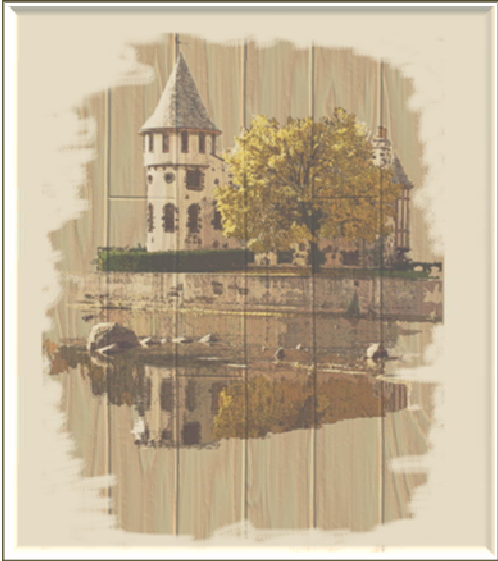


Owosso Downtown Historic District
City of Owosso
Shiawassee County
Michigan

August 2010



Section II

SECTION II

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Owosso Downtown Historic District

Shiawassee County

DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW

June, 2010

The hub of Owosso's commercial and community activity was always and still is the downtown commercial district. In the earliest days of Owosso's history, there were several mills, the first constructed to saw lumber into boards to construct buildings, while others followed to grind grain into flour, and to card wool, all located on the Shiawassee River which flows South to North on the Western edge of the downtown and wraps around the southern edge of the commercial area paralleling Comstock Street. Our clever early settlers built a mill race to accommodate these mills and maximize the river's power. The mill race ran parallel to the river and with the advent of steam and more efficient methods to produce the same products, the mill race was filled in, paved, and became Water Street. Because of the availability of water, for power, and for drinking and for transportation, several general and dry goods stores opened within near proximity to the mills. Owosso's founding brothers, the Williams brothers, hired a surveyor to plat the downtown into generous blocks with streets right of ways sixty-six feet in width, except for Washington and Main and Exchange Street. These three streets were created to be ninety-nine feet wide, because these two men felt certain that Owosso would be an important town. In fact, Benjamin and Alfred Williams always thought that Owosso would be the State capitol. History records that when the state representatives voted for placement of the state capitol, Owosso as one of the cities selected, missed by one vote.

This portion of Michigan is largely agricultural due to the flat and fertile fields which surround and comprise Shiawassee County. Potatoes and sugar beets at one time drove the agricultural economy in this area. With a population of about 14,000, Owosso is the largest community in Shiawassee County and historically has served as the commerce and entertainment hub for the entire county.

Owosso is located almost dead center in the lower peninsula of the state of Michigan, easily accessible by State Highways M-21 which is downtown's Main Street, and the town is bisected by M-52. At one time three railroads had depots in Owosso; one of these still exists as a Elk's Club. The railroads still come through town though and The Steam Railroading Institute Museum is active in preserving railroad history in Owosso.

Homes were constructed near the commercial center of the town in the 1840's and 1850's, especially on Park Street which has become the easternmost boundary of the downtown historic district. As commerce increased and the town grew, those small Greek-Revival three or four room houses were relocated from Park Street throughout the town by house-movers using block and tackle, horses and wagons, and new businesses, and much later large parking lots, were

located on Park Street. During this time, more elaborate homes were built on the eastern, western and northern borders of the downtown, most of which still exists, but the commercial district ends on the northern edge at Mason Street primarily with some commercial buildings expanding the district to the 300 block of North Washington. In the three hundred block of North Washington, two historic homes still survive the expansion of the commercial district into residential neighborhoods, one Italianate which served, and serves still, as a doctor's office for many decades, and a later Victorian house. On Washington Street we also find four historic churches, two of which are located within the downtown historic district, which provide for the spiritual needs of the townspeople, as well as the Masonic Temple built in 1924. During the 1970 and 1980's, new commercial architecture appeared on this block with the advent of the Shiawassee Council on Aging Building and the new Post Office. Beyond this point, the architecture changes from commercial to historic residential.

