

News Release

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The following property was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The **National Register of Historic Places** is the nation's inventory of properties deemed worthy of preservation. It is part of a national program to coordinate and support local and private efforts to identify, evaluate and protect the nation's historic and archeological resources. The National Register was developed to recognize historic places and their role in contributing to our country's heritage. For more information on the National Register program in Nebraska, contact the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office at (402) 471-4787 or visit www.nebraskahistory.org.

DOUGLAS OMAHA

The **Nicholas Street Historic District** was officially entered on the National Register of Historic Places on March 2, 2009.

The following is an excerpt from the National Register of Historic Places nomination form:

The Nicholas Street Historic District is locally significant under Criterion A for its association with community development and industry in Omaha. As a whole, this District represents one of three patterns of industrial development along railroad lines in Midwestern towns which were formed simultaneously with railroads.

Development of America's Railroad System

As sections of the Great Plains achieved statehood, railroads began to spread across the United States. The first railroad charter in North America was granted to John Stevens in 1815. For the next 25 years, a series of inventions continued to improve and refine components of the railway. By 1840 the parts of the system were standardized. Tracks began spreading throughout the country.

In the 1850s, two significant factors of railroad development emerged that influenced the growth of communities all over the mid-west. The first was that speculators began to purchase land in hopes railroads would come through their area. As a result, individuals and towns began wooing the railroads and many early towns either began to thrive or became ghost towns due to where the railway was laid. The second factor was that a private/public partnership developed between the U.S. Government and the railroads, in which the government granted alternating one-mile-square sections of land to the rail companies with the government retaining ownership of the intervening lands. This partnership in turn led to the extension of the railroads into underdeveloped areas. By 1880, this first boom of railroad growth had laid 160,506 miles of track and had connected both coasts of America with the first transcontinental railroad. During this period, it was common for small lines to sell out to one another and form larger systems. Where two companies had competing lines, often the more difficult route was abandoned.

The boom was quickly halted by the national depression of the 1890s. Financial panics and mismanagement of various companies forced approximately one-fourth of the railroad tracks and capital into receivership. The resulting natural consolidation produced large railroad conglomerates that divided up the country and eliminated competing lines.

Once the economy was back on its feet in the early 1900s, a second railroad boom began and railroads began quickly laying out more track. In 1916, the number of railroad tracks peaked at 254,000 miles. The peak was short-lived however, as the government took over the railways during WWI. They cut passenger lines, removed passenger cars, increased freight traffic, increased efficiency and guaranteed a net annual income for investors.

In 1920, the railroads were returned to private control. By this time, an overall decline in the importance of transportation by railroad had begun. Increasing competition from trucks and airplanes at first meant fewer passengers, but soon also meant a decrease in freight traffic, especially for short runs. By 1932, the total value of the railroads as a percentage of the GNP began to fall. To survive the depression and throughout the 1930s, railroads reduced expenses wherever possible, curtailing purchases, cutting services, limiting salaries, and reducing employment, despite the advent of the diesel engine and swift passenger service. Overall the railroads' importance as an employer began a steady decline from its peak in 1920 of 1 in 28 people of working age to 1 in 170 of working age in 1969.

World War II brought back government oversight, but it acted as a coordinating force instead of a direct takeover. For example, the government directed that no car should be sent out unless it was full. Since the war was fought on two fronts, neither coast was

overwhelmed with goods and personnel. Troop movements were typically coordinated through the railroads. Sleeping two to a bunk in Pullman cars probably did not leave fond memories of passenger service in the minds of many Americans.

After the war, the transition in transportation away from trains was rapid. Automobile sales soared as GIs moved to the suburbs; truckers took advantage of the improved roadways to carry more freight; and thanks to improvements during the war, airplanes were more reliable, more spacious and less expensive to operate than ever before. The changeover was guaranteed when railroad rates rose and the Interstate Highway Act was passed in 1956 authorizing the construction of our federal highway system.

