



City of Ypsilanti

Community and Economic Development

Depot Town Walking Tour

Tour Distance: 6 Blocks, 0.2 miles.

Tour Length: 20 minutes

Tour Difficulty: Easy- relatively flat terrain.

Seating Opportunities: About 3- various public benches/bus stop bench and storefront benches

Starting Point: Tour starts at the southwest corner of Maple and N River Streets. If participants are coming by car, public parking is available in the Maple Street lot.

Introduction: Welcome to Depot Town, one of Ypsilanti's three historic commercial districts. The neighborhood developed in the second quarter of the nineteenth century as the city's nexus of industry and transportation. In 1838 the Michigan Central Railroad completed a line from Detroit to Ypsilanti. The railroad cut diagonally across the east side of Ypsilanti, bisecting East Cross Street near the Huron River. A depot was erected at this location, and a commercial area flourished between the railroad and the mills on the river. The neighborhood became known as Depot Town because of its railroad connection.



Figure 1. Aerial view of Depot Town, 1986, Courtesy Ypsilanti Historical Society

Stop 1. 90 Maple Street-Passenger Depot



Figure 2. Late Nineteenth Century Photo of Depot

One of Depot Town's most significant buildings is naturally, the depot. The now vacant brick building to was erected in 1860 to serve as the Michigan Central Railroad Depot. When it was built, the depot was said to be the "largest and finest between Detroit and Chicago." Historically the depot was three stories, but was reduced to one by a fire in 1910, and further remodeled following a 1939 train wreck. The linear building is oriented parallel to the railroad tracks, with a main building and smaller baggage building that are connected by a canopy. In the nineteenth century the station was surrounded by elegant flower gardens that welcomed passengers to the city, in the area where the Maple Street lot is today. The historic depot is well-positioned for rehabilitation.

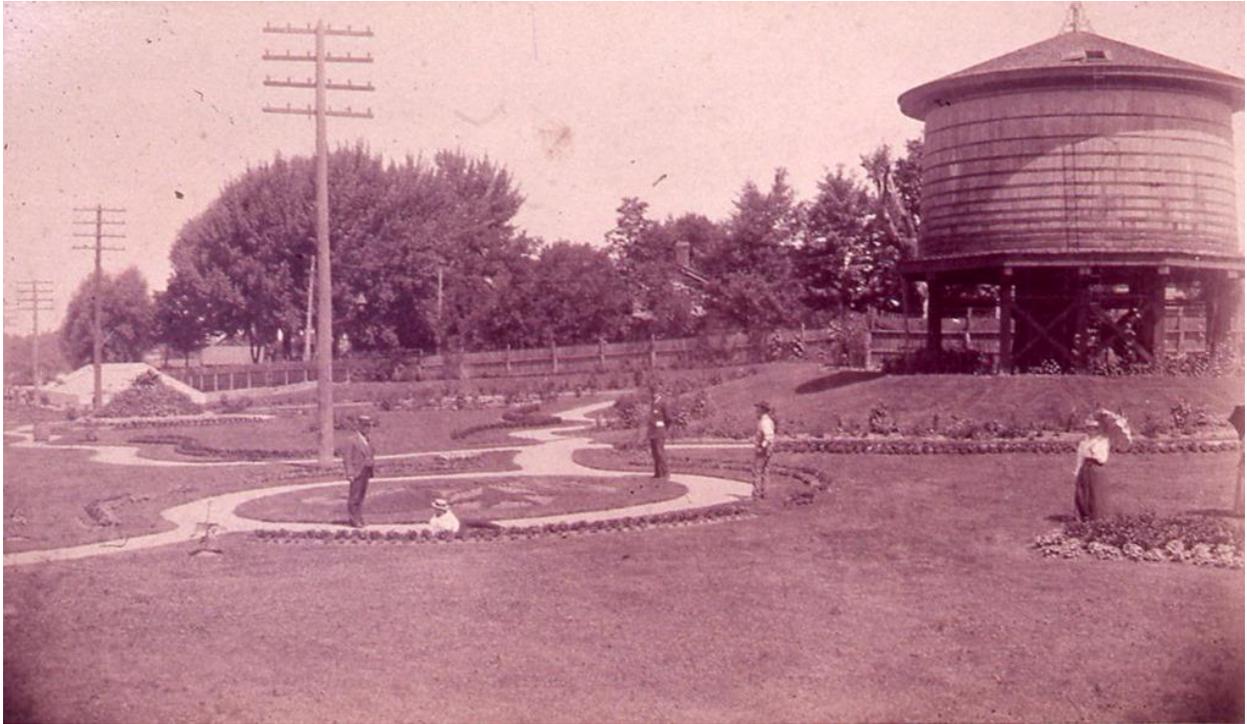


Figure 3. Ypsilanti Depot Gardens, Photo Courtesy Ypsilanti Historical Society



Figure 4. Depot After Being Reduced to One Story, 1919, Photo Courtesy of Ypsilanti Historical Society

Head south on N River to northwest corner of N River and E Cross.