From the 1850's, the social events of Owosso occurred in special second or third floor halls which were created for such events such as plays presented by the Owosso Dramatic Society, musical entertainments, circus acts including Tom Thumb and Minnie Warren, and parties in general, and yes, they were conducted above a commercial enterprise in the downtown. Today social events still center around the downtown with the Mitchell Amphitheater on the river, the Lebowsky Performing Arts Center (currently being rebuilt after a fire), Main Street Plaza and various businesses, movie theaters and restaurants which include entertainment.

The sense of history is pervasive in the entire town in which forty-five percent of the buildings have been built prior to 1939, but especially in the commercial downtown area. The broad streets and sidewalks, the grand (and formerly grand) multi-story nineteenth- and early twentieth- century buildings which comprise an eleven block area tell a story of the enterprise, pride and commitment of the people who settled and created wealth in this town. As the Michigan economy has faltered over the past three decades, so have the fortunes of the Owosso downtown, which has become in some instances, shabby, with botched attempts at modernization of the historic buildings. The covering of entire facades of Victorian buildings with materials foreign to the time such as enameled metal tiles and rough-sawn cedar, and metal are blatantly evident, however nineteenth century master brickwork details are fortunately more prevalent in the downtown, especially on buildings on Washington Street, both North and South and on Exchange Street and on the Armory and High School (now the Junior High School) buildings on Water Street, which is the western boundary of the commercial downtown, the Shiawassee River serving as a natural boundary.

On the southern boundary of the downtown historic district, an individual can stand on one side of the street with buildings from the nineteenth century at one's back and look across the street to see the expansion of the downtown in modern terms with a 1982 J. C. Penney's store and a new bowling alley, new movie theaters, restaurant and doctor's offices, the boundary being self-explanatory.

HISTORIC NARRATIVE

The city of Owosso has passed through dynamic social and economic changes during the past two centuries that are recalled and reflected in one of the largest and best preserved collections of historic buildings in the state of Michigan. Like that of many other cities in the region, Owosso's civic development evolved through eighteenth-century pioneer beginnings and small mill enterprises, through an era of burgeoning transportation accessibility by river and rail that supported an early industrial boom and an accompanying period of building activity in the expanding business and residential areas. Like many other Michigan cities, too, the rising trajectory of Owosso's industrial development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took a profound downturn in the 1930's, only to rebound in the next decade through the success of thriving enterprises in support of the war effort. In the ensuing decades, Owosso's fortunes have risen and fallen with trends in manufacturing, especially in the auto industry, and the city now faces, with other communities throughout the Midwest, challenges associated with an economy in transition. Historical parallels aside, however, Owosso stands apart from most other cities in Mid-Michigan in the extent of its industrial development and the scope of its civic ambition, all of which may be read in the city's extensive surviving architectural record, especially in its richly detailed downtown district.

Prior to the arrival of non-native settlers in 1835 (preceded by trappers, traders and federal surveyors in the 1820s), that region of the Shiawassee River around which the central city later grew was home to the Shiawassee band of Ojibwa, after a chief of which, Wasso, the city is named. The early settlement was established by immigrants from the northeastern U. S. and nascent communities in southeastern Michigan, with residences, trading posts, mills and millrace all concentrated in what is now the epicenter of downtown, along current M-21 running east and west; with Adams, Water, Ball, Washington, Park and Saginaw, crossing to the north and south, almost all of it to the north and east of the Shiawassee. As late as 1884, the date of the first Sanborn fire map for Owosso, development within the city was still concentrated within these boundaries, edging toward Williams Street on the north and Comstock Street on the south. The eight Sanborn maps that follow, documenting the city's expansion through 1946, illustrate the growth of the city beyond these initial boundaries, with industrial enterprises moving outside the district and substantial residential districts developing to the north and south. It is worth noting, and indicative of the early citizens' breadth of ambition for their city from its earliest days, that the downtown was laid out not along a single main street, as is characteristic of so many Michigan municipalities, but according to a grid radiating outward from the intersections of a main street and six north/south streets.