Development of Industrial Areas in Mid-west Towns

Forms of Organization

As the railroad network developed, those Mid-western towns fortunate enough to lie at intersections of major routes between established Eastern cities and popular Western destinations began to develop as regional business and industrial centers themselves. In these new industrial centers, the relationship between the railroad tracks and the adjacent urban environment began to take shape in one of three forms. In towns large and small, warehouses, manufacturing buildings and fuel dealership building began to emerge in one of three places in conjunction with the railroads:

Form 1. The first and simplest form of organization was parallel lines of industry and railroad tracks.

Form 2. Interlaced fingers of railroad tracks and rows of warehouse/manufacturing plants.

Form 3. Railroad tracks were routed around an area, forming an island.

This occurred for a number of reasons, including natural barriers and previously developed areas of town.

Phases of Construction

In addition to these three forms of organization, the evolution of industrial areas within our towns had a process of their own. Like their commercial counterparts, the industrial areas typically passed through four phases of construction.

Phase 1. Small wooden structures with a mix of commercial, residential and industrial buildings along the same street.

Phase 2. Additions and infill. Buildings were still primarily wooden structures, but more substantial. A few brick buildings began to emerge and residential buildings began to disappear.

Phase 3. Brick structures begin to dominate and the transition to separated uses occurs with areas of town becoming dominated by residential, commercial or industrial uses. Although zoning may or may not be in place yet, similar businesses tend to gravitate to locations near each other. Most empty spaces in this phase of construction are infilled by buildings with income producing activities.

Phase 4. As the population swelled and the opportunity to spread out was restricted, floors were added to the brick structures or they were replaced by larger brick structures.

Development of Industry and the Rail Roads in Omaha

In Omaha, the development of the railroad was simultaneous with the development of the city. Because space was open and ill-defined, all three forms of organization can be seen here. Additionally, because of Omaha's significance as a regional business and industrial center, its industrial areas have evolved through all four phases of construction.

Omaha was founded in 1854 and selected as the terminus of the transcontinental railroad in 1863. By January 1866, 50 miles of track were completed and in running order. That same year, Omaha offered more bonds than Council Bluffs and won the Union Pacific's business for locating the main transfer depots, general offices, machine shops, etc. in Omaha. In 1868, three railways came to Omaha; drawn here by the prospect of connecting to the transcontinental railroad. Four more lines came in quick succession, connecting Omaha to Sioux City, Minneapolis & St. Paul, Chicago, Milwaukee and Kansas City.

As the railroads boomed, so did Omaha's population. During the 1860s, 70s and 80s the city's population grew exponentially from 1,883 in 1860 to 140,452 in 1890. Likewise the number of railroad tracks grew. Working around lots that were already claimed and developed, the tracks began to snake in ever increasing numbers throughout Omaha. Maps from this period illustrate the growing scale of local development. Because of the number of lines coming into Omaha, several islands of mixed-use development began to appear between major track lines as well as a concentration of industrial buildings alongside the railroad tracks. (See map in Appendix B, page 36) In most cases, the pattern of development was derived based on who originally bought the land since Omaha zoning codes were not developed until the 1910s, and were not adopted until 1920. The industrial areas of this era began to pass through phases one and two of construction, infilling empty lots, constructing additions and expanding in number.

Little development occurred through the national depression and local drought of the 1890s. In fact, Omaha lost 27% of its population during this period. The turn of the century however, brought renewed energy and growth. A second railroad boom occurred from 1900-1920 and Omaha's population began a steady increase. In addition, Omaha's industrial buildings began to pass through phase three of construction, using more substantial materials and becoming separated from other uses. In 1905, the third form of organization began to occur when a noticeable number of spurs began to branch off the main trunk lines through town, creating an interlaced finger pattern of organization between Omaha's major industrial area and the railroads to the east of the downtown. By 1918 the Omaha Sanborn illustrates that tracks circled three sides of the original plat of Omaha forming a vast network. Development along and between tracks in these areas held the majority of the city's fuel and lumber yards, grain warehouses and breweries. Some meat packing plants also stood in the original city plat, although the larger companies already concentrated their businesses in South Omaha.

