

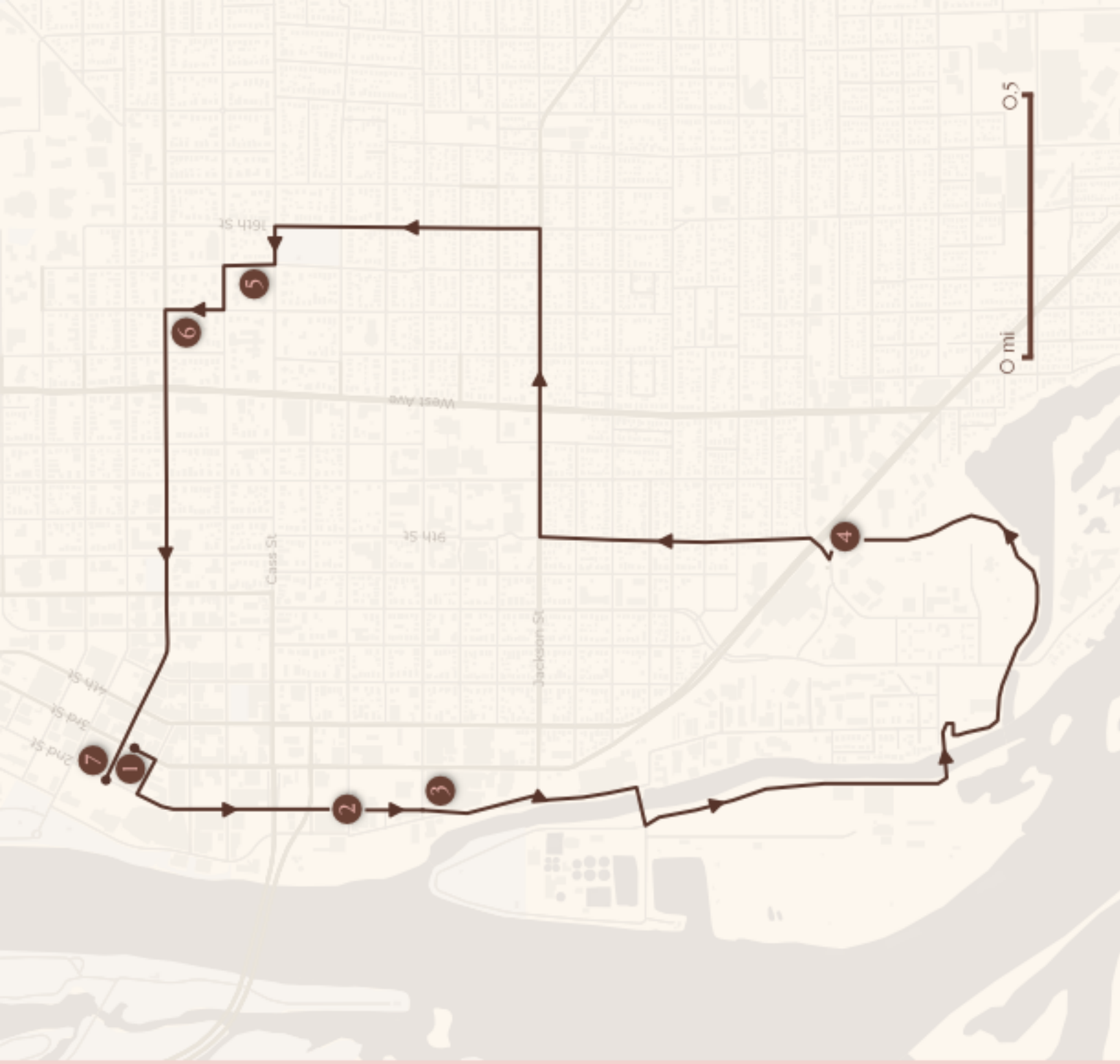


FOOTSTEPS OF LA CROSSE
TOURS THROUGH TIME

BEER BIKING TOUR

- 1. C. & J. Michel Building**
113 3rd St S
- 2. C. & J. Michel Brewery**
SE Corner of 2nd &
Division
- 3. Heileman House & G.
Heileman Brewing Co.**
925 3rd St S
- 4. John Gund Brewing Co.**
2130 South Ave
- 5. Charles & Louise Michel
House**
1431 Cass St
- 6. Emil & Louise Mueller
House**
128 14th St S
- 7. Turtle Stack Brewery**
125 2nd St S

