

# *Footsteps of La Crosse*

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME & ARCHITECTURE



## La Crosse Historic Landmarks

Preservation of La Crosse's architectural heritage began in the 1970s when several properties were listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Historic preservation from a municipal perspective began in 1973 with the appointment of a preservation group which made a preliminary reconnaissance survey of historic buildings in 1977. A detailed professional intensive survey was completed in 1984 and updated in 1996.

The City of La Crosse Preservation Ordinance that provided for local listing of architecturally and historically significant buildings was revised in 1994 requiring all previously listed properties to be re-listed. Individual properties in the city are eligible for Historic Landmark status if they meet criteria similar to the National Register. Properties are presented to the Historic Preservation Commission for consideration and approval. If approved by the commission, the application for historic status is then forwarded to the La Crosse City Council for final approval. Designation as a Historic Landmark by the city does create some level of protection for historic properties. There is a "demolition denial" clause in the ordinance and a non-binding design requirement as well. There are currently over 50 buildings listed as City of La Crosse Historic Landmarks, including the seven identified on this tour.

Site 1: City Brewing Offices / Gottlieb & Johanna Heileman House  
925 3<sup>rd</sup> St. South  
Built in 1876

The Gottlieb and Johanna Heileman House, although somewhat altered, is a fine example of late 19th century High Victorian Italianate architecture and an important landmark building related to the beer industry in La Crosse. The two-story red brick residence has a distinctive square three-story square tower placed at the junction of the two cross-gabled wings. The tall narrow windows with highly ornamented hood moldings, paired brackets under the cornice and octagonal bay window are hallmarks of the Italianate style. Classically influenced elements of this style seen in the Heileman House are the prominent cornice returns, broad entablature with dentil detail and the oculus windows in the gable ends. The removal of the highly stylistic mansard roof on the tower (see archival photo) and the unsympathetic additions to the porches detract from the architectural integrity of the building. However, the Heileman House remains a fine example of the heavy classical Italianate style favored by late 19th century German immigrants in Wisconsin.

Gottlieb Heileman (1824-1878) was born in the Wurttemberg region of Germany and came to America in 1852, settling first in Milwaukee where he worked as a baker for four years. He arrived in La Crosse in 1857, worked first at the Nickolai Brewery and after one month was offered a better job with the C. and J. Brewery. In 1858 Heileman formed a partnership with John Gund that became known as the City Brewery. In 1872 he bought out his partner and later the brewery was renamed G. Heileman Brewery. After Gottlieb's death in 1878 (barely two years after his new house was built) his wife Johanna Gottlieb (1831-1917) became president of the company and continued to live in the house the rest of her life and is recognized as one of the first female business leaders in Wisconsin. Under her leadership, decision-making at the brewery was shared with a corporate board of directors. This modern style of business management was instrumental in the growth and ultimate dominance by G. Heileman Company of the brewing industry in La Crosse. The company managed to weather the Prohibition years and after World War II grew to be one of the biggest breweries in the country by the late 20th century. After corporate takeovers and industry shakeouts in the 1980s and 1990s the former G. Heileman Brewery buildings are now the home of locally based City Brewery. This reduced scale brewing operation continues beer making in La Crosse on the site of the historic brewery. The Gottlieb and Johanna Heileman House was listed as a La Crosse City Historic Landmark in 1999.

Site 2: Henry Ott Pure Oil Station / Mobil Detail Specialists  
400 Cass St.  
Built in 1928/1937

The former Pure Oil Station, prominently located at the corner of Cass and 4th Streets, is the best-preserved early 20th century service station in La Crosse. This building is an excellent example of the picturesque "homey" style gas

station that became popular throughout the country in the 1920s. As the automobile era began in the early 1900s, gas stations were unsightly and odorous utilitarian structures that were seen as undesirable in downtown commercial or residential neighborhoods.