By the late 1920s, Omaha had established itself as a regional industrial center and its industries had entered the fourth phase of

construction. In 1934, five-sevenths of Omaha factories were devoted to the production of food products. Subsidiary industries, such as soap factories and tanneries became important local industries. At the same time factories devoted to supporting the numerous outlying farms grew, such as those that produced farm machinery and hardware. All of these in turn created a demand for local factories that produced clothes, building materials, furniture and drugs. The majority of these factories were still located between, around and along the rail road tracks, crowding out other uses as they vied for access to the railroad system, even through trucks began to take some of the loads on shorter runs. Smaller structures were replaced with larger, more substantial structures as investors sought to make the most of their now limited space.

After WWII, Omaha's economic base began to shift away from meat packing, grain processing and wholesaling to service industries such as insurance and retail. By the late 1950s, over 40 insurance companies had located their headquarters here and factories began to decline. Omaha's claim to bring breakfast to the world began to wane.

Development of the Nicholas Street Historic District

Pre-1890s

When Omaha was founded, this area straddled the border between the north edge of the city plat and the vast prairie. In 1866, a single railroad line for the Union Pacific railroad ran South along the river, near this area, past Omaha's future downtown and West out of town. Several spurs extended through town, including one from the edge of the future downtown up to the corner of 14th Street and Izard. Furthermore, the north levee / ferry landing was approximately at the eastern end of Nicholas Street, making this a good location for collection of goods coming across the Missouri and readying them for resale or further transport. Thus, as investors selected likely sites for the future growth of the town, this area held several indicators of potential and some of Omaha's pioneering settlers bought land here.

1890s

As Omaha grew, the form of organization in this area quickly developed into an island, separated from Omaha's main industrial area to the South by the Union Pacific railroad shops and from the large estates of Omaha's prominent businessmen to the North by scores of railroad tracks. In its first phase of construction, the limited number of large buildings in the Nicholas Street Historic District were one or two stories tall and filled their respective lots, with platforms overhanging into the street and railroad right-of-ways. Showing the true nature of this urban edge, immediately along the railroad tracks were the warehouse buildings and directly behind them, and in some cases along side, were small residential buildings. Listed as squatter's shanties and very small dwellings, some were even located in what is now the street. Businesses in the area were those common along railroad lines in this era, including a mix of fuel dealers and what buildings codes now classify as light industrial buildings. In particular, this area attracted a few warehouses, a millwork company, two sawmills and a mattress/upholstered furniture manufacturer. Several of the companies located here began to thrive, including the M.A. Disbrow Company which stayed in the area for the next 100 years, and the Orchard and Wilhelm Company which stayed until the late nineteen-teens.

Compared to other industrial areas here in Omaha, this section of the city was already distinguishing itself both in its form of organization and its uses. The buildings here served more industrial uses such as fuel distribution and furniture manufacturing than those generally found around Omaha railroad tracks. The area lacked the meat packing, beer distilleries, food and hardware distribution of the Eastern and Southern portions of the railroad loop around Omaha. Additionally, at this time there were three examples of the island form of organization in Omaha; one at blocks 308-310 and 317- 319 (the Nicholas Street Historic District); one at blocks 6-8 and 354 (the central island – Burt to California and 12th to 15th); and the last at blocks 188-191, and 202-207 (the southern island – Leavenworth and Marcy, 6th to 12th – now part of the Omaha Rail and Commerce Historic District, NR 1996). Both of the other islands were substantially more residential in nature, and in fact, the central island was only separated from the adjacent residential neighborhood by a single track along its southern edge.

1900-1920

Over the next 20 years, the Nicholas Street Historic District passed through phases two and three of construction. The residences became incidental to the industry which was establishing itself between the railroad lines in this area. After the depression of the 1890s, many of the residences disappeared as well as the smaller businesses; notably the smaller fuel dealers. Overall however, the area remained full of light industry, adding grain and hay dealerships and City of Omaha Sewer Department activities to the warehouse, millwork, and mattress/upholstered furniture manufacturers in the area. During this period several more companies were established that began to anchor the area, including L.G. Doup, an upholstered furniture and mattress maker, and Adams & Kelly, a window, door, and trim manufacturer. Brick buildings became prominent and several companies added to their existing buildings.