**This recommended route was intended to be used by bicyclists. Please reroute yourself depending on your vehicle and use your own discretion if there are any obstacles.*



BEER HISTORY OF LA CROSSE

What is Footsteps of La Crosse?

This is a program hosted by the LPL Archives and Local History Department. Though the Footsteps tours are always available online for self-guiding, LPL Archives staff typically guides a series of tours each May and September. Each Footsteps tour focuses on themes in La Crosse history, generally giving you an overview of how architecture, class, and culture intersect on La Crosse's streets.

INTRODUCTION

Beer production and beer drinking throughout La Crosse history has directly impacted our everyday lives. This tour visits the stories behind historic breweries, tasting rooms, and mansions to show this to be true. Throughout history—just like today—our community supported the beer industry and in turn, the brewery industry has served the livelihood of thousands of La Crosse residents in our community's history. And for those interested, this tour also points out some architectural features in the buildings that haven't been demolished.

As you take this tour, think about how far the brewery industry reached in impacting our community. How have our streets, our neighborhoods, our parks, our commutes—everything we see in our built environment—been impacted by the brewery industry? How have our local government and City policies been impacted by the beer industry? What role does architecture play in telling the story of class and culture in our history? How do these things impact your life every day? Take the tour to find out!

When you are done, we hope you grab a growler or a six-pack from your favorite local brewery and talk about how that beer impacts our current community. If you have questions from this tour or wish to discuss the history of Wisconsin's beer industry further, join the Footsteps Watch Party on May 29 to talk with the author of this tour.

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LAND RECOGNITION

THE STOPS ON THIS TOUR EACH OCCUPY THE ANCESTRAL LANDS OF THE HO-CHUNK, WHO HAVE STEWARDED THIS LAND SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL.

The city of La Crosse occupies land that was once a prairie that was home to a band of Ho-Chunk. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in attempt to forcibly and often violently remove Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands located east of the Mississippi River to occupied territory west of the river. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the Federal Government conducted a series of six attempts to forcibly remove local Ho-Chunk by steamboat via the Mississippi River to reservations in Iowa, northern Minnesota, southwest Minnesota, South Dakota and finally to Nebraska. The historic steamboat landing where this took place is now Spence Park in downtown La Crosse (across the street from the Charmant, at the northwest corner of Front and State Streets).

However, many of La Crosse's Ho-Chunk found their way back to their homeland and eventually the federal and local governments moved on to new strategies to eradicate Indigenous peoples and cultures from the newly established United States of America. As of 2016, Wisconsin was home to over 8,000 members of the Ho-Chunk Nation, about 230 of whom live in La Crosse County.

STOP 1: C. & J. MICHEL BUILDING

Built 1892

GO TO: 113-115 3RD ST. S.

In 1857—just one year after La Crosse was incorporated as a city—German immigrant brothers Charles and John Michel started a business together called the La Crosse Brewery. After getting blocked by ice on their way from Davenport to Minneapolis, the two brothers were forced to stay in La Crosse for the winter of 1855-56. They decided to stay and start a carpentry business before quickly realizing that brewers in La Crosse were not able to meet the local demand for beer. Within just three years, their brewery was the largest in the city and one of the largest in western Wisconsin.

Most of the hops the Michel brewery used were from Bangor, Wisconsin, though they also imported hops from California. Their most popular beer was called Elfenbrau, which was introduced in 1910 with the tagline "Wholesome as Sunshine." They used rambunctious elves in their advertisements for this beer.