Stop 2. 400 N River- Thompson Block



Figure 5. Thompson Block, ca.1862

The building known as the Thompson Block can also tie its construction directly to the railroad. The Michigan Central Railroad expanded its footprint in the neighborhood in 1860, placing the new track directly in the direct path of the Western Hotel, owned by Mark Norris. Norris had the hotel demolished and salvaged the bricks to construct the large commercial block you see today, known then as the Norris Block. The building included six storefronts on the ground level, with residential units on the upper floors. In 1862 the building housed barracks for the Fourteenth Michigan Infantry Regiment, a kitchen was installed in the basement and social hall placed within the upper story. The Fourteenth Regiment left Ypsilanti on April 17, 1862, and the building was used for barracks again the following year for the Twenty-Seventh Infantry Regiment. Reputedly, the building is the only Michigan barracks used in 1862 that is still extant.

In 1869 Oliver E. Thompson opened his paint and wagon shop in the corner unit of the building, establishing a long standing business for whom the building is now named. Over time, the Thompson store expanded to the full south half of the building, where it sold agricultural implements, bicycles, and various home/hardware goods. In the 1910s, Oliver Thompson's grandson, Joseph Thompson opened a Dodge dealership in the north half of the building, which soon thereafter moved across Cross Street. The Thompsons eventually shifted their family business to small manufacturing and selling an expanded variety of goods. In 1927 they sold the business to a Detroit firm that retained the family name. O. E. Thompson and Sons, which remained in the building until 1950.



Figure 6. Thompson Block, ca. 1929

Various businesses occupied the building throughout the second half of the twentieth century, however it slowly fell into disrepair and was determined a case of demolition by neglect in 2002. Repairs were made to the building, but unfortunately it was gutted by fire in 2009. The exterior walls were preserved and the building was finally rehabilitated in 2019/2020.



Figure 7. Stabilization of Thompson Block- post fire

Head south on River Street to face southeast corner of N River and E Cross.

Stop 3. 100 E Cross- Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum



Figure 8. 100 E Cross, 1982

This late nineteenth century building was erected in 1892 to house the Ypsilanti Electric Company. It remained a power generating facility until 1900 when Comstock Sash Lock & Novelty Company moved into the building. They remained until 1916, by then known as Michigan Pressed Steel.

In 1917, Joseph Thompson, son of Oliver E. Thompson, moved his Dodge dealership into the building, beginning its long automotive history. In 1921 He added a showroom to the building. Thompson moved his dealership to Michigan Avenue in 1926 and the following year the building was acquired by Carl Miller and converted to a Hudson Sales and Service franchise. The dealership was renamed Miller Motors after the Hudson/Nash-Kelvinator Corporation merger in 1955 that formed American Motors. The dealership continued sealing new cars until 1958 when the Hudson line was discontinued. From 1958 until 1995 Miller Motors remained in business, with Carl's son Jack, selling Hudson parts and used cars. The building became the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum in 1995.

The museum's collection interprets the Ypsilanti area's connection to automotive history. Included are stories of the Chevrolet Corvair, Tucker, Hudson, Kaiser-Frazer, and General Motors Hydra-matic. Visit ypsiautoheritage.org for more information.

Head south on River to 308-312 and 306 N River.

Stop 4. 306-312 N River- Ypsilanti Mill Works Building Complex



Figure 9. Ypsilanti Mill Works Building, 1916, Photo Courtesy of Ypsilanti Historical Society

This property comprises a historic industrial/commercial complex that are some of the oldest buildings of this type in the city. Fronting on River Street, 308-312 N River currently houses the Ypsilanti Food Co-op, behind it at 306 N River is another mid-nineteenth century industrial building that now houses Hyperion Coffee. The building that houses the Ypsilanti Food Co-op is notable for its age. The oldest parts of the building date to 1840, which originally housed the Ypsilanti Machine Works- owned by H. Shaffer. In 1856 the building was purchased by Philo Ferrier and M. E. Schuttles; the latter was eventually bought out by Ferrier's son, Charles. Ferrier and Son operated the business until 1884, when it was sold to George W. Walterhouse. The small machine factory was especially known for production of grain milling equipment and other items for manufacturing agricultural products. Manufacturing continued in the building through the early twentieth century, with firms such as: the Wolverine Forged Drill Company, Streicher Die & Tool, and Ypsi Sheet Metal Roofing. From 1948-1973, Forbes Cleaners were housed in the building, and from 1975-1979 it was occupied by Huron Advertising.