In an effort to improve the image of gasoline stations, the Pure Oil Company directed company architect Carl A. Peterson to design their new stations in a quaint style that would both enhance the image of gas stations and provide a visual brand identity for the company. The Tudor Revival style English Cottage appearance with white brick façade and contrasting blue tile roof became the trademark for Pure Oil service stations and was adopted with variations by other oil companies in the 1920s and 1930s. Other Tudor Revival elements include the steep gable roof with flanking brick chimneys, decorative brickwork in the façade, multiple arched windows and distinctive copper-roofed bay window and canopy over the entry.

The first filling station was built on the site in 1928 in a commercial vernacular style and became a Pure Oil Station in 1934. In 1937 Henry Ott reopened the completely rebuilt and expanded Tudor Revival style service station, touted as a “shopping center for motorists”. The new five-section building was sited at an angle along the southeast corner of the intersection for maximum visibility at a major urban crossroads in La Crosse. This iconic early 20th century gas station was built by local contractor Art Schwalbe, the last of the well-known Schwalbe family of builders in La Crosse. The Pure Oil station closed in 1962 and the underground tanks were removed by the mid 1960s. In the 1950s a small café was located in the northeast section of the structure. Since ceasing to operate as a service station the building has housed several automobile related businesses in recent decades. The exterior remains essentially intact and retains its historic architectural integrity. The Henry Ott Pure Oil Station is a La Crosse City Historic Landmark (2000) and was featured in a recent book highlighting 58 historic gas stations in the state titled “Fill'er Up: The Glory Days of Wisconsin Gas Stations” published by the Wisconsin Historical Society in 2008.

Site 3: Rublee – Washburn House / Cadwallader C. Washburn House  
612 Ferry St.  
Built in 1856/1886

The Rublee/Washburn house was built by pioneer land developer Francis M. Rublee in 1856. Rublee moved to La Crosse from Madison in 1848 and is considered one of the founding fathers of La Crosse. The unusual massing of the house features crossing north-south and east-west wings that is a Tuscan Villa variant of the Italianate style popular with wealthy builders of the mid-19th century. The low pitch gable roofs with extended eaves and paired brackets along with ornamental window hoods are typical of the Italianate style. The most distinctive element of this style is the multi-sided central cupola or belvedere. The original brick exterior has been covered by stucco. Positioned on the top of a rise in the center of the block and surrounded by landscaped grounds with a semi-circular driveway; the Washburn House in the late 1800s no doubt radiated a grandiose appearance.

That grandiose appearance reflected the wealth, power and status of the man for whom the home is named. Cadwallader Colden Washburn (1818-1882) was born into an illustrious Yankee family in the state of Maine and along with several of his brothers came to the “Old Northwest” to seek his fortune. He first settled in Iowa in 1839 and later moved to Mineral Point in 1842. At that time Mineral Point was at the center of the lead mining activity in southwest Wisconsin and the staging area for settlement of the Upper Mississippi. Washburn studied law and became involved in teaching, real estate speculation and banking. He was elected to the U. S. Congress in 1854 and served three terms as a congressman from the Second District before moving to La Crosse in 1861. He soon ventured into the growing lumber business and purchased the home at 612 Ferry from the Rublee family. When the Civil War broke out, Washburn raised the Second Wisconsin Cavalry Regiment and became its colonel. He advanced quickly in the army was given command of Union troops in West Tennessee under General Grant. He finished the war as a Major-General; Wisconsin's highest ranking soldier in the Civil War.

After the Civil War, he was elected to the U. S. Congress again in 1866 and served two terms before being elected Governor of Wisconsin in 1874. He was defeated in his campaign for re-election and returned to live at the house on Ferry Street in 1876. Washburn continued in the lumber business and was President of the La Crosse Lumber Company in affiliation with fellow La Crosse based entrepreneur W. W. Crosby. Apparently these two local venture capitalists saw an opportunity in flour milling and extended their business ventures to the growing river town of Minneapolis where they founded the Washburn/Crosby Milling Company. This venture paid off handsomely -- their company is known today as General Mills. At his death in 1882, C. C. Washburn was one of the most wealthy and powerful residents of western Wisconsin. He was also quite generous. He left money to build a public library in La Crosse and his philanthropy extended to establish the Minneapolis Orphan Asylum and endow Edgewood College in Madison. The C. C. Washburn monument in Oak Grove Cemetery, a towering granite obelisk, is the tallest and most recognizable memorial in the cemetery. The Washburn name is found throughout northwestern Wisconsin as the name of a county, city and numerous townships.