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They incorporated as the C. and J. Michel Brewery in 1882. Like many breweries of the time, the Michels opened “sampling rooms” that served beer from their brewery. They built this building in 1892. Before this location, they had a sample room that you can visit at the end of the tour at 111 2nd St. S. (a few buildings north of Turtle Stack Brewery), which they used from 1887-1892. This photograph in an unknown tasting room shows a bar decorated with Elfenbrau paraphernalia, just like you would see at a bar today with neon signs featuring various beers and breweries.

The C. and J. Michel Building also housed the White House Dry Goods Store in the 1890s. The Bijou Theatre was located on the second floor from 1906-1910 and was the site of performances by performers like Al Jolson and Buster Keaton.



Unknown downtown La Crosse bar interior, circa 1910

Architectural Highlights

This building exhibits a mix of commercial Queen Anne and Italianate elements and has been described as Late Victorian Eclectic. It was designed by the local architectural firm Stoltze and Schick, who designed many of the no longer existing late 19th century commercial buildings in downtown La Crosse.

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Gustav Stolze and Hugo Schick were both German-speaking immigrants, likely a reason that they were hired by the Michel brothers.

Key elements:

- Colorful façade
- Metal cornice
- Two well-preserved two-story metal-clad oriel windows
- Limestone sills under the windows, lintels above the windows, and stringcourses across the building, through the oriel windows
- Notice the name plate at top of building

STOP 2: C & J MICHEL BREWERY (DEMOLISHED)

Built 1907/08

GO TO: 201 DIVISION ST. S.

Of the *fourteen* breweries that operated in La Crosse in the late 19th century, the Michel Brewery was one of four that became large, well established companies (Michel, Gund, Bartl, and Heileman). At one point, it was the largest brewery in the city. In 1879, they were producing 15,000 barrels of beer per year. They even used modern processes, like pasteurization, that only the most advanced Milwaukee breweries were using at the time. Nearly half of the employees (12 out of 27) worked in the bottling room where they washed, filled, steamed (that's the pasteurization), corked, cooled, and labelled fifteen barrels a day and 48,000 bottles a month.

At the corner of Third and Ferry streets was the Michel house, which became the offices (gone now) after the Michels moved to their Cass Street mansion (Stop 5). This home was one of the first in the city to be heated by steam because the Michels were able to run pipes from the brewery to the house. In 1907, the brewery expanded west and built on this lot at the southeast corner of Division and 2nd streets. This lot was the home of the last remaining building of the brewing complex until just this winter, when it was demolished.

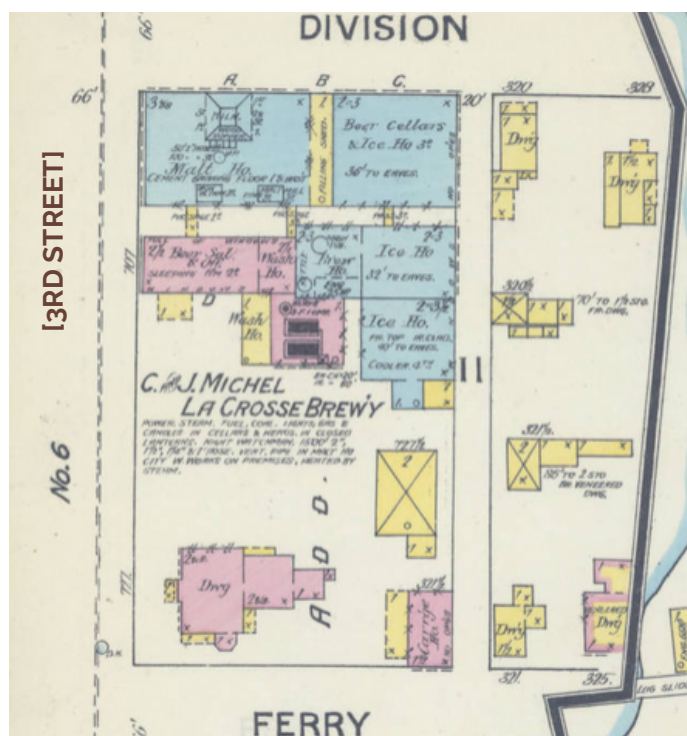
As the Temperance movement grew in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, the general public grew uneasy with beer, wine, and alcohol. Brewers tried fighting this, arguing that only hard liquor should be prohibited under the increasing dry laws. The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 did not help their battle. Breweries like Michel began advertising their beers as "fresh"

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and “pure,” claiming their beer was recommended by doctors, all to combat the growing stigmas.