In 1988, the building was purchased by the Ypsilanti Mill Works Partnership, a group of five investors who cared about the building and historic preservation in the city. The building was renovated to include four upper apartments, four offices, and a large retail space. The retail space has been occupied by the Ypsilanti Food Co-op, since 1984.

Head north on River and west on Cross Street to southwest corner of E Cross and N River.

Stop 5. Signal Tower – northwest corner of N River and E Cross



Figure 10. Train in Depot Town ca.1920, Signal Tower at Left

An octagonal tower is located at the northwest corner of Cross and River. The structure is a 1991 reconstruction of a late nineteenth century signal tower that operated the gates and signals of the railroad crossing. Reputedly, the original tower was installed ca. 1860, however historic maps reveal that it had been removed by the 1880s. A second tower was built ca.1900 and remained in place the 1950s. Following a 1976 neighborhood plan, the Depot Town Association pursued the reconstruction with support from the Downtown Development Authority and City.

Turn around to face opposite side of the street

Stop 6. 46-56 E Cross, Masonic Block



Figure 11. Masonic Block, 1954, Courtesy of Ypsilanti Historical Society

Depot Town is distinctive for its intimate nineteenth century commercial setting, with two and three-story buildings that feature decorative cornices and window hoods.

The Masonic Block is a great example of such Italianate commercial architecture. The building was erected during the 1850s by several local businessmen. The eastern three bays of the building were erected first, in 1854, reputedly to welcome President Franklin Pierce on a visit. This fraternal hall on the upper floors served as the Masonic Lodge, and later the Maccabees Hall as well. The center bay, with its distinctive Gothic arch entry vestibule was erected second, and the remaining bays that today comprise Sidetrack and Frenchie's were erected last. The northeast (left) corner building, where Sidetrack is, has housed a saloon since the mid nineteenth century- catering to neighborhood customers, railroad workers, and travelers. The building formerly had a triangular storefront bay at the northeast corner, where a dining patio is today. This corner unit housed candy store on the ground floor. It was hit by a derailed train in 1926, resulting in its removal.

Head west on Cross Street, and stop in front of the clock tower.

Stop 7. 17-29 E Cross



Figure 12. Follett House, December 1970-before Restoration

Depot Town is unique for its concentration of pre-Civil War commercial properties. A fine sample of these are the buildings from 17-29 E Cross.

The large building on the corner of Rice and E Cross was built as a hotel, known as Follett House. The Italianate-style building was financed by Benjamin Follett, local banker and entrepreneur. He began construction on the east half of the four story building in 1852, adding the west half ca. 1859. The west addition features a large ballroom, evidenced on the exterior by the prominent two-story windows. Reputedly, the hotel was considered one of the finest in the path of the Michigan Central Railroad; of course, that could have been clever marketing- as the nearby depot was also considered the finest on the railroad. By the mid-twentieth century the building had fallen into disrepair. Restoration efforts have been taken to preserve it over the last 40 years.

The neighboring buildings at 27 and 29 E Cross are among the oldest in the neighborhood, dating to the 1850s. Their simple stone lintels and six-over-six windows are indicative of the period.

Head north across E Cross Street, through the alley, to Market Place.

Stop 8. 100 Market Place- Ypsilanti Freight House



Figure 13. Ypsilanti Freight House, 1919

Market Place

The space behind buildings on the north side of E Cross Street is known as Market Plaza. It is one of two locations that hosts the Ypsilanti Farmers Market. Within the plaza is an old train caboose that dates to the turn of the 20th century. The Depot Town Association, an organization that has worked since 1975 for the continued revitalization of the neighborhood, purchased and relocated the caboose to this site in 1980.

Adjacent to the Market Place is the freight house, erected 1879. While the depot served as the on-and-off point for passengers, the freight house was the loading and unloading point for various goods entering and leaving Ypsilanti. The building served this purpose for a century, and was an instrumental location for shipping pilots and equipment during World War II. The City of Ypsilanti acquired the freight house in 1979 for use as a community center and location of the Farmers Market. In 2016 the building was rehabilitated, with help from State Historic Preservation Office grants, and many of its original features were restored.

Head south to E Cross then east to N River, and north on N River to Maple to return to the starting point.

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