

Preliminary Historic Assessment of the Stanton (Iowa) Commercial District



Figure: Broad Avenue postcard (Stanton Historical Society collection)

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Overview and Background

This preliminary historical assessment pertains to the Stanton (Iowa) Commercial Business District. Architectural historian Jennifer Irsfeld James, MAHP, visited the town in November 2018 at the invitation of Principal Community Planner Zachary Mannheimer of McClure Engineering Company. The initial historical findings and recommendations contribute toward the comprehensive Creative Placemaking provided by McClure Engineering Company.

During the site visit, the historian toured selected commercial buildings, met with property owners and community leaders, and provided a broad overview of about the benefits of official National Register of Historic Places designation and historic tax credits. This report describes observations and opportunities gleaned while touring, historical themes reinforced by reading some of the well-documented local histories, and specific practical recommendations for next steps.



Figures: Broad Avenue from Thorn Street (All photographs by Jennifer I. James)

Methodology

This assessment was accomplished through the following activities:

- Touring eight of the commercial buildings within the business district as well as photographing the business district overall;
- Discussing local history with community leaders;
- Touring the historical society's museum and collections with the town's historian; and
- Reviewing selected existing written histories from the museum's collection along with other historical materials.

Key Findings

Stanton has a wealth of resources, especially notable for a town of its smaller size. These resources include the cohesive commercial district containing some notable individual buildings, as well as strong local organizations and leadership. In addition, historic tax credits may provide incentives for historic preservation. The commercial district appears to be a good candidate for an intensive historical and architectural survey to determine National Register of Historic Places district and/or individual eligibility.

Strengths and Opportunities:

- The commercial district streetscape is cohesive: the buildings are mostly a century-old (and older) in vintage, all presenting one or two stories in height, with a mostly unified setback. The buildings run nearly uninterrupted for much of two blocks along Broad Avenue with few “missing buildings” or modern intrusions.
- The downtown has a high quality collection of commercial buildings dating from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The buildings include several with intact cast-iron storefronts and metal cornices—rare-surviving features. Other notable buildings include architecturally rich banks, two fraternal halls located above storefronts, an intact lumberyard, and a vintage service/oil station. Collectively, the business district buildings may qualify as a potential commercial historic district, with additional evaluation and survey work, as will be discussed below.
- Stanton proudly celebrates its distinctive Swedish heritage. The story of the town's founding by Swedish immigrants and the development of the business district has been well documented in a variety of local history projects. Supporters have dedicated considerable time and resources toward historical research, preservation, and education through the Stanton Historical Society and Swedish Heritage and Cultural Center.
- Local leaders have an established track record of initiating and sustaining complex improvement projects.

- The State of Iowa Historic Tax Credit program offers a 25 percent refundable credit on qualified rehabilitation expenses. The Federal Historic Tax Credit program offers a 20 percent non-refundable tax credit on qualified rehabilitation expenses. Together, they can provide 45 percent credits on necessary improvements to a building in need of maintenance or other such improvements. Properties utilizing the Federal Historic Tax Credit program must become listed to the National Register of Historic Places either individually or within a historic district. National Register listing provides “all carrot and no stick” – properties gain eligibility to apply for grants and use historic tax credits for sensitively designed rehabilitations. Plus the community enjoys the marketing and advertising benefits afforded by being a historic resource.

Challenges:

- Vacant and underused buildings can be vulnerable resources. Keeping building envelopes tight (repairing leaking roofs, for example) and secure can be a challenge for properties in these situations.
- Repairing century-old building components may involve specialty trades and products not available locally.
- Building owners may not share the same level of interest in historic preservation. Some redevelopment plans may involve removing character-defining historic elements.