Only a small handful of La Crosse breweries would survive Prohibition, and the C. & J. Michel Brewery was one of them. Carl Michel Sr., son of Charles, kept the company going by changing its name to the La Crosse Refining Company. They produced malt syrup products to market to home brewers, which was still legal. By March 1933, Carl Michel Sr. was prepared to convert the manufacturing equipment back to brewing beer and rollout two classic labels: Elfenbrau and Peerless. Michel was able to acquire Peerless from Gund Brewing, who did not survive Prohibition. They even had the ability to rehire their brewmaster and the former Gund brewmaster to recreate the original recipes.

By the 1950s, the Michel family brewery was unable to keep up with Heileman. In 1955, management tried cutting costs by using a local distributor instead of their own, unionized employees for deliveries. That June, workers organized a strike and won, pressuring management to go back to using their own employees for distribution. However, within just a few months the brewery shut down, unable to keep up with production. They were in business for nearly 100 years. G. Heileman Brewing, which we will learn about at the next stop, acquired the Michel brewery in 1965.



1887 Sanborn map shows the original brewery buildings, before the 1897 fire wiped out the brewery complex. Note the pink building in the bottom left—that is the original Charles & Louis Michel home.

ELFENBRÄU

The Beer of the Family—Wholesome as Sunshine.



It leads all others, that's why it is called the King of Bottled Beers; leads in flavor, leads in purity, leads in quality.

You are not bilious after drinking this good beer, the time we spend in aging it prevents that. It is appetizing and nourishing.

To get the quality that characterizes this delicious beverage we spend money and use mature judgment. Our brewers are men who know how.

Into the rock-ribbed earth some 1500 feet deep, we go for the purest water. Our hops and malt are the very best that can be had. Nothing is too good for Elfenbrau.

Purity is assured by cooling the beer in filtered air; even the bottles are sterilized before and after filling.

Doctors recommend Elfenbrau because they know the nerve and force building value of hops and malt. They know this to be a healthful and delicious beverage.

C. & J. Michel Brewing Co.

La Crosse, Wis. Family Trade a Specialty. Phone No. 2 Either System.

A 1909 newspaper ad for Michel's Elfenbrau

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STOP 3: GOTTLIEB & JOHANNA HEILEMAN HOUSE

Built 1876

GO TO: 925 3RD ST. S.

Both Gottlieb Heileman (1824-1878) and Johanna Bantle (1831-1917) were born in the Württemberg region of Germany. In 1852, they each separately immigrated to the U.S. and settled in Milwaukee, where there was a bustling German community. Gottlieb worked as a baker for four years, while Johanna was a house maid for Frederick Pabst. It was through Pabst that the two met. In 1858, Johanna and Gottlieb were married and came to La Crosse. Gottlieb worked for a few breweries, including the C. and J. Michel Brewery. After only a few months, Heileman formed a partnership with John Gund, who had been brewing beer for the city since 1854. Their business became known as the City Brewery. In 1872, Gottlieb bought out Gund.

Local and family sources say that Johanna and her seven daughters would cook and serve dinner to unmarried brewery workers. This made Johanna a trusted face to Heileman employees. Just two years after this home was built, Gottlieb suddenly died and Johanna was made president of City Brewery. After the brewery incorporated in 1890 as the G. Heileman Brewery, Johanna likely became the first woman in the U.S. to operate a brewery. She is often cited as the first woman CEO in Wisconsin, and sometimes even in the nation, though this is hard to verify.