Transportation of people and materials on the Shiawassee River were initially facilitated by flat-bottomed boats, with channel improvements and small steamboat enhancing travel as early as 1846, making Owosso an accessible destination. Extensive development of rail transportation through Owosso by multiple lines between 1850 and 1900 supported the growth of many industries, especially in the production of furniture and building elements. The vitality and quality of these enterprises is evident in the craftsmanship of fine homes, churches and other buildings from the period that survive largely intact in neighborhoods immediately adjacent to downtown. The resulting boom and prosperity enabled development of the downtown

infrastructure, including installation of electricity in 1890, implementation of a streetcar line in 1893, and brick paving of the streets in 1898.

By the turn of the century, early single residences and industries in the downtown had largely been displaced to outlying areas by an increasingly dense concentration of retail, and commercial buildings, often including apartments and/or offices on the upper floors; along with churches, hotels, restaurants and entertainment businesses. The economic success of ongoing manufacturing concerns, especially in industries relating to furniture, automobiles and electrical devices, fueled redevelopment, and sometimes architectural transformation, of existing downtown properties. Such changes to the cityscape were largely suspended during the Depression, which hit Owosso particularly hard given the predominance of its economic base in manufacturing, but resumed when thriving wartime industries revived the local economy.

Owosso's proximity to Flint and the presence of numerous auto-related industries in town kept Owosso economically healthy until the last quarter of the twentieth century, during which the economy of the city, along with that of the rest of Mid-Michigan, has struggled to survive a diminishing market for the manufactured goods that employed its citizens for more than a hundred years. While the downtown district has remained functional during this period of civic decline and inevitable urban sprawl to discrete commercial districts, the impact of the economic downturn is clearly visible in the deterioration of buildings that remain largely intact, but in urgent need of rehabilitation and regeneration.

THEMATIC NARRATIVE

Commerce and Social History

Downtown Owosso has been the commercial and social center for both the City and the surrounding areas of Shiawassee County for more than 150 years. From its origins as a few cabins on the Shiawassee River to the establishment of a mill and early industries to the development of stores and banks, Downtown Owosso has been a gathering place for the transaction of business and for the attendant personal interactions that accompany shopping, finance, and entertainment. Over the years, with changes in technology and transportation, the nature of commerce has changed, but downtown Owosso has adapted to remain a place where individuals can meet, do business, and build a social network.

Among the 19th century pioneers of the community were entrepreneurial individuals who started business to supply new settlers. Charles Goodhue made his fortune from his General Store located at the northwest corner of Washington and Main. Starting in the 1830s the entire Gould family was involved in commerce. Amos Gould opened the first bank, "D. Gould and Company," which became the First National Bank of Owosso, and he was the town's first mayor. His brother Ebenezer Gould had an early general store with his brother in law – "Gould and Fish General Store." David Gould not only managed the bank of his Uncle Amos, but was also the president of an early railroad and a partner in the Nason-Gould Timber Company in Chesaning, just downstream on the Shiawassee River.

Early settlers began commerce in Owosso with planing mills, grist mills and woolen carding mills. Early visionaries, knowing that transportation was crucial, formed the Shiawassee Navigation Company to clear the river of impediments from Owosso to Saginaw with the intent to float flat boats to and from Saginaw. A road building company was also formed to clear a track for a road, as early on the only "road" was an Indian path along the east side of the Shiawassee River from Pontiac to Saginaw.

The first train came in 1857, and Owosso soon had three depots and four railroads in town bringing new settlers. To supply the burgeoning community, the Osborn Family opened a large dry goods store. Dwight Dimmick who built his fortune in residential real estate, started in 1872 with a grocery store. James Laverock, who started in 1878 working for The Woodard Furniture Company, and sold "10cent sheds" to people doing business in town to shelter their horses, shifted to manufacturing cigar boxes and eventually settled into selling coal and wood for heating. He built two large tenement buildings on Mason and on North Ball, a business block in the 300 block of North Washington, and developed an entire section of residential homes called the Laverock subdivision. The Owosso Carriage and Sleigh Company for a time had a healthy business. The four furniture companies located in Owosso were rewarded with tremendous growth

By the turn of the century, Christian's Department Store and The New York Store of Charles Lawrence (later Lawrence Department Store) Osborn's Dry Goods, Shattuck's Music House, Hartshorn Agricultural Implement Company, Pearce and Ward (later Arthur Wards Dept Store) had replaced some of the small specialty businesses such as tin smiths, harness makers, purveyors of valises and trunks, and merchant tailors who sold top hats and cloaks.

There were also many grocers such as Hall Brothers and C. C. Duff. Byerly's started their entire Michigan chain of stores in Owosso packaging their own teas, coffees and spices. Meat markets and small grocery and fruit markets were many: Copas Meats being on North Washington and Barie's on Main Street; Spaniola's Fruit Market was a fixture in Owosso for almost a century, to name just a few.

In addition to commerce, the social aspects of downtown were complementary both in activity and architecture. The early construction of two and three story buildings allowed for ground floor retail and upper story "halls" which would be the venue for social events such as balls, parties, and other entertainment, such as the plays sponsored by the Owosso Dramatic Society. The Salisbury Opera House was located in the heart of the downtown on North Washington near Exchange; later there were four movie theatres.

Downtown halls were also the home for political meetings and various fraternal orders such as the Masons, The Knights of Pythias, and The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. That the historic churches were built near the center of the downtown also speaks to the importance of the social aspects of the area. The churches may have sought to counteract the influence of 14 saloons and billiard parlors and at least three operating breweries in Owosso. Restaurants, such as The Wildermuth Dining Room, the Merrill House Dining Room, The Blue Bird, The Popular Cafe, the Elite, Candyland, and Capitan's were popular social gathering places as well. Perhaps the most iconic gathering place for social and business interaction, was the Owosso City Club, on the upper floors at the corner of Exchange and Ball Streets.

The buildings of downtown Owosso have hosted a number of businesses that have changed with the economy and transportation technologies. But whether accessible by canoe and horse, or train, or automobile, downtown has been the gathering place where goods were offered for sale, retail purchases made, and financial transactions executed. Accompanying this commerce, social interactions occurred in halls, clubs, churches, taverns, restaurants, and on the street as people went from building to building. It is this legacy that will continue as downtown Owosso is preserved and further developed.

ARCHITECTURAL NARRATIVE

Introduction:

Owosso's downtown contains an exemplary collection of historic buildings. Today's streetscapes proudly display blocks of brick commercial buildings in an impressive array of architectural styles. (Unfortunately, one must look to the second and third floors of most buildings to see the original designs, as street-level facades have usually been heavily reworked to adapt to changing tastes.) Most plentiful are two- and three-story brick commercial structures of Victorian design that date from Owosso's boom years, which fit roughly within the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, closer observation reveals that, in addition to our wealth of Victoria-era buildings, we also can claim handsome buildings from earlier days (Greek Revival and Italianate), grand civic structures in the later Beaux Arts and Tudor Revival styles, and even a few buildings with Art Moderne and Mid-Century Modern designs.

The proposed historic district is composed mostly of brick commercial structures. There are a few exceptions: three churches, a middle school, an armory, city hall and the adjoining public safety building, a funeral home, two houses, and a very few non-contributing contemporary buildings. These exceptions have been addressed in other areas of this report and will not be included here. The following architectural narrative will address the commercial structures in Owosso's downtown.

