10) Ibid.