Johanna built herself a solid, supportive management team of family members. Her brother-in-law, Richard Wacker, and her son-in-law Emil Mueller both aided her in running the company. Many of her daughters' husbands were major stockholders. It was under this family leadership that the Heileman Brewery expanded their market and grew production. Around 1905, Heileman began advertising a beer that would become its flagship beer and a Wisconsin legacy: Old Style Lager.

In 1912, Johanna stepped down as president and she died in 1917, leaving the brewery, the home, and her amassed wealth to her children. Two of her sons-in-law, Emil Mueller and George Zeisler took over most of the Heileman Brewery responsibilities. Both worked in management and as executives for the company. George Zeisler's father had also started an early La Crosse brewery (Zeisler Brewery, also known as the Plank Road Brewery). After his father died in 1902, George Jr. sold the Zeisler brewery to serve as vice president at Heileman. His history in working with his father made him well-equipped for this role.

When Prohibition came, Heileman survived by producing alternative beverages, like near beer, a malt tonic with less than 0.5% ABV. They even had a soda line under the name Old Style. After World War II, Heileman grew to

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be one of the biggest breweries in the country. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, the company faced corporate takeovers and industry shakeouts. In 1999, two locals bought the company back and named it City Brewery, the company's original name under Heileman and Gund in the 1870s. Many bars around Wisconsin—even outside of the state—still hang Old Style signs outside their front doors.

Architectural Highlights

The Gottlieb and Johanna Heileman House remains a fine example of the heavy classical Italianate style favored by late 19th century German immigrants in Wisconsin, despite alterations. The highly stylistic mansard roof on the tower (see historic photo) was removed and additions to the porches detract from the architectural integrity of the building.

Key elements:

- Two-story red brick
- A distinctive square, three-story square tower placed at the junction of the two cross-gabled wings
- Tall narrow windows with highly ornamented hood moldings
- Paired brackets under the cornice
- Octagonal bay window
- Prominent cornice returns
- Broad entablature with dentil detail
- Oculus windows in the gable ends



Heileman House

STOP 4: JOHN GUND BREWING CO.

Built 1898

GO TO: 2130 SOUTH AVE

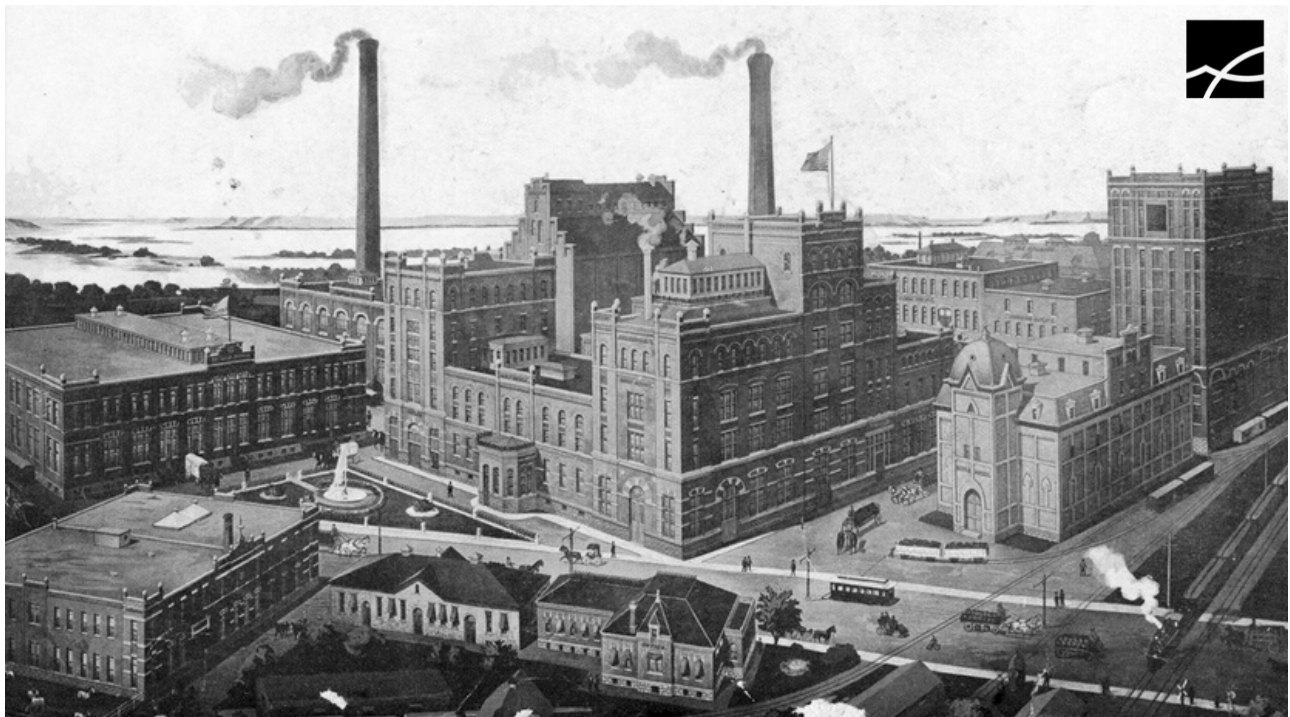
John Gund's first brewery was started in 1854 and was operated out of a log cabin on the riverfront at the end of Division Street. His advertisement in the newspaper listed that he would have "ale and beer which he shall keep on hand cheap for cash." In 1857, he partnered with Heileman, which dissolved in 1872. At this site was the location of his third brewery: Empire Brewery. When he originally built here, there was nothing around—just an open prairie. Building the brewery this far south in the city enabled land further south to be platted for city expansion.