Today the home that C. C. Washburn called his main residence in La Crosse throughout his 40-year career in business, military and public life is now greatly reduced in condition and appearance. Operated as a rental property for most of the 20th century this historic and architecturally significant City of La Crosse Historic Landmark (1995) was listed as one of the Ten Most Endangered properties in Wisconsin in 1996.

Site 4: Bishop's House / Siena Hall  
608 11<sup>th</sup> St. South  
Built in 1877

The well preserved exterior of the Bishop's House is the best example of French Second Empire architecture in La Crosse. This style began in France during the reign of Napoleon III (1852-1870) and was popular in both commercial and residential buildings in the Midwest from the 1860s through the early 1880s. The most important feature of the style is the double-pitched mansard roof, which distinguishes Second Empire from the contemporaneous Italianate style. The highly ornate Italianate elements include the basic red brick two story cubic form with small cupola on top, projecting cornice with paired brackets and dentiling, tall narrow paired or triple windows with elaborate hood molding and first floor hexagonal bay windows with decorative balustrades or railings.

The Bishop's House was built in 1877 at a time when the role of La Crosse as a regional trade and population center was steadily increasing. Many of the immigrants to the area were German Catholics; joined by numerous others of the same faith from Ireland, Poland, France and Bohemia. By 1868 the Roman Catholic population had grown sufficiently that the Diocese of La Crosse was established to serve the newly settled areas in western Wisconsin. Rev. Michael Heiss, a native of Bavaria, came to La Crosse in 1869 from Milwaukee as the first Bishop of the newly established Diocese of La Crosse. Heiss lived in temporary housing until the new Bishop's House was completed in 1877. The grandiose three-story home; built in the style of large mansions of the era, reflected the important role of the Roman Catholic Church in La Crosse. The attic level provided private rooms for resident priests and a chapel was attached to the side of the building for group gatherings. Bishop Heiss lived in his new home for only three years; for in 1880 he was called back to Milwaukee to serve as Archbishop. The house was then occupied by Bishop Michael Flasch from 1881 to 1891 and by Bishop James Schwebach until his death in 1922. At that time the diocese purchased the N. B. Holway House at 1419 Cass Street (see the Cass/King walking tour) to serve as the new Bishop's residence.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse purchased the building in 1922 for \$15,000. The Bishop's House was then converted into a residential facility for 60 nurses who served at what was then called St. Francis Hospital. The remodeled residential facility included a new recreation hall, living room, dining room, parlor and kitchen. When the School of Nursing was built in 1942, the nurses moved out and were replaced by Franciscan Sisters who taught at Aquinas High School, located a few blocks away. At that time, the building was renamed St. Catherine's Hall. Through most of the 1950s and 1960s St. Catherine's Hall served as a residence hall for female students attending St. Rose High School and Viterbo College. The current chapter of the Bishop's House story began in 1967 with the conversion of the building into a residential treatment facility for patients with behavioral disorders. With a new use came a new name, Siena Hall, named after St. Catherine of Siena.

The story of the Bishop's House represents the historic and continuing presence of the German Catholic community in the area as well as the important contributions to regional education and healthcare by the Franciscan Sisters. A major interior update and exterior preservation project for Siena Hall was completed in 1996 the same year that the Bishop's House was designated a La Crosse City Historic Landmark.

