

Buildings
~~600-700~~ Block Main Street
Louisville
Jefferson County
Kentucky

HABS No. KY-147

HABS,
KY,
56 - LOUVI,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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LOUISVILLE: MAIN STREET, HISTORIC VIEW

1760-1850

HABS No. KY-147

Although long considered only as a busy commercial hub, the site of Main Street roughly between Fifth and Ninth Streets has been the location of many other uses and events -- some vital to the origin of the city itself. Just prior to 1800, the falls of the Ohio in the vicinity of the present Main Street had received the attention of a number of explorers and adventurers seeking to establish a base for the exploitation of western resources and a mercantile link between East and West. Beginning with a survey of the region of the falls made in 1766, the path towards permanent settlement and the development of the Main Street tract was irreversibly begun. In that year Capt. Thomas Hutchins was at the falls and produced a map which appeared in various topographical works devoted to the Western Territory calling attention to the area and enhancing its chances for further exploration.

The lands were again surveyed in July of 1773 by Capt. William C. Bullitt and shortly thereafter were acquired. Under a commission from the College of William and Mary, Bullitt spent most of the summer there in preparation for the transfer of the land at the end of that year. Because of his assistance to the Crown during the French and Indian War, John Connolly received the deed for two thousand acres opposite the falls in December of 1773 from his friend and comrade Lord Dunmore. Connolly and his partner John Campbell advertised the acreage for sale in April of 1774 and it was reported that by 1775 a number of men "were sent out by them to occupy their lands" (Durrett, Reuben Thomas. The Centenary of Louisville [Louisville: John P Morton and Co., 1893] p. 28)--a move intended more likely to safeguard the claim than for purposes of settlement.

With the outbreak of the Revolutionary war, little more was accomplished regarding settlement until 1778. In May of that year, while under orders from then-Governor of Virginia Patrick Henry, George Rogers Clark set out from Pittsburgh for a campaign against the British in the Illinois territory. With him were some twenty families bound for the Falls of the Ohio. Left there while Clark continued westward, these families chose the relative security of Corn Island over the probability of frequent Indian attacks on the main shore, spending the summer and fall of 1778 and part of the winter of 1778-79 in small block houses which they had erected.

The winter and spring of 1779 marked the movement of the settlement from the island to the main shore. Lots were drawn on April 24, 1779 for the land in the vicinity of the falls, after trustees had been appointed to administer the growing affairs of the village on 17 April of that year. A map produced shortly after this initial drawing showed that the "first lots laid off and occupied were along both sides of Main Street from First to Twelfth . . ." (Durrett, The Centenary of Louisville, p. 27). In 1781 a small fortress was erected on the eastern side of a large ravine that had entered the river at the termination of Twelfth Street. It served the village as a public meeting place for a short while and provided protection against attack until larger quarters could be provided with the construction of Fort Nelson the following year.

Built by regular troops stationed at the falls with assistance from various townspeople and militia, the fort provided additional security to the settlement, thus attracting greater numbers of immigrants. An account of the fort by Mann Butler follows:

The fort was situated between the present Sixth and Eighth Streets, on the northern side of Main Street, immediately on the bank of river; and it was called Fort Nelson, in honor of the third Republican Governor of Virginia; Seventh Street passed through the fort gate opposite to the headquarters of Gen. Clarke. The principal [sic] military defence in this part of the country . . . contained about an acre of ground, was surmounted by a ditch eight feet deep and ten feet wide, intersected in the middle by a row of sharp pickets; this ditch was surmounted by a breast work of log pens filled with the earth obtained from the ditch, with pickets ten feet high planted on top of the breast work. Next to the river pickets were deemed sufficient, aided by the long slope of the bank. There was artillery likewise in the fort, particularly a double fortified six pounder . . . (Butler, Mann. Richard Otis' City Directory for 1832. pp. 101-102).

With the security against further Indian attack increased, the new town could direct more of its attention to expansion. After receiving an act of incorporation from the Virginia Legislature in the summer of 1780, the city began two decades of slow, but steady growth. Publishing in London in 1793, Gilbert Imlay's A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America stated that in 1784 Louisville contained approximately two hundred houses that "straggled along Main Street from First to Twelfth." These houses were mostly of log construction. Included in that survey was the first dry goods store in Kentucky. Daniel Brodhead opened that store in 1783, featuring a variety of merchandise "all the way from Philadelphia." "This Broadhead store was a double log cabin, with broad roof and puncheon floor on the north side of Main between Fifth and Sixth" (Durrett, The Centenary of Louisville). This was preceded by the opening of the first gunsmith shop in 1782 by Michael Humble in the vicinity of the old fort. Brodhead was given some competition shortly after his opening by John Sanders "who had moored a flatboat on the corner of Third and Main and turned it into a store." (Durrett, pp. 70-72). Louisville received its first brick house in 1789 on Market Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets. Built by Frederick Kaye, it was followed by two on Main: the first by Mr. Eastin on the north side just below Fifth Street and the other by Mr. Reed at the southwestern intersection of Main and Sixth Streets. By May of 1786, all of the river front lots had been auctioned off.

The first decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a continued expansion of the city, both physically and economically. Main Street, paved from Third to Sixth Streets in 1813, played an integral role in this growth process. After numerous ponds scattered throughout the area were drained and filled and work was begun on the Portland Canal, the district became the nucleus of the city's growing mercantile prowess. By 1832 a total of 161 addresses were given for the property between Fifth and Ninth Streets. The variety of uses evident in this early period illustrated the fact that there was little of the pressure to specialize into like uses that one sees later. A partial list of the use types demonstrates this interesting "mix": attorney, grocer, residence, boarding

house, auctioneer, merchant, hackman, founder, carpenter, tailor, cooper, shoemaker, tobacco inspector, pilot, blacksmith, engineer, physician, hatter, tallow chandler, barber, painter, upholsterer, insurance company, plasterer, druggist and brewer. Included within this list of occupants were two of Louisville's early mayors: John C. Bucklin, the city's first mayor in 1825, was a merchant listed on the north side of Main Street near Sixth Street, and David L. Beatty, a founder, was also on the north side between Seventh and Eighth Streets. Main Street also became the center for financial activity, following the erection of the Bank of Louisville in 1837.

Of particular importance in the development of the district were the various hotels constructed in these first decades. As the city's population expanded (it grew from 600 at the turn of the century to 10,336 in 1830), more pressure was put on hotels or boarding houses to shelter the newcomers, since private housing could simply not keep pace. Another reason for the increased demand for hotels in the Main Street district had to do with the completion of the canal and an upsurge in shipment around the falls in the Thirties. As visitors or businessmen would stop in Louisville they would seek lodging in places nearest to their point of disembarkation at the wharf near Fourth Street. Consequently, hotels were built on a grand scale to accommodate these genteel travelers.

Nine addresses were given in the 1837 Directory for rooming or boarding houses, inns, coffee houses, and hotels. By far the most splendid lodging could be found, however, on the south side of Main Street near Sixth Street, at the Louisville Hotel. "There is being erected on Main Street between 6th and 7th," reported Butler, "an edifice, which of its kind will surpass in elegance and arrangement, any in our Western County, and in extent will exceed most in the United States, covering a surface of near 16,000 square feet, being 3,000 feet greater than that of the Tremont House in Boston." Butler continued by stating that the plans by the architect, Hugh Roland, included a front of 124 feet on Main Street that was "ornamented by a Colonnade of Ten Ionic Columns, projecting 10 feet from the body of the building and standing upon a Stylabate over the basement story," and that it would be surmounted with "an appropriate entablature on the established principles of Grecian Architecture."

By the publication of the 1838-39 Directory a total of four large hotels, along with various smaller inns, gave their addresses as Main Street: the Exchange Hotel at the corner of Sixth Street; the Louisville Hotel; the Franklin House, also at the corner of Sixth Street; and the Ormsby House on Main Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets. The first Galt House was built in 1834 at the northeast corner of Second and Main Streets. The Galt House was Louisville's most well-known hotel.

The first of many disasters which shaped the appearance of the district throughout most of its history occurred in 1832. A flood lasting a good portion of February of that year was responsible for immense destruction of property. "Nearly all the frame buildings near the river were either floated off or turned over and destroyed. This calamity, however, great as it was, could have but a temporary effect on the progress of the city . . ." (Casseday, Ben. The History of Louisville From Its Earliest Settlement Till The Year 1852. Louisville: Hull and Brother, 1852).

1850-1860

In the 1850s much of the predominantly small-scale commercial shops, warehouses and hotels on Main Street were housed in simple, severe-style structures of brick or frame construction. Two important elements of architectural change occurred in the buildings during this period. One element was the increased scale of the buildings. It was first noticed in the 100 block of buildings built to replace those destroyed by a fire. Current Nos. 113-115, 117 and 119, composed of brick, are representative examples of the increased scale of Main Street architecture. The second element of change was the new, more ornate appearance of the buildings. In 1853 the Galt House hired the architectural firm of Rogers and Whitestone to make designs for its enlargement and remodeling. The same firm was also hired to design enlargement and remodeling of the Louisville Hotel. When the remodeling of these two hotels was completed, their new looks presented a sharp contrast to the more commonplace severe-style brick and frame structures. (The original plans of remodeling and enlargement for both hotels are at the Filson Club in Louisville. The Galt House burned in 1865, and was later rebuilt. It was demolished in 1921 to make way for a new office building for the Belknap Company. Louisville Hotel was demolished in the 1940s). Styles such as Renaissance Revival, Romanesque Revival, etc. were employed in the new buildings. The face of Louisville's architecture was changed forever.

According to the 1858-59 Louisville City Directory and Business Mirror, there were the Phoenix Hotel at the northeast corner of Eighth and Main Streets, and the Falls City Hotel on the south side of Main Street between Seventh and Eighth Streets.