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Original Gund Brewing before 1897 fire

The Empire Brewery had quick success and was incorporated as the John Gund Brewing Co. in 1880—one of the first to incorporate in the state. In 1897, Gund had grown to producing 100,000 barrels a year when a fire destroyed nearly the entire property. Partial reason for this great loss was inadequate water pressure from the city water works. In 1905, the company completed a project that allowed the brewery to pump more than 5 million gallons a day and millions more for other businesses and homes in the city.



Gund Brewing campus after 1898 rebuild and early 1900s growth

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By 1908, Gund's regional success had grown to the point that the company owned 22 taverns in Minneapolis, more than any other Wisconsin brewery. The company put a lot of time and money into quality advertising, launching campaigns that rivaled breweries much larger than Gund. Their most popular beer was Peerless, which is still brewed today by Potosi Brewing Co. If you look around, you will still see bars that have old "Peerless" signs hanging outside their entrances (from when Heileman owned the label, which they bought in 1965).

John Gund Sr. had always been a strong voice for civic improvement in the city and his children all followed his path. When he died in 1910, each of his three sons had large roles in the community—one was an alderman and director of the Inter-State Fair, another was a treasurer for the Board of Trade and past president of the La Crosse Baseball Association, and the third helped establish La Crosse's Parks Commission. The brewery kept producing beer after Gund Sr.'s death, but as Prohibition approached, the Gund family decided against keeping the company alive by making other products.

The few buildings that remain today are a result of the 1898 rebuild. The Gund Brewery Lofts were the original bottling works and the brewery's stables were in the matching red brick building across the street. You can still see the horse figure above the entryway.

Architectural Highlights

These two buildings show Neo-Classical influences.

Key elements:

- Red brick façade contrasted with limestone belt courses, window hoods, and foundation
- Tall, narrow windows
- Central bay entrance with brick pilasters
- Roofline accented with stepped pedimented parapets
- Decorative horse above door on the old horse stables
- On the old bottling works, there are the slightly arched second story windows and brickwork between the first and second stories

BEER HISTORY OF LA CROSSE

STOP 5: CHARLES & LOUISE MICHEL HOUSE

Built 1892, with 1927 alterations

GO TO: 1431 CASS ST.

