

Richland Center history, the formative years

The historical development of Richland Center as an agricultural support community and retail trade center is reflected in its fine architectural heritage. Buildings dating from as early as the mid-1850s and 1860s still remain in the city. The greatest wealth and diversity shown in the city's architecture dates from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Richland Center experienced rapid growth and prosperity as a result of the creation of the Pine River and Stevens Point Railroad in 1876. The two major building boom periods were the years from 1880 through 1890 and again in 1910 through 1930.



"A beautiful prairie with scattering shade trees, and the whole surrounded by noble groves of thrifty timber."

The city is nestled in a valley carved from the surrounding hills and bluffs by the Pine River. At the time Richland Center was platted in 1851, one of its founders, Ira Haseltine, described it as "a beautiful prairie with scattering shade trees, and the whole surrounded by noble groves of thrifty timber." Richland County is located in the center of the driftless area of southwestern Wisconsin and was not covered by glaciers during the last ice age. This forced the original commercial district and residential neighborhoods into a distinct, compact area making for an easy walk.

Retail and craft services and several important industrial establishments dominated the economy. By 1854, Ira Haseltine had gained ownership of the water power on the Pine River and erected a dam at the west end of Court Street, a sawmill, and a small grist mill. By 1854 Richland Center also was served by a hotel, a post office, three mercantile stores, a blacksmith, and about eight dwellings. As in most western Wisconsin communities, Richland Center developed as a flour milling center in the 1850s. Richland Center's lumber milling industry developed in the late 1870s and 1880s, processing mainly hardwood lumber and wood products. Although lumber milling had ceased in most of Wisconsin by the turn of the century, the city's largest lumber mill and manufacturer Krouskop Lumberyard prospered in the lumber industry as well in other areas of commerce. Cheese and condensery products gained significance after the turn of the century, remaining a dominant industry to this day.

As the economy expanded and the population grew from 660 in 1860 to 4,364 in 1940, the needs of the community grew. Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Baptist Church congregations were established as the 1850s and 1860s. When Richland Center was established as the county seat in 1852, additional business and services were attracted to the area. The first tax supported public school occupied in 1858 was followed by a high school in 1875. Teachers were trained at the Richland County Training School beginning in 1902. Woman's groups, fraternal organizations, temperance and suffrage and health service groups created a major impact upon the community. Richland Center women organized one of the first local suffrage organizations in 1882. Faced with meeting the demands of a more sophisticated early twentieth century community, the city built a modern city hall and auditorium in 1912 and the first post office building in 1935.

Architectural and historical survey project

In 1987 the city of Richland Center organized an architectural and historical survey project. The purpose of the project was to identify individual historic properties that were potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The Court Street Commercial District, the Krouskop Lumberyard District, and the Richland Center Residential District, as well as approximately 74 properties were identified as significant or potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. As a result of the survey, the Court Street Commercial Historic District consisting of the ten block central business district was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989. The Court Street Commercial Historic District joined the Frank Lloyd Wright designed A.D. German Warehouse (NRHP 1974) and the Richland Center City Hall and Auditorium (NRHP 1980) on the list. The Richland Center Residential Historic District was identified and defined, but has not been added to the register yet. The Krouskop Lumberyard District was lost in the re-routing of U.S. Highway 14 in the Orange Street Project.

Richland Center local register of historic places

The Richland Center Historic Preservation Commission has placed 25 structures on the Richland Center Register of Historic Places to date that are deemed to be historically significant because of architectural style, the person who lived there or a specific business that was located there. Most are within the boundaries of the Court Street Commercial Historic District or the Richland Center Residential Historic District. They are listed by building name and address: the **Robinson Building**, 179 E. Court Street; the



SandHill Marketing, LLC photo collection.

W.H. Pier Bank, 142 S. Central Avenue; the **Park Hotel**, 213 S. Central Avenue; the **Masonic Temple**, 165 N. Central Avenue; **Barnes and Toms' Jewelry Store**, 155 E. Court; **A.A. Bulard Jewelry Store**, 155 E. Court; the **Richland Center Railroad Depot**, 397 W. Seminary; the **Robert C. Burnham House**, 263 N. Central Avenue; the **Fred H. Pratt House**, 314 N. Central Avenue; the **Leo Keegan House**, 480 N. Central Avenue; the **William Schmitt House**, 475 N. Central Avenue;

Jim Keegan House, 565 North Central Avenue; the **Charles R. Thomson House**, 499 East Second Street; **Dr. Daniel E.**

Smith House, 392 North Park Street; **Janine Crary House**, 516 North Cedar Street; the **Fred and Julia Bowen House**, 220 East Union Street, (this building is also on the National Register of Historic Places); the **Bowen carriage house**, 220 East Union Street; the **G.L. Laws House**, 484 North Church Street; the **W. Fogo House**, 265 North Park Street; **Trinity United Methodist Church**, 400 East Seminary Street; **Peace United Methodist Church**, 265 North Church Street; the **S.I. Freeborn/John Kirkpatrick House**, 109 South Sheldon Street; **Judge Daniel L. Downs House**, 322 North Park Street; **Judge Levi H. Bancroft House**, 277 North Sheldon Street; and the **Ira Haseltine House**, 133 South Grove Street.

Keep in mind the homes listed are private residences which are not open to the public. Please respect the occupants' privacy when viewing their homes from the sidