

Downtown Alton Recognized in National Register of Historic Places

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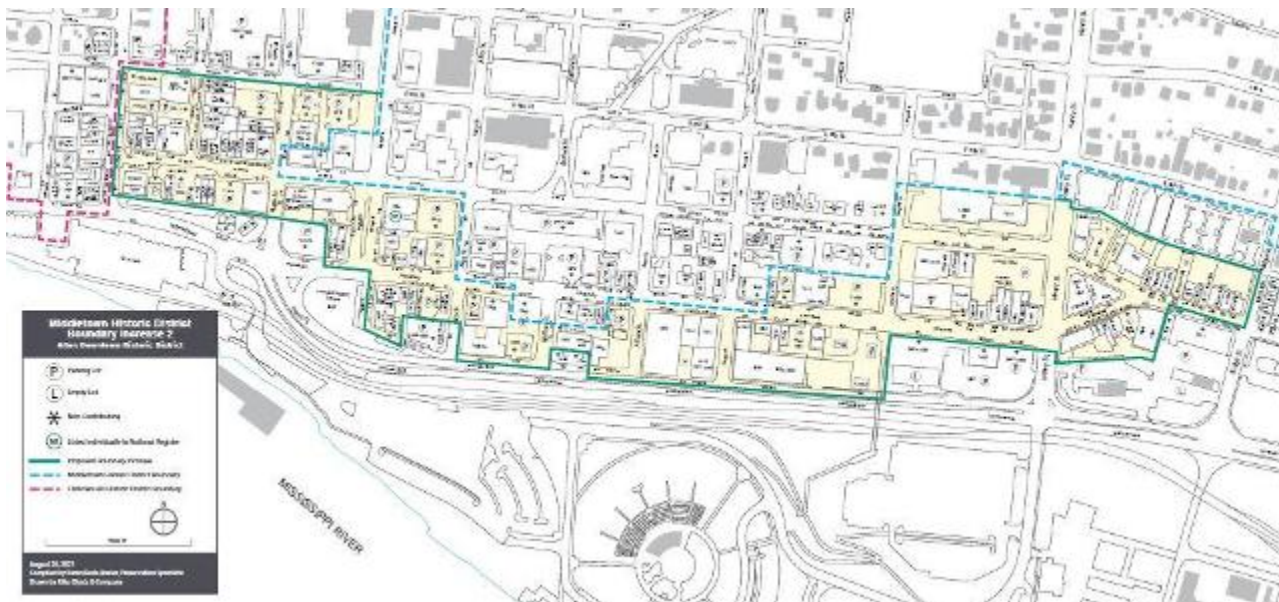
ALTON – Thanks to the hard work and relentless commitment of dozens of Alton community volunteers, much of Alton’s Downtown Historic District is officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of an expansion of the Middletown Historic District. The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the Nation's historic places worthy of preservation and part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America's historic and archeological resources.

“When the people of Alton come together, we can accomplish anything,” said Jayne Simmons, President of AltonWorks. “Members of local organizations including Alton Main Street, Alton Area Landmarks, the Historical Commission, and Hayner Library

worked with the AltonWorks team and dozens of community volunteers from January of 2019 through early this year, gathering documents, taking photos, verifying property addresses, and researching to ensure everything that was submitted was clear and accurate. This was an amazing effort and everyone who lives, works, and plays in downtown Alton will benefit from this distinction.” Volunteers included college students, property owners, business people, civic leaders, and citizens who value Alton’s history.

Prior to the inclusion of the downtown area, Alton had three historic districts that were mostly residential areas of the community including the Middletown, Christian Hill and Upper Alton. The expanded area of the Middletown District includes 134 new properties covering 11 blocks in the downtown area stretching from State Street to Ridge Street along Third Street, Broadway, and Front Street/Landmarks Boulevard. The Middletown Historic District incorporates residential, institutional and commercial properties within the Original Town of Alton and the early Hunter’s Addition to its east, but only a portion of the actual historic commercial district was included within the jagged southern boundary of the original Middletown Historic District.

Other organizations that assisted with the project include the Alton Assessment Office, the County Assessor’s Office, Madison County Courthouse staff, Illinois State Preservation Office, Illinois Advisory Council of Historic Preservation, and property owners.



A public event to share more information with the community will be scheduled and announced in the next several weeks.