Charles Michel—the “C” behind the C. and J. Michel Brewing Co.—commissioned this home with his wife, Louise Gund Michel, to be built in 1892. After being married in 1871, the two had lived in a house adjacent to the brewery at the corner of Third and Ferry streets. By 1892, the Michel brothers had been brewing beer in La Crosse for 35 years and had established their beer throughout the Midwest. Louise was the oldest child of John Gund. With their collected wealth from the brewery industry, Charles and Louise were able to have this mansion built. At the time, Charles was 66 years old and Louise was 38.

In December of 1904, Charles died in his bed after asking Louise for a glass of water. Because he had no known sickness, his death was sudden for the family. At just age 26, Carl, their son, took over as president of the brewery. After Louise died in December of 1919, she left the house to Carl, who lived here until his death in 1958.

Architectural Highlights

Originally, this home had a much different appearance. When it was designed in 1892, it was a high-style Queen Anne mansion with a red brick exterior. In 1927, Carl and his wife Nina dramatically altered the home to modernize it. The exterior was changed to a cream brick and the tower on the west (left) side of the home, above the entryway, was removed. The new style after this renovation would reflect a Period Revival influence, which was common for mansions of the 1920s. However, the interior still has many of the original fixtures, such as the grand open stairway, leaded glass windows, and numerous fireplaces.

Key elements:

- Multiple gables
- Hip-roof
- Hip-roofed dormers
- Round-arched entry
- Conical roofed tower (now removed—see historic photo)



Michel home before 1927 remodel

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STOP 6: EMIL & LOUISE MUELLER HOUSE

Built 1914

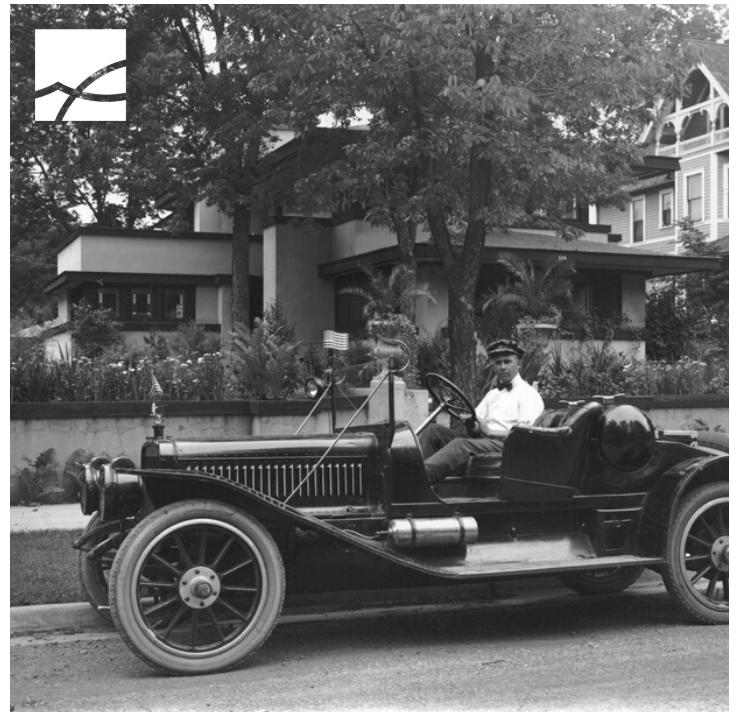
GO TO: 128 14TH ST. S.

Emil Mueller (1858-1929) and Louise Heileman (1859-1924) were married in 1881. That same year, Emil is listed as a bookkeeper at Heileman Brewery in the City Directory. As Johanna's oldest daughter, Louise and her husband were entrusted with the future of the brewery and Emil was rewarded as a close colleague of Johanna. Within just a few years of being hired, he was promoted to general manager. Before his retirement, Emil would serve as secretary, treasurer, and president of the company.

He and Louise lived in a few houses before commissioning this modern, Prairie Style home in 1914. Together, they had six children. One of their sons, Otto, was tasked with demolishing his childhood home (211 6th St. S.), where Emil and Louis lived before building this home here. In a 1965 newspaper article, Otto shared fond memories of his parents. He remembered his father's evening routine including a tall glass of beer, a pipe, and telling the children long, adventurous stories.