During this period, the core buildings of this historic district were constructed. Three to four stories tall, these buildings were constructed to withstand heavy warehouse and factory loads and utilized by companies who were all related by wood processing; making furniture, millwork, windows, doors and trim. Additionally the companies each sold to a regional market. Each wood process produced something different however; and companies generally specialized in one type of item or another. Of the mattress companies, sash and door companies, and millwork companies, those located in this area of Omaha were in business longer than almost any of their rivals in their specialty, making this area unique for its stability of use for such closely related businesses.

In comparison, the uses of the central island of development were changing very little, while the uses of the southern island of development were moving towards a more typical mix for Omaha. The central island maintained its highly residential nature with a limited amount of industry while the southern island replaced a large number of homes with new implement dealerships, breweries, grocery wholesalers and the Union Pacific Passenger Depot. This last island began illustrating Omaha's economic emphasis on food

processing and jobbing, while the Nicholas Street Historic District began to exemplify the support industries and locally crafted goods. The difference in use with-in the islands was due in part to the location of the Union Pacific Shops. Located between the Nicholas Street Historic District and the central island, it caused a break in continuity along/with-in the railroad tracks. Since businesses tend to locate next to similar businesses this caused jobbing businesses to concentrate in the southern island, where several had been previously established, and support industries to cluster in the north for the same reason.

The nature of being an island also affected development. It was difficult for pedestrians to cross so many tracks, which limited the types of businesses that made sense to locate with-in one. Although it was acceptable for employees to cross the tracks, it was objectionable to make patrons do so. Additionally, with little room for expansion, few business owners saw the potential or appeal of the Nicholas Street location any more. Some of the blocks which had never been purchased were taken over by the city public works department.

1920-1935

Between 1920 and 1935, this area matured to phase four of construction. It developed both additional substantial buildings and a denser configuration. Many of the buildings constructed as new structures or additions to existing buildings were for companies already in the District. Having established a presence here and having been able to acquire enough adjacent land to extend their business interests when necessary, it must have seemed natural to stay. By the end of this period, the core of brick structures were surrounded by smaller brick one story buildings serving as ancillary support structures and smaller, industrial businesses.

In contrast, the central island in Omaha was wiped out by the expansion of the Union Pacific shops and railroad tracks cutting through town. In the southern island, just a few residential units were left and the larger factory buildings were evolving. A few left, but many simply replaced earlier structures with larger and more substantial new buildings.

1935-1960

As with most of the Mid-West during the Depression, this area saw little change. A number of small buildings were constructed, but nothing substantial. Overall the uses of the buildings also remained steady. The companies located here were well established by this time and were able to devise strategies for weathering the tough economic times.

In comparison, the southern island finally matured. The remaining residential units were removed and the companies in the area filled the existing area with larger and more substantial warehouses. This area retained its wide variety of uses, including the electric company, a molasses factory, a grocery warehouse and the Union Pacific freight and passenger depots.

After WWII, with the change in transportation from railroads to trucks and the change in the local economy from food distribution to a financial and insurance center, this area changed slowly. The 1940s saw the addition of a few small garage buildings, and in the 1950s additions were erected for the Industrial Chemical Laboratory Company and the M.A. Disbrow company. Each replaced earlier structures on the same site. Since the 1960s, other structures were lost, including a six-story office/factory building and three storage warehouses. Overall, the stability of the companies in this area generally continued into the late 1970s.

Conclusion

Altogether, this area is locally significant under Criterion A in the area of Industry as representative of some of Omaha's oldest and longest-lasting industries. It represents the lesser known support businesses of Omaha that were able to reach out to the local and regional markets with products for those who made their living working at Omaha's more well-known food processing industries.

Furthermore, it is locally significant under Criterion A in the area of Community Planning and Development as a good example of the island form of organization and the fourth phase of construction in industrial areas in the Mid-West. Common in cities across the Mid-west that developed simultaneously with the railroads, it was created as tracks coiled their way around previously developed land. This group of businesses was able to strike a fine balance between competition and interdependency with their neighbors. The island provided immediate, convenient access to the railroads, enough room for the well-established businesses to expand as needed and a boundary from competing companies that didn't fit into the balanced business population that had formed. These factors helped this industrial center to grow and thrive as the city of Omaha matured. It is the area's isolation that has preserved it for our generation and those of the future.