

Crookston Commercial District

HABS No. MN-153

Main Street and Broadway between Fletcher Street and West Second Street

Crookston

Polk County

Minnesota

HABS
MINN
60-CROK,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
CROOKSTON COMMERCIAL DISTRICT

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Location: Main Street and Broadway between Fletcher Street and West Second Street (Figure 1).

Significance: The Crookston Commercial Historic District reflects the city's early period of growth, which was prompted by agriculture and the railroad industry. The district remains a large, and mostly intact, concentration of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commercial structures.

Description: The historic downtown district of the City of Crookston, which is located in the Red River Valley region of northwest Minnesota, is comprised of two entire blocks and portions of six others. The district lies between the meandering curves of the Red Lake River. Downtown streets follow the pattern established in 1872 by the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, whose tracks run nearly northeast to southwest.

The existence of primarily two- and three-story buildings, and the absence of vacant lots, creates a strong sense of visual continuity within the district. Typical of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commercial districts, most buildings have flat facades which front the sidewalk, and sidewalls that abut neighboring buildings. These characteristics create an uninterrupted wall spanning the length of the block. Another unifying characteristic of the district is the presence of similar building materials. Virtually all of the significant structures are either beige or red brick with rusticated red sandstone or molded stone trim. Although the buildings exhibit similarities in height and massing, they display a variety of popular turn-of-the-century architectural styles, including Italianate, Richardsonian Romanesque, and Classical Revival.

The contributing buildings within the district have maintained a high degree of integrity. Non-contributing buildings are primarily those built since World War II, as well as earlier buildings which have received significant exterior alterations. A streetscaping project, completed within the last few years, has added brick sidewalks, benches, and plantings.

History: The Crookston Commercial District stands as a monument to the city's early economic success and the people behind it. Crookston grew because of railroads, lumber, and agriculture. The town was incorporated in 1879 by the authority of Governor John S. Pillsbury. By this time, the St. Paul and Pacific Railway had been operating in Crookston for seven years. The financial crisis of 1873 slowed progress toward extending the tracks to the north, but by 1878

the line reached the Canadian border.¹ James J. Hill and his associates gained control of the St. Paul and Pacific Railway, which they renamed the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railroad, in 1879. Later renamed the Great Northern Railway System, Hill's railroad was responsible for generating further interest in the agricultural markets of Crookston and the region.²

Another railroad, the Northern Pacific, established Crookston as a regional transportation hub. The Northern Pacific's tracks came to Crookston in 1889, and in 1890 were joined with tracks from the north to form the first direct rail line from St. Paul to Winnipeg. Ultimately, Crookston was connected to all areas of the United States and Canada by rail. In 1905, Hill made Crookston the administrative headquarters of his railroad's northern division, expanding the importance of Crookston as a railroad city.³ The ca. 1900 Great Northern Depot, now gone, was a part of the district when it was first placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

The area's agricultural community benefitted the most from the railroad development. The fertile lands of the region were attractive to farmers, and having direct access to important markets made farming a profitable venture. The sale of land by the railroads drew many settlers. The lumber industry also thrived in the area in the late 1800s, making it another important part of Crookston's economy. These industries stimulated Crookston's growth in the late nineteenth century, particularly after a U.S. Land Office opened in Crookston in 1878.⁴

Many buildings of the Crookston Commercial District are representative of the city's most prominent early merchants. A.C., Alexander, and John McKinnon, brothers who manufactured carriages and wagons and sold farm implements, built the McKinnon Block (115-125 W. Robert St.). Alexander McKinnon also built the Union Block (111-113 W. Robert St.). Louis Fontaine and William Anglim, early department store operators, owned the Fontaine and Anglim Block (117-119 N. Main St.). Charles Kiewel, a brewery owner, has his name on two Kiewel Buildings: 203 N. Main St., which was originally a saloon, and 113-115 N. Broadway. The Fournet Block (101-111 N. Broadway) was designed and built by Felix Fournet, a wholesale liquor dealer and hotelman. Local hardware dealers James E. and John W. O'Brien had the O'Brien Block (114 S. Broadway) built for their business. S.A. Wallace had the Wallace Block

¹William H. Bingham and R.I. Holcombe, eds., Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County, Minnesota (Minneapolis: W.H. Bingham and Co., 1916), 85.

²Albro Martin, James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 190.

³Bingham and Holcombe, 85; Norene Roberts, "Crookston Commercial Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, prepared for Historical Research, Inc., 1983, section 8.

⁴Stephen G. Sylvester, "Crookston, Minnesota, Historical Commercial District Booklet," (n.p., 1988), 2.