During the 1850s the area became a partial wholesale district, which has remained so through ensuing decades. City directories show that companies such as Carter Brothers were on Main Street as early as 1859. There were boot and shoe wholesalers such as Piatt, Harvey-Keith, and W.E. Snody. There were also three drug companies; one was J.B. Wilder and Brothers on the north side of Main Street at No. 356. On Main Street west of Eighth Street, there was a concentration of tobacco companies and warehouses. The building in most continuous use as a tobacco warehouse is the two-story brick building still standing on the southwest corner of Eighth and Main Streets. Tanner's City Directory of 1859-60 showed tobacco warehouses on Main Street at the southwest corner of Eighth Street, the northeast corner of Ninth Street, and the corner of Seventh Street.

1860-1870

During the decade of the 1860s, the Main Street area increased as a wholesale center, with numerous dry goods, drugs, shoes and boots, clothing, china, harness and grocery merchants located there. Banking institutions, commission merchants, tobacco warehouses, insurance agents, and hotels were some of the other businesses there.

During the Civil War, Louisville was a neutral city and prospered as a supply depot largely because of the network of railroads connecting it to both the North and the South. Officers and troops were housed at the Louisville Hotel, and according to The Courier-Journal for April 25, 1921, the Todd Tobacco Warehouse at Seventh and Main Streets became a United States government ordnance depot early in the war and continued in that capacity until its close. Since city directories were not published during the war, other buildings involved in wartime commerce cannot be made known.

Immediately after the war, the city's economy, strengthened by wartime commerce, was stable enough for plans to be drawn up for new construction. Henry Whitestone designed a building for Gustavus Schurman on the south side of Main Street between Seventh and Eighth Streets. He also designed a structure at 704-705 Main Street.

1870-1890

Main Street between 1870 and 1890 witnessed the erection of numerous cast-iron commercial structures. These were primarily warehouses and shops. Combination of cast-iron and masonry construction (which was either limestone or brick) or pure cast-iron facade was used extensively on the buildings. The buildings were usually between three and five stories in height and possessed a variety of architectural styles which ranged from Renaissance Revival to eclectic styles. Henry Whitestone, Henry Wolters, McDonald Brothers, D.X. Murphy, Charles Meyer, Charles J. Clarke and John Andrewartha were among the architects involved in the design of these buildings.

In the 1870s some of the Main Street structures were built in order to replace the earlier brick structures destroyed from the fires. One of these structures was the Bamberger, Bloom and Company building, erected in 1872 and designed by architect John Andrewartha. Another was the cast-iron front Carter Dry Goods Company structure, completed in 1878 on the north side of Main Street between Seventh and Eighth Streets, and designed by prominent local architect Charles J. Clarke (1836-1908). The company is Main Street's largest commercial building and was Louisville's first department store. By 1875, twelve banks were located on Main Street. The Falls City Bank, incorporated in 1865, was shown in the 1866-67 Edward's City Directory to be on West Main Street at the corner of Bullitt Street. By 1870, it was located on the southwest corner of Seventh and Main Streets, where it remained for a number of years.

At the end of the 1870s, the Main Street area was still populated by a number of banks, wholesale, clothing and shoe and boot houses, with the added dimensions of saloons.

Then came the Fire of 1889. The Bamberger, Bloom and Company building, which was a "model wholesale dry goods house", was destroyed by the fire. The structures on the south side of Main Street between Sixth and Seventh Streets were also destroyed. Rebuilding followed.

A powerful 1890 tornado rocked the city. It hit the western part of the city, the river front district and the eastern end of the city, damaging or destroying the buildings. However, the area hardest hit by the tornado was the Main Street business district. The 600, 700 and 800 blocks bore the losses. The property loss was estimated to be at approximately \$2,000,000, which included the heaviest damage done to the tobacco trade in the western section of Main Street. Afterwards many buildings were repaired or rebuilt, again in revival styles.

Examples of Main Street combination cast-iron and masonry warehouses built during this period are found at Nos. 516, 520, 522, 623, 627, 629, 631, 710 and 712. Examples of pure-cast iron facades are found at Nos. 607, 635, 637, 639, 641, 713-717, 720, 722 and 724. The Hart Block building at Nos. 726-730 (HABS No. KY-120) is one of the finest examples of cast-iron facade in the country. Some of the buildings in the 800 block are also rich in architectural details.

1900-1970

The public interest in the Main Street business district began to decline after 1905, as it shifted to the more prosperous and newer sections of the city. Businesses, some with addresses dating back to the early nineteenth century, soon moved to the new locations. The decline continued until the 1970s, when the City of Louisville called for the revitalization of Main Street as part of its urban renewal program. It was during this period of decline that little construction of new buildings in the Main Street area was accomplished.

ADDENDUM TO
MAIN STREET, 600 & 700 BLOCK (BUILDINGS)
Louisville
Jefferson County
Kentucky

HABS No. KY-147

HABS
KY,
56-LOUVI,
10-

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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