Dennis M. Hyland, AIA NCARB, with Kiku Obata and Company, the firm that manages planning, design and architecture for AltonWorks, spearheaded the project for AltonWorks. “A lot of people assumed that Downtown Alton was already in the National Register of Historic Places,” said Hyland. “Prior to this recognition formalized on January 4, 2022, only a tiny portion of downtown was included on the registry. This accomplishment is a recognition of something that has been a longtime coming and important to the future revitalization of Alton.”

The battle to keep Alton historic has been going on for years. President Terry Sharp of the Alton Area Landmarks Association (AALA), a key organization in securing the nomination, said "The AALA endured a 13-year court battle with the State of Illinois to preserve the Alton riverfront. It was eventually saved by the Illinois Supreme Court who prohibited the state from building a highway through Riverside Park." Sharp said the newly added area to Alton's historic districts was the last piece of the puzzle needed to keep the beauty and history of Alton's downtown.

Putting together the nomination to the State Historic Preservation Office and the National Register took almost three years. Preservation Specialist Karen Bode Baxter was one of the authors of the nomination. “If we didn’t have the community volunteers to help with this project and the cooperation of the area organizations with the data and knowledge of Alton, this project could not have been completed,” said Bode Baxter. “Everyone came together to gather the information we needed before the pandemic, and we are so grateful for the timing. If we had started in 2020 rather than 2019, we would still be working through this time-consuming and labor-intensive process.” Each building and property have to be surveyed to assess the viability of the property as a historic building.

“I think this national recognition is significant because it changes the way everyone views our downtown,” said Lacy McDonald, Genealogy and Local History Manager at The Hayner Public Library District. “This acknowledgment generates pride in the city and helps people appreciate the beauty and influence of the past.” Since the city directories, photographs, and other documents used by the preservation team are part of the Hayner Genealogy & Local History Library collection, many of the documents created by the preservation team were housed at the library for safe keeping during the process. In the last several years, Hayner Library has expanded their online catalog of historic photos and documents for the entire community to enjoy. This includes high-resolution photos used in the historic district application. The community can access the collection of more than 4,000 photographs through the following link:

Illinois Digital Archives - Alton Area Local History Collection

Photographs digitized and uploaded by the Hayner Genealogy & Local History Library staff are word searchable. Remote access is available without a library card.

Background

National Register of Historic Places - Registration Form - Middletown Historic District (Boundary Increase 2- Downtown Alton)

<https://downtownalton.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Alton-Downtown-Historic-District-NR-Nomination-8-15-21-Draft.pdf>

Downtown Alton encompasses an eleven-block-long commercial strip on the south side of the Middletown Historic District. The Middletown Historic District incorporates residential, institutional, and commercial properties within the Original Town of Alton and the early Hunter's Addition to its east, but only a portion of the actual historic commercial district was included within the jagged southern boundary of the Middletown Historic District. Boundary Increase 2 infills this southern boundary and extends the district to the limits of the historic central business district which developed along the north side of the railroad tracks (now Landmarks Boulevard and U.S. Highway 67) that ran parallel to the river bottoms of the Mississippi River with the residential development extending uphill behind the commercial area in the Middletown Historic District.

The principal characteristic of the streetscape in the central business district is that of one to three-story commercial storefronts, interspersed with a few four to six-story commercial buildings, generally at intersections or along Front Street facing the Mississippi River. Most of the commercial buildings are brick of various colors, intermixed with some stucco and limestone facades, providing a colorful palette to the streetscape. The facades about the public sidewalk, distinguish the central business district from the institutional and residential buildings to the north within the original Middletown Historic District, which generally is set back with a lawn separating the building from the street. Although several of the commercial buildings have been neglected for many years, they were well built initially and retain their character-defining features, such as the decorative cornices and parapets, the rhythmic window patterns on the upper levels, the stone or terra cotta embellishments, and the variety of colorful brick, limestone and stucco facades. While storefront display window systems have often been altered over the years, these are generally cosmetic alterations rather than structural changes, retaining the massing that separates the storefront display windows and street-level entries from the upper-level windows and parapet details.

Building construction dates span from 1835 through 1962, defining the period of significance for the Middletown Historic District Boundary Increase 2, when construction came to a near halt in downtown Alton for nearly two decades. Only six of the buildings in the district were constructed before the Civil War. The c. 1835 William and Catherine Miller House and Store at 16 E. Broadway is the oldest building in the proposed historic district. The Ryder Building at 31 E. Broadway and the residence and store of tailor Walter B. Schmoeller (11 E. Broadway) (were both built around 1840. However, there are 38 buildings that have only been dated as-built prior to 1885, and it is likely that some of these are also antebellum buildings and may have been built as early as the 1830s.