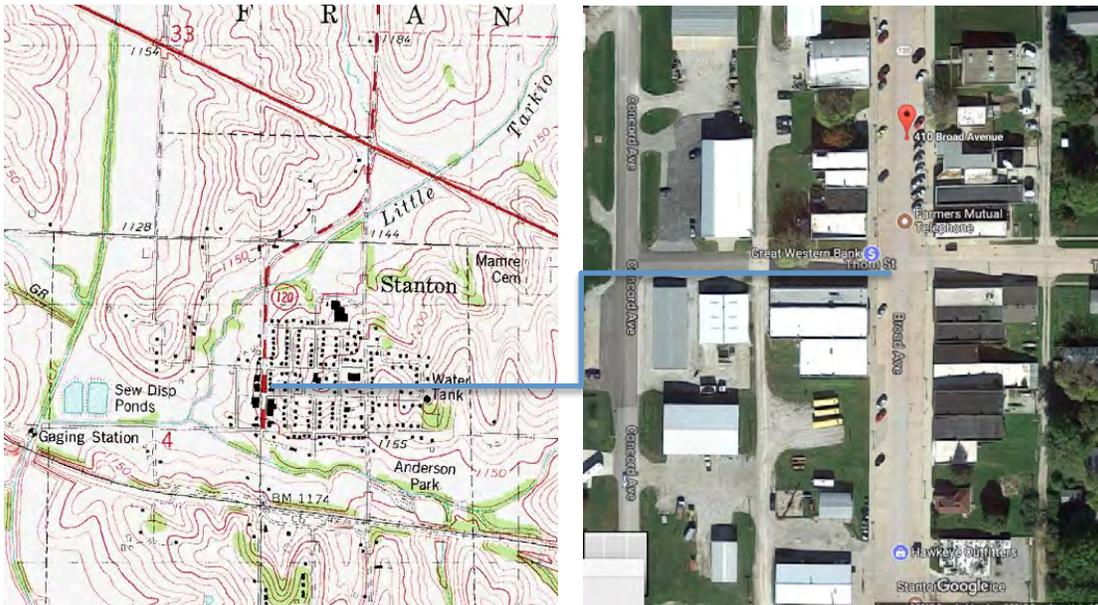
Recommendations

The major recommendations are as follows:

- *Action item: Complete a comprehensive historical and architectural survey of Stanton’s commercial and related resources.* Understanding what resources exist provides a strong foundation on which to build for the future use of historic preservation as a powerful economic development and placemaking tool. Stanton’s downtown appears to have a quality collection of commercial buildings that are at least 50 years old—the cut off for listing a building or district to the National Register of Historic Places.
- *Action item: Involve community members and building owners in the research and findings of the comprehensive historical survey to build awareness of important historical elements.*
- *Action item: Provide educational outreach and technical assistance to property owners on benefits of historic preservation as an economic development tool.* As underused buildings become available for re-use, update new users and owners about the potential historic nature of the buildings and benefits to the community and individual owners for retaining historic character—including the potential for historic tax credits and grants. This includes how to carefully remove cover-up siding and storefront infill in order to reveal buried historic fabric.

Stanton Commercial District Overview

This evaluation scans town settlement and platting history, geographic setting, siting and layout of the business district, building types and styles, and historical themes. Together, these elements contribute to the specific character of a place.



Figures: Topographic map and aerial view of Stanton commercial district (USGS and Google)

Geographic Setting:

The town was platted on a hillside with the commercial district overlooking the Tarkio River — currently the Little Tarkio Creek meanders through the town and joins the north-south Tarkio River (further research recommended as to whether the course of these waters has changed since initial platting). The rolling landscape has provided rich farmland, with fields still plowed up to the developed town lots and some forested stands along the waterways.

Settlement and Platting History:

Swedish immigrants settled Stanton in 1869 as a railroad town. Many of Iowa's towns share this rail heritage, as competing roads sought to promote business along their lines while building westward. Platting follows a grid oriented to true north. The original rail line ran through the business district at an angle, bisecting Broad Street. Although this rail line was abandoned in the early 1900s, its historic location is evident by the layout and development of some commercial buildings such as the lumberyard and by the remnant of a rail bridge west of the business district. A second rail line still operates south of the commercial business district.



Commercial District Siting and Layout:

The Stanton commercial district encompasses a roughly two-block area defined by buildings lining the north-south main street, Broad Avenue, bounded by Center Street to the north and Frankfort Street to the south. The subordinate street is Concord Avenue to the west, the location of light industrial uses. North-south alleys run behind the Broad Avenue lots. Thorn Street runs east from Concord Avenue and crosses Broad Avenue.

Broad Avenue is extra wide as it runs through the two-block central business district; the street slopes down to the south toward the existing railroad tracks. Some buildings are built into the hillside, with a single-story façade and a rear lower second commercial level. Alleys run behind both the east and west sides of Broad Avenue. Most commercial buildings are oriented east-west.

Commercial Building Types and Styles:

The cohesive Stanton commercial district contains many original buildings from the late nineteenth century through early twentieth century. The following are elements worthy of preservation and further assessment in a historical survey:

- Stanton possesses a large percentage of commercial buildings with intact Late Victorian cast-iron storefront systems and metal cornices. These are rare-surviving character-defining architectural features especially worthy of further research into manufacturers. (Throughout the United States, many of these metal elements have been lost to scrap drives and remodeling.)
- Some buildings on the west side of Broad Avenue were built into the hillside and feature a “hidden” lower story accessible from the rear alley.
- The commercial district contains several richly detailed bank buildings, an intact lumberyard, at least two fraternal halls, an early service (oil) station with its canopy, a two-story meat locker built into the hillside, and store buildings.
- The Swedish heritage of original builders and building owners may have impacted the architectural development of the commercial district.

Historical Themes:

The Stanton downtown appears to incorporate several historical themes, which may include architecture, commerce, ethnic heritage, industry, social history, and transportation. Further research is recommended.

Appendix 1: State and Federal Historic Tax Credits

The State Historic Preservation and Cultural & Entertainment District Tax Credit Program provides a state income tax credit for the sensitive rehabilitation of historic buildings. It ensures character-defining features of buildings are retained and helps revitalize surrounding neighborhoods. The Program provides an income tax credit of 25% of qualified rehabilitation costs. Another 20% is available if the property is income producing and qualifies for the Federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit. The two credits can both be used.

State Eligibility Basic Requirements Overview:

Buildings must meet one of the Significance Requirements:

- Buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, or determined by the staff of the State Historic Preservation Office to be eligible for listing,
- Buildings contributing to the significance of a historic district that is listed, or eligible to be listed, on the National Register,
- Buildings designated as local landmarks by city or county ordinance, or
- Barns constructed prior to 1937 and National Register barns.

Buildings must meet the Substantial Rehabilitation Test:

- For commercial buildings, qualified rehabilitation expenditures must equal at least 50% of the assessed value of the building (excluding the land) before rehabilitation, or \$50,000, whichever is less.
- For non-commercial buildings, qualified rehabilitation expenditures must equal at least 25% of the assessed value of the building (excluding the land) before rehabilitation, or \$25,000, whichever is less.

The work must meet the Standards for Rehabilitation:

The work as proposed and built must meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings.

Federal Eligibility Basic Requirements Overview

1. The historic building must be listed in the National Register of Historic Places or be certified as contributing to the significance of a "registered historic district." Buildings may be listed individually or as a part of a historic district.
2. The project must meet the "substantial rehabilitation test." In brief, this means that the cost of rehabilitation must exceed the pre-rehabilitation cost of the building. Generally, this test must be met within two years or within five years for a project completed in multiple phases. The cost of a project must exceed the greater of \$5,000 or the building's adjusted basis.

3. The rehabilitation work must be done according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. These are ten principles that, when followed, ensure the historic character of the building has been preserved in the rehabilitation. The Standards are applied to projects in a reasonable manner, taking into consideration economic and technical feasibility.
4. After rehabilitation, the historic building must be used for an income-producing purpose for at least five years.

National Register Eligibility and Listing Overview

For historic tax credit eligibility, a building can be eligible for the National Register individually or through a historic district. National Register eligibility is determined through study of potential resources by a cultural resource professional. Intensive-level surveys provide identification, documentation, and National Register evaluation of potential cultural and historic resources through assessment of buildings in regard to historic contexts, significance, construction history, and integrity. Surveys can both identify locally important buildings and districts that should be protected, as well as identify areas or buildings that are appropriate for future redevelopment.

Significance and integrity have specific meanings in regards to historic resources: Integrity is the authenticity of physical characteristics from which resources obtain their significance. Specifically, integrity is the composite of seven qualities: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. When a property retains its integrity, it is able to convey its significance, or its association with events, people, and designs from the past.

Commercial Historic Districts

One common type of historic district is a commercial historic district that includes a group of buildings representing local historical development patterns relating to commerce and trade.

Based on a site visit and preliminary evaluation, the Stanton commercial business district appears to be a good candidate for an intensive historical and architectural survey to evaluate commercial buildings and determine significance for a potential commercial historic district. It is also possible that individual buildings may qualify for individual National Register listing for significance such as for associations with architecture or Swedish heritage. This conclusion is not final or definitive. All decisions on National Register eligibility for Iowa resources require appropriate historical surveys developed in conjunction with the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office, with listing to the National Register completed through the National Parks Service, keeper of the National Register.

Appendix 2: Site Visit Properties

The following eight properties were toured during the site visit. Building dates are per the Montgomery County Assessor's Office.



1) Former meat market/meat locker, 403 Broad Avenue

Assessor dates masonry building to 1916. Upper level meat market and locker; the lower-level commercial space accessible from alley was not visited. Leaded-glass transom visible from interior; partially intact tin ceiling and plaster walls. Building was under renovation.



2) Marshall building, 317 Broad Avenue

Assessor dates this masonry storefront to 1890; includes cast-iron storefront. Rear has two-story addition or secondary building that opens to Thorn Street and alley. Storefront interior defined by ornate decorative metal ceiling and large skylight and wood floors.



3) Commercial double storefront building, 316 Broad Avenue

Assessor dates building to 1890. Brick front with colorful glazed inserts, delicate cast-iron storefront designed for large windows, and intact cornice—rare-surviving architectural features. Building was under renovation. Beaded-board ceiling visible above dropped ceiling; wood floors.



4) American Legion Ernie Johnson Post No. 406 building, 314 Broad Avenue

Assessor dates this two-story masonry building to 1900. Brick front is intact on second story; cast-iron columns and beam frame later-20th-century storefront infill. Fraternal hall occupies upper floor, with storefront also used currently for fraternal use. Reportedly early Masonic lodge located here. Wood floors visible on second story; other historic fabric may be located beneath later cover-up materials.



5) Former Masonic Tarkio Lodge No. 645 building, 312 Broad Avenue

Assessor dates this two-story masonry building to 1900. Cast-iron columns and beam frame later-20th-century storefront infill. Upper fraternal lodge meeting space reportedly use as town hall and movie theater before purchase by Masons. Intact decorative metal ceilings and wood flooring on both levels. Partially vacant.



6) Former Wistrom Oil Station, 219

Built over time into a gas station with two-bay automobile garage and front service canopy; vacant. Local history records this to have been a house converted to an early bank with wooden false front on the façade still intact, with rear frame addition and 1958 (per assessor) garage addition. This building demonstrates how commercial buildings can evolve and may contain at its core one of the oldest extant commercial buildings in the downtown.



7) Lumberyard building (telephone company storage), Thorn Street

Built in the early 20th century (assessor lists 1970, which may indicate date of remodeling); wood siding and windows in monitor roof still intact under cover-up metal siding. Interior features well-preserved two-story lumber storage; a modern office stands in the southeast corner.



8) Farmers Mutual Telephone Co., 410 Broad Avenue

Utility company's headquarters building anchors the north end of the business district. The office building was expanded over time from initial 1957 construction to incorporate what appear to be at least two other storefront buildings. Further research recommended to fully explore expansion history.