Site 5: Carl Rediske Cobbler Shop  
600 Badger St.  
Built ca. 1889

The Rediske Cobbler Shop is a wood frame, one room former commercial building that was relocated to its current location from its original North 12th Street site in December 2002. The simple one story 12 foot by 16 foot shop has a cedar shake roof, beveled wood siding and plain unornamented windows and door. The only distinctive feature is the rectangular facade with narrow projecting cornice; often called a "boomtown" false front because of the popularity of this simple decoration in western frontier settlements in the 1800s. This building displays the Commercial Vernacular style, which means a simple utilitarian structure designed by local craftsmen and built with locally available materials.

German immigrant Carl Rediske (1856-1948) was trained as a shoemaker (cobbler) in Germany in the "old world" tradition. He came to the U. S. in 1883 at age 27 and purchased a standard lot on North 12th Street several years later. He built the shop in about 1889 before building a home for his family a few yards away on the same lot in 1900. Carl specialized in hand-made shoes and was patronized by several prominent German immigrants, including the Gund brewery family. He practiced his trade in the tiny shop adjacent to his home for nearly 60 years, practically until the day he died.

An interesting additional event related to the Rediske Cobbler Shop is the story of a barn on the original site on North 12th Street that was removed and reassembled by the Wisconsin Historical Society in 1988. Presumably sometime around 1900 Carl Rediske built a small barn on the back lot that had room for one cow and a couple of horses. Carl and his wife Anne Wavra Rediske had seven children and only Carl's shoemaker income for support. The single milk cow provided food for the family as well as a little extra income. Many urban residences in the late 19th century had a small barn or carriage house located to the rear of the house, often on an alley. The surrounding area around the original location of the Rediske Cobbler Shop is the historic Goosetown neighborhood, home to dozens of immigrant families that brought many life-ways of their European homeland to La Crosse in the 1800s. Carl Rediske lived, worked and provided some of the nourishment for his large family on one city lot that he purchased in 1883. The tradition of a trained craftsman/artisan living and working in a mostly self-sustaining urban homestead is one that

goes back to the early Middle Ages in central Europe. Carl and many others like him had transplanted that culture to the “new world” in La Crosse.

Carl’s daughter Rose Rediske apparently was aware of the significance of the old barn and shop which were two of the very few surviving wood frame late 19th century outbuildings left in the neighborhood. She offered both buildings to Old World Wisconsin, an outdoor heritage museum located in the south-eastern part of the state and operated by the Wisconsin Historical Society. The WHS gladly accepted her offer. They dismantled the old barn, board by board, and relocated it to their outdoor heritage museum. They also took the old metal cobbler shop sign with distinctive boot and shoe along with most of the shop’s leatherworking tools. However, they already had a shoemaker’s shop. Much to the disappointment of Carl’s 91-year-old daughter Rose, Old World Wisconsin took the barn but left the shop, stripped of its historical context.

Very few of these 19th century commercial buildings in La Crosse like the Rediske Cobbler Shop remain intact and unaltered. These simple utilitarian structures used to line the main streets of rail, river, mining and lumber towns throughout the country. Fires, floods and changing tastes have eliminated most of these holdovers from the early settlement years. The La Crosse Historic Preservation Commission has twice listed the Rediske Cobbler Shop as a local historic landmark property. First in 1991 and later in 1995 after the changes in the City Landmark Ordinance necessitated re-nomination of all landmark properties. The commission stated in the 1995 nomination that the Rediske Cobbler Shop “embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type inherently valuable for study of a historic period of the city’s history.”

In 2002 when the building was threatened with demolition, a coalition of private individuals and organizations led by the Preservation Alliance of La Crosse relocated and restored the Rediske Cobbler Shop in order to preserve this piece of the city’s architectural heritage.