Construction by Decade

1830s	2	1890s	5	1950s	10
1840s	3	1900s	12	Pre-1960	2
1850s	1	1910s	8	1961-1962	4
1868	3	1915-1926	1	Post-1960	2
1870s	6	1920s	13	1970s	1
1880s	5	1930s	7	1980s	1
Pre-1885	20	1940s	5	Post-2000	2

The boundaries of the Middletown Historic District (Boundary Increase 2) were determined by first completing a photographic survey and dating through research (analysis of city directories, fire insurance, and other historic maps, historic photos, and Hayner Genealogy and Local History Library’s Property Research Files) of the entire downtown Alton (from William to Cherry Streets along Front Street/Landmarks Boulevard, Broadway, Third Street, and Fourth Street). Much of the research utilized in

this analysis was gathered by volunteers from local organizations interested in the history of downtown Alton (Alton Area Landmarks Association, Alton Historical Commission, Alton Main Street, and the Hayner Genealogy and Local History Library). These findings were meticulously reviewed by Karen Bode Baxter and the National Register and Architectural Survey staff of the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office to eliminate the areas around the periphery of the district where there had been: (1) too many alterations to the buildings (resulting in loss of historic integrity), (2) too many vacant lots due to demolitions of deteriorated buildings, (3) too much new infill construction, or (4) inclusion within the existing Christian Hill and Middletown Historic Districts. Then, the remaining area was assessed to determine that it retained most of the buildings with enough historic integrity that had been built during the historic period of development of Alton's commercial district and that this area did not have much infill construction or too many vacant lots to finalize the boundaries of the district.

The commercial development occurred alongside the residential development of the central core of the "Original Town" in the plat for Alton after the township was incorporated in 1833 with the commercial developments paralleling the Mississippi riverfront and extending steeply uphill to the bluffs where the town's earliest residential development occurred, thus Middletown. The earliest developments in the commercial district began in the 1830s, but the economic crash in 1837, the massive flood in 1844, the cholera epidemic of 1859, and the Civil War curtailed the commercial growth of the community until the 1870s; today the downtown is most reflective of the commercial boom that began in the late nineteenth century and extended for nearly a century with 96 of the 105 district buildings dating from 1870 to 1962. While residential development in Middletown basically ended in the early 1930s, commercial development extended into the early 1960s.

The city's location on the banks of the Mississippi River led to its early industrial character. This commercial district not only served the adjacent residential neighborhoods but much of the surrounding region, with Alton becoming one of the most important commercial centers along the Mississippi River in Illinois, in part due to its proximity to riverfront transportation, but also due to the interurban streetcars and railroad lines as well as the highway that paralleled the riverfront along the south end of the district. It served as the hub of commercial activity with a full spectrum of commercial establishments, including a wide variety of retail stores, service trades, restaurants, social centers (like lodge halls and movie theatres), hotels, most of the community's financial institutions, as well as large medical and professional office buildings. Although commercial development extended farther in both directions along Third and Broadway, beyond this district's boundaries, demolition and new construction have altered the character of the area to the east and the area to the west is already included within the Christian Hill Historic District.

While Alton never surpassed St. Louis in terms of its population and economic impact, the city was nonetheless an important center of commerce, finance, industry, and trade, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century.

Alton's downtown commercial corridor and surrounding streets attest to the city's era of growth and development during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Post World War II impacts, however, affected Alton in ways that diminished the downtown commercial viability. Automobiles, industrial and building technologies, and postwar prosperity compelled the development of new housing, shopping centers, and industrial parks well beyond Alton's downtown streets.⁵⁵ The city's population peaked in 1960 at 43,407 and has continued to decline since that time. The most recent estimates of the population (2018) are reported as 26,528. ⁵⁶ While manufacturing remains a mainstay of the city's economic success, few industrial properties are located near downtown with the exception of the Old Bakery Beer Company that now operates in the Noll Baking Company complex at 400-410 Front Street and the massive concrete grain elevators at the west end of the downtown along the riverfront where they remain the iconic backdrop to the skyline of downtown Alton after more than a century of operations.

Today the riverfront primarily supports recreational activities, rather than trade and industry. Though Alton's population has declined since the mid-twentieth century, the downtown retains its commercial density and architectural character. Many older commercial and industrial buildings (such as the former Jacoby Furniture Store, currently an arts center) are now serving new purposes and attracting new "immigrants" to live, work and reside in Alton.