Architectural Highlights

The Mueller House was designed by local architect Percy Dwight Bentley, who was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright. Bentley designed many of the Prairie style homes and buildings in La Crosse. The original light-colored stucco exterior (see photo) was replaced in the mid-20th century with the rough-cut limestone and red clapboard siding associated with Wright's Prairie buildings. Far from detracting from its appearance, many architectural historians feel that the altered exterior actually enhances the early 20th century Prairie School appearance of the house.



Original Mueller house.

Key elements:

- Low-slung geometric mass
- Wide, flat chimney
- Overhanging eaves
- Original open floor plan and Arts and Crafts interior finish
- Decorative band of windows

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STOP 7: TURTLE STACK BREWERY

Built circa 1885

GO TO: 125 2ND ST. S.

Turtle Stack Brewery started in this building in June of 2015, with seven beers on tap in their tasting room. They had to remodel the interior extensively to accommodate a brewing system and tap room. Before it was the brewery, it served as the La Crosse Clocks store, a bookbinder, a candy manufacturer, and the National Engraving Company.

Turtle Stack's tap room is in good company. Just down the street, at 111 2nd St. S., was the first tasting room for the Michel brewery. At the corner of Pearl and 2nd streets, the Satori Arts building was the Zeisler Brewery sampling room. In 1905, John Gund bought a saloon on Pearl Street for \$6,000. Historian Doug Hoverson points out that this was "a considerable amount for a small property but not for a prime location."

At the turn of the century, this was the heart of the downtown district, with another block and a half of buildings between here and the riverfront. The railroad had a depot just across the street, where visitors would see their first view of the city as they stepped off the train. This neighborhood was full of restaurants, hotels, saloons, and brothels, most of which catered to the infamous rough traffic that came with being a Mississippi River town. River workers and lumbermen were known for spending their money at establishments like this, often to cope with the dangers that came with their work. La Crosse's breweries—including Michel, Heileman, Gund, and Zeisler—were sure to keep these patrons well-stocked with their beer.



Two men outside the Paul Malin tasting room (now the Bodega), circa 1890s, cheering the photographer with beer in their hands.

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CONCLUSION

After the 1965 flood, the buildings on La Crosse's downtown riverfront were old and damaged and the area was subject to a fad that ran across the country: Urban Renewal. In some cities, Urban Renewal meant beautification or improvement projects (like parks, raised highways, civic centers, and tourist attractions) that displaced entire neighborhoods where working-class community members lived. In other cities, the neighborhoods that were chosen for Urban Renewal projects were the segregated neighborhoods where immigrants and people of color had found their homes.

In La Crosse, the buildings that were lost were primarily from 2nd St. to the riverfront, between State and King streets. This area was part of the historic Red Light District and the locale for the river workers and lumbermen, which was a contributing factor to the buildings being run down and underutilized by the early 1910s, when this traffic was long gone. By the 1970s and 1980s, most of these buildings were a century old and lacked the care and preservation that old buildings need for preservation and utility.

Today, across the street from Turtle Stack Brewery's historic building, we have more modern buildings to remind us of this history. As urban philosopher Jane Jacobs said, "Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings. Even the enterprises that can support new construction in cities need old construction in their immediate vicinity."

While Urban Renewal and these lost buildings are not exactly part of the story of La Crosse's beer industry, it is all connected. The patrons who drank beer at the saloons and tasting rooms in this neighborhood hold as much of a stake in this history as beer giants like Michel, Heileman, and Gund. And just like it was supported by many, La Crosse's brewing industry in turn helped sustain the livelihood of thousands of community members. This included the genius brewmasters whose recipes became world famous, the bottling department that hired women and children to support their working class families, the local contractors and carpenters who built every building after every fire, the distributors, or the artists who created beer labels and advertisements. The beer industry reached far and wide in our community's history and directly impacted our built environment today.