Site 6: Concordia Hall / Concordia Ballroom  
1129 La Crosse St.  
Built 1891

The Concordia Dance Hall, located in the historic neighborhood known as Goosetown, is one of the last remaining buildings associated with the social life of the German immigrant community in La Crosse. Designed by the local German speaking partnership of Gustav Stolze and Hugo Schick, this large public building has had major exterior alterations but still retains its original form and distinctive square towers with bell-shaped roof and decorative finials. The original brick exterior and window openings have been covered with stucco and faux half-timbering. The entrance has been altered as well. Still evident is the “1891” date-block positioned high in the middle of the façade between the flanking towers.

In the 19th century beer and dance halls were very popular with the large German-American community in La Crosse. The Concordia Society was established by local German immigrants in 1870. The group was incorporated in 1876 as the Concordia Singing Society and later became known as the Concordia Aid Society. Although singing for entertainment was one of the main functions of the group, additional goals were to practice and cultivate vocal and instrumental virtuosity, perform gymnastic exercises for the mind and body and provide mutual benevolence and financial support for members in need. One of the member singing groups, The Frohsinn Society, had the Concordia built in 1891 as a community center and dance hall. Previously, the members met in a building on North Third Street. The neighborhood in the roughly ten-block area surrounding the intersection of La Crosse Street and West Avenue (formerly 12th Street) was known as Goosetown for the large number of domestic fowl kept by German immigrants in their backyards. This neighborhood would have been a logical place to locate a dance hall for singing and drinking beer.

By 1984 the dance hall was no longer profitable and the building was in need of major repairs. In 1994, the remaining members of the Concordia Aid Society voted to sell the property to pay back taxes and other debts. In 1995 Concordia Hall was saved from demolition and extensively renovated as a result of cooperation between the Preservation Alliance of La Crosse, the Concordia Aid Society and a volunteer ad hoc group called “Save the Concordia.” Under the leadership of Concordia Aid Society member Bernie Duerkop, the Concordia was purchased by a new organization that now runs the hall for a variety of community events including weddings, benefit concerts and old-time and country dances. Concordia Hall was listed as a La Crosse City Historic Landmark in 1995.

Site 7: Frank & Alice Kendhammer House / Bluffview House – Lustron Home  
751 22<sup>nd</sup> St. North  
Built ca. 1950

Lustron Homes are prefabricated porcelain-enameled steel houses developed in the immediate post-World War II era in response to the shortage of housing for returning GIs. The Lustron Corporation was formed in January 1947 with government financial assistance by Chicago-based industrialist and inventor Carl Strandland, who had previous experience in manufacturing steel-plated military vehicles and service stations. The all-steel exterior and interior was touted to “defy weather, wear and time” and designed for simplicity, efficiency and economy. The houses initially sold

for approximately \$9,000 and had about 1000 square feet of living area. Nearly 3,000 Lustron Homes were manufactured at the plant in Columbus, Ohio between 1948 and 1950.

The all-steel modular homes were built with assembly-line efficiency and delivered to the building site in a kit by a special Lustron Corporation delivery truck. The homes were built on a concrete slab with no basement and came in two or three bedroom models in eight distinctive pastel colors with a number of innovative built-ins and window types. The Lustron Corporation declared bankruptcy in 1950 due to production delays, distribution problems and escalating prices for the finished product. Also, political intrigue that led to a withholding of promised government financing proved to be the final blow to Strandland's Lustron Corporation.

Today there are approximately 2,000 Lustron Homes still in existence in 36 states. Lustron homeowners have organized preservation groups and events and many Lustron homes are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places for their significance in mid-twentieth century post-war building history. The Lustron house built for Frank and Alice Kendhammer is the "Westchester Deluxe" model with distinctive tri-partite picture windows. The original recessed entry area has been enclosed and a screen porch was added to the rear of the Kendhammer House. Otherwise, the exterior appears to be intact and unaltered after over 50 years of exposure and use. The Kendhammer House was listed a La Crosse City Historic Landmark in 1998.

Five other Lustron Homes have been identified in the city. These are located at 130 South Losey Boulevard, 1211 Bluff Street, 2215 State Road, 2011 Park Avenue and 4514 Mormon Coulee Road. Can you find any others?