The Early Years:

Founded in 1836 and incorporated as a city in 1859, Owosso early on dedicated its resources to commerce. The earliest settlers were drawn to the power generated by the Shiawassee River, and their settlement at the east edge of the river grew into today's downtown district. Countless other cities were founded for much the same reasons and in much the same way. Many of these smaller cities and small towns existed primarily to service the thousands of family farms that tilled the lush Michigan soil. While serving the need of the agricultural community, Owosso also concentrated on manufacturing. The city grew by leaps and bounds, money flowed in, and the downtown buildings reflected this increasing prosperity.

Today's downtown is by and large the product of Owosso' boom years, with much of its impressive inventory of two- and three-story brick commercial buildings dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, as Owosso grew and its buildings increased in size and grandeur, the center of downtown continued to occupy the area established by the earliest settlers. Starting at the east bank of the river (the site today of the 1915 Tudor-style armory and the 1924 Beaux Arts City Hall) and stretching two blocks east to the primary intersection of Main and Washington Streets, Owosso's downtown radiates only one to two blocks away from this core area. When someone wanted to build a new and larger building, they tore down (or moved) an existing structure and built anew. Thus, many of Owosso's extant historic buildings are actually the second (and sometimes third) structure on their site.

The earliest settlers built log cabins, and these cabins were clustered together for security in a small area (the core of today's downtown). These cabins served as residences and commercial spaces. (One of the very first log cabins has miraculously survived and is exhibited today in Curwood Castle Park, just across the river from the proposed historic district.) As more settlers arrived and Owosso's commerce started to expand, simple wooden structures were erected. (A few of these small Greek Revival buildings have also survived, saved by having been moved from the downtown to outlying areas.) Then, about the time of the Civil War, the buildings started to reflect an increased awareness of architectural styles; perhaps the coming of the railroads to Owosso did much to increase knowledge of style trends on the East Coast. Vintage photos show a city center filled with one- and two-story wooden buildings, independent structures with gable roofs and tall false fronts ornamented with elaborate woodwork. (To modern eyes, this style of building is familiar from Western movies.) The store owner conducted business on the first floor and the family lived above.

Residential neighborhoods developed on the periphery of the downtown area and, slowly, the prospering citizenry moved to newly-built houses in these areas. The downtown became dedicated to commerce. (Even the churches built their houses of worship on the edge of the city center, possibly because vacant land was cheaper away from the developed area.) The boom years were coming and Owosso's downtown architecture would reflect this increased prosperity.

The Civil War Era:

There had been large and impressive brick structures erected prior to 1875. History records the Williams brothers, founders of Owosso, built the first three-story brick building at 112 N. Washington Street in 1855, less than 20 years after the city's founding. The three-story brick building at 213 N. Washington Street dates from this era as well. Both facades feature the simple symmetrical designs of Greek Revival architecture. (As many of Owosso's first settlers came from New York State, they would have been building in the style much in favor as they left their homes and journeyed west to Michigan.) The second Gould Hall, at 217 N. Washington Street, was constructed in 1868 and reflects the Italianate style, with its round-topped windows and deep overhanging eaves supported by richly carved corbels. A smaller building at 118 S. Washington Street, far less grand and intimate in scale, also exhibits Italianate details.

The tall and impressive three-store corner building at 122 N. Washington Street, with its tall, narrow windows and heavy Renaissance Revival lintels, is believed to have been built in 1868; if so, it was built in the very height of fashion on the East Coast and represents the start of Owosso's building boom. Downtown Owosso as we know it today was about to be built.