(101-103 W. Second St.) constructed in 1896 for his pharmacy, which is still a drug store today.⁵

Although rail transportation began to decline in the 1940s, Crookston has maintained its role as an agricultural center. Keeping businesses downtown has been an important factor in the district's ability to survive. A relatively small amount of development has taken place on the edges of town, keeping customers focused on the downtown area. Most of the buildings in the commercial district have seen alterations, especially on the first floor storefronts, but maintain a strong sense of their original character.

This Historic American Buildings Survey study has been completed voluntarily by Polk County. It was undertaken in order to document the district before the removal of buildings at 109 and 111 West Second St. (HABS Nos. MN-154 and MN-155), which are located within the district.

Sources:

Published

Bingham, William H., and R.I. Holcombe, eds. Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County. Minneapolis: W.H. Bingham and Co., 1916.

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Historians: Chad J. Perkins and Charlene K. Roise, Hess, Roise and Company, October 1994.

⁵Roberts, section 8; Sylvester, 9, 10, 16, 18, 23, 24.

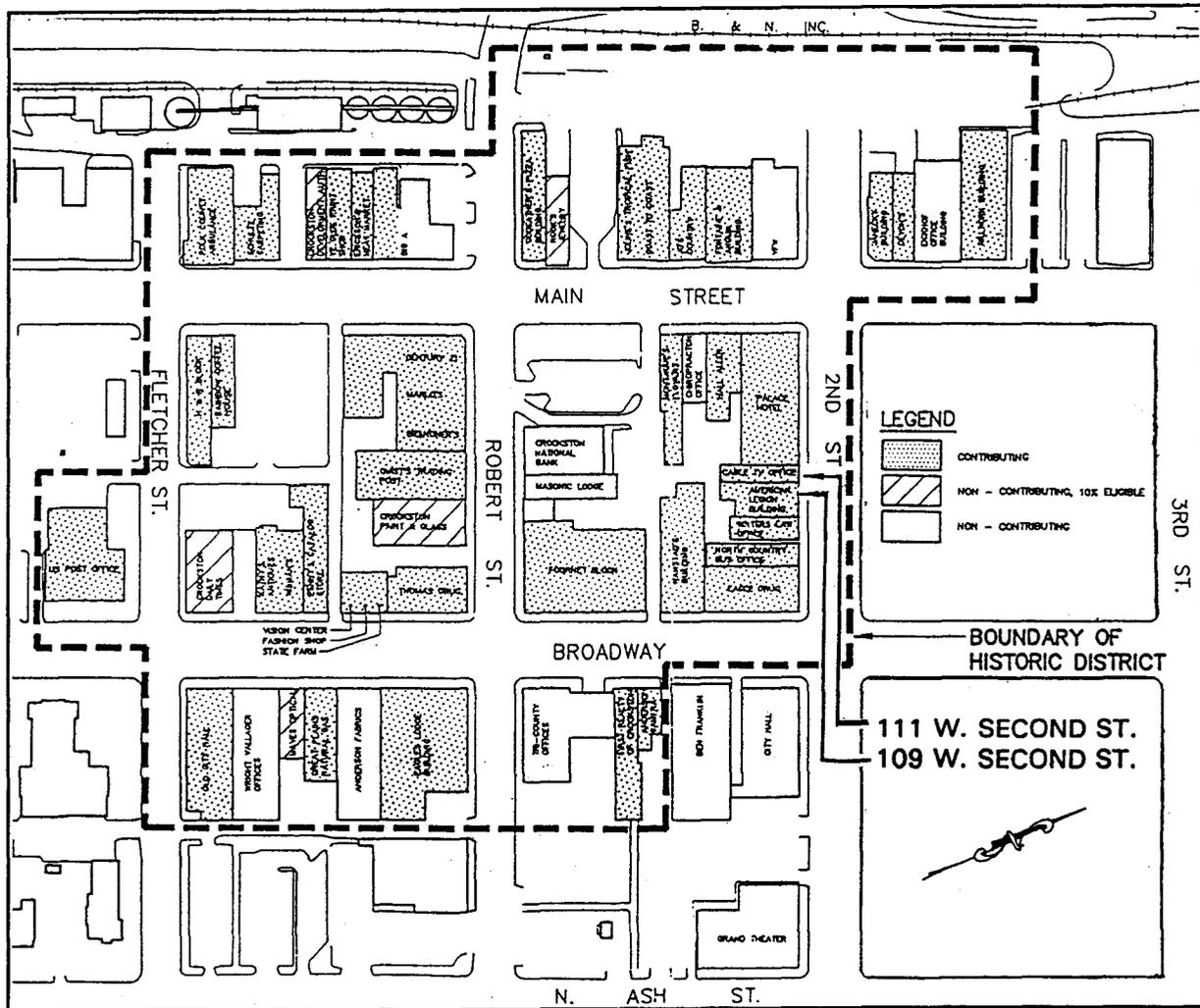


Figure 1: Location of Crookston Commercial District, Crookston, Polk Co., Minnesota
Not to Scale