The Boom Years:

Coming from the East Coast, Owosso's citizens brought with them a familiarity with urban architecture. Densely packed cities, some developed a century or two earlier, were filled with narrow buildings abutting one another, with street facades typically 25 to 30 feet wide, and stretching back 60 to more than 100 feet toward the back alley. (Buildings were typically no wider, as this was the widest possible support span in these pre-steel construction days.) As Owosso's commercial center grew in wealth and importance, and citizens wanted to construct finer, more substantial buildings, they replicated those long, narrow commercial buildings they had known back East. Down came the wooden stores with their gabled roofs and enlarged

parapets, and up went two- and three-story brick buildings with dignified, even exuberant brick facades.

Some of Owosso's Victorian era buildings were small, more utilitarian in their design and execution. These tended to be a little removed from the heart of downtown. The two-story building at 200 W. Exchange Street, for example, 208-12 W. Exchange Street, and the 200 block of N. Ball Street (odd numbered side) were all of simpler design, with minimal brick ornamentation held primarily to the frieze, and single windows under plain lintels.

Lots facing the important streets - E. and W. Main Streets, N. Washington Street, and W. Exchange Street – were in demand and prospective builders constructed increasingly elaborate brick structures. Great care was taken in details – window shapes and configurations, brick juxtapositions, stone embellishments, and wooden ornaments. It must be assumed that each heavily detailed façade satisfied the ego of its builder, as each corner and indentation, each inset panel, each row of specially-cast brick, cost the builder a little more. And downtown Owosso real estate must have been a good investment. There are several buildings that were constructed as one structure but divided, visually and spatially, into multiple store fronts. Examples abound in downtown Owosso: 116-20 N. Washington Street, 106-12 W. Main Street (the surviving section of the original 102-14), 111-13 S. Washington Street, 104-08 N. Washington Street, 121-23 W. Exchange Street, 120-22 W. Exchange Street, 113-19 W. Main Street, 216-18 W. Main Street, others. And, amazingly, given the rampant construction that must have kept downtown Owosso buzzing through the 1880s and 1890s, great care seems to have been taken to create unique street facades, as there is very little repetition among the various buildings.

Other than the matched store fronts on the above-referenced single structure buildings with multiple units, there is only one façade design that repeats on different sites downtown. One of Owosso's most elaborate and exuberant high-Victorian brick facades, it appears (with very slight variations) at 115-17 N. Washington Street, 112 S. Washington Street, and 114-16 W. Exchange Street (although 116's beautiful Victorian façade is regrettably hidden under a false front of mid-twentieth century tiles).

Owosso's surviving commercial buildings also reflect the advances in building techniques and construction materials. The earliest surviving brick buildings, such as the Greek Revival 112 N. Washington Street (1855) and the Italianate 217 N. Washington Street (1868), relied on centuries-old building techniques. Thick masonry sidewalls support the upper floors, the joists for which run parallel to the street. The weight of the second floor façade relied on support from the first floor façade, meaning piers were required between the original store windows; the weight of the third floor façade relied on the second floor façade for support, so second floor windows were separated by sturdy brick piers. When large open interior spaces were desired, they were of necessity placed on the highest floor. Such was the case with 217 N. Washington Street, the second Gould Hall. The façade features dramatic, large windows on the third floor – with an obviously much higher ceiling than on the first two floors. This vast third-floor meeting space was much used in the second half of the nineteenth century by Owosso's citizens for cultural gatherings, social events, and even military occasions.

These thick masonry sidewalls caused some interesting design decisions. In several instances, it is easy to see that one building was constructed as a stand-alone structure with both its side walls. Later, someone constructed a building abutting the original structure. Presumably to save space and expense, the support for the new building was tied into the existing sidewall of

its neighbor. At 208 W. Main Street, this caused the Adam-style wood frieze to extend onto the neighboring building's façade and sit squarely on that building's Georgian-style quoining. This at least helped maintain the attempted symmetry of 208's façade. 116 W. Exchange Street (one of the five near-twins) lacks its left sidewall and appears to be hugging its neighbor. Finally, the in-fill construction of the three-story 119 W. Exchange Street used the existing support wall of both of its neighbors; unfortunately, the neighbor to the left was only two stories tall, so the building without its own sidewalls suddenly gains a sidewall on the left side of the third floor!

The facades of the late Victorian buildings display evidence of the transition to newer construction methods and better materials. For example, 120-22 W. Exchange Street (188?) features individual windows on the upper floors, separated by wide sections of brick wall. Buildings of a slightly later date, such as 114 S. Washington Street, 110 W. Exchange Street, and the intricate façade repeated on five store fronts (115-17 N. Washington Street, et al), all feature much narrower brick piers between the upper floor windows. Then better support systems allowed for the façade at 118 W. Exchange Street, with two pairs of windows and one narrow brick pier between. There are four windows grouped together on the second floor of 111 E. Main Street, with only wood moldings separating the windows. (Here, the arch above the windows may be supporting much of the weight.)

By the end of the 1890s, downtown Owosso was filled with Victorian commercial buildings. Primary thoroughfares like N. Washington and W. Exchange Streets were lined with (mostly) three-story red brick commercial structures with Victorian facades of varying complexity. There have been regrettable losses – to fire, changing tastes, and neglect – but the downtown Owosso of 2010 was pretty much in place.

After the Boom:

The Columbian Exposition of 1893, held in Chicago and attended by millions, greatly influenced American architecture. The classic simplicity of the White City, with its neoclassical buildings, slowly strangled the supremacy of Victorian high-style architecture. Owosso builders continued to construct red brick facades with complex masonry and a plethora of details, but tastes were changing. One sees it at 208 W. Main Street, with an Adam-style wood frieze applied to a Victorian façade busy with brickwork. Neighboring 212-14 W. Main Street was constructed with very plain, flat brick walls and all its ornamentation was supplied by applied wood elements.

In 1907, a Beaux Arts style bank was erected in orange brick at 100 E. Main Street, on the southeastern corner of Main and Washington Streets. It is a handsome building, despite the uncharacteristic brick, and conveys everything one would hope for in a bank building. Yet its design hardly pushed the envelope, architecturally.

Not everyone subscribed to the new neoclassicism. Visiting the White City, Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, who had been moving American architecture forward to a new place, shook his head and expressed his disappointment. American architecture, he said, had just been set back 50 years. And Frank Lloyd Wright continued to blaze his own trail, promoting and advancing his Prairie Style, despite the setback. A very few of Owosso's buildings – 113 W. Exchange Street and 216-18 W. Main Street come to mind – exhibit Chicago Style elements in their designs.

Then, in 1911, fire destroyed the large three-story mid-Victorian building at the prime intersection of Washington and Main Streets. The structure that arose from the ashes at 100 N. Washington Street was a rare animal for downtown Owosso: a four-story brown brick commercial building whose design was heavily influenced by Wright's Prairie Style. Plain brick piers ran up the facades facing the busy streets, dividing groupings of large, plain windows. The emphasis was on the horizontal, with the roofline capped by a wide, flat overhanging eave that dominated the design. Ornamentation was held to a minimum. Today, this building (although vacant) still dominates the intersection.

A wealthy city with an active commercial center and thriving manufacturing concerns, Owosso entered the twentieth century with some impressive civic goals. A stunning Beaux Arts post office was constructed in 1906 on E. Exchange Street. In 1915, the huge and ungainly Victorian armory (at E. Mason and N. Park Streets) was replaced by the foursquare Tudor castle at 201 N. Water Street in the commanding position at the head of W. Exchange Street. In 1924, an impressive Beaux Arts City Hall was constructed at 301 W. Main Street, on a site whose history goes back to the very beginning of Owosso; this design reflects the neoclassical building boom then changing Washington D.C. into architect John Russell Pope's version of a great city. And a new high school was dedicated in 1929 at 239 N. Water Street, just north of the new armory. This time, the Tudor design was somewhat lighter in spirit, less ponderous than the new armory, with stone detailing and subtle design flourishes.

To the Present:

From this point, downtown Owosso as we know it was substantially complete. The streets were lined with buildings of various designs. There was minor growth on the fringes. But the greatest threat to the downtown's architecture was fire. Great fires had been part of Owosso's history almost from the beginning, but the fires of the twentieth century would strike like thieves, stealing our architectural heritage. A huge fire in the mid-1960s devastated the entire 200 block front (odd number side) of W. Exchange Street. What had been a row of handsome brick facades became a parking lot. It remains a parking lot today. In 1981, the three three-story Victorian buildings at 119-21 E. Main Street burned to the ground, creating another vacant space later converted to a parking lot. More recently, arsonists torched the historic Lebowsky Center (historically, the Capitol Theater), which is currently being rebuilt, and the Victorian building at 104-08 N. Washington Street (historically, the Wesener Building), which sits awaiting rehabilitation through tax credits made available once the historic district designation is in place.

Changing tastes have also led to significant losses. Handsome three-story buildings in the 100 block of N. Washington Street were replaced in the 1950s by a single-story, non-descript five-and-ten store. The entire block front (even numbers) of the 200 block of N. Washington Street was lost over two separate decades. In the 1950s, the southern half of the block, containing the Strand Theater and several handsome store fronts, was razed and replaced by another one-story five-and-ten. Then, in the 1970s, the northern half fell to the wrecker, to be replaced by a single story block building and, yes, another parking lot. The elegant Beaux Arts post office on E. Exchange Street, executed inside and out in marble, was razed in the early 1960s. The site became a parking lot (one detects a theme here: more parking places and fewer buildings to visit!) and replaced with a sleek 60s building with little style in the 300 block of N. Washington Street. The loading docks might have been vastly improved but Owosso's streetscapes suffered a devastating loss.

Changes in architectural fashions have also wrought havoc on some wonderful downtown facades. Several buildings (one of the five near-twins at 114 W. Exchange Street, 113 N. Washington Street, 113-117 W. Main Street, 211 N. Washington Street, 115 E. Main Street, 108 E. Main Street and, most notably, 123 N. Washington Street) have all had their handsome Victorian facades ignobly covered by a false front. The drug store at 201 N. Washington Street has recently been encased in a bland outer skin, although a recent sign change revealed, for one brief moment, the fabulous Art Moderne façade hidden underneath.

Age has also caused some losses. Many downtown buildings have bare parapets; some bear clear markings from the original elaborate cornices having been attached to the parapets for decades. The mid-Victorian brick façade at 110 N. Washington Street began to separate from the building, threatening to crumble into the street. The Victorian front was removed and a solid blonde brick façade was constructed over a street level wall of glass. At 207 N. Washington Street, Owosso's only stone façade in the Richardson Romanesque style, an owner in the 1970s wanted to reduce his upkeep and removed the entire third floor, reducing the grand building to two stories and a somewhat truncated appearance. And the historic first Gould's Hall at 221 N. Washington Street, dating from the 1850s and integral to Owosso's history, was reduced from three floors to one story in the 1950s.

In Conclusion:

Despite some heavy losses through the decades, Owosso's downtown contains an impressive collection of nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial architecture. Because Owosso was a wealthy community flush with manufacturing income, the buildings that were erected were often grander and more elaborate than in the average midwestern city. Architectural history for the last 150 years could be taught using Owosso's surviving commercial district for examples

Like old downtowns across the country, Owosso's commercial center is struggling. Big box stores and suburban shopping habits have made city centers almost passé. However, we believe that Owosso's downtown has the potential for revival. Much of its charm is derived from its exemplary historic architecture. The establishment of Owosso's downtown as an historic district will protect the surviving structures from some of the losses detailed in the section above. The availability of tax credits will allow for the rehabilitation of some endangered buildings and the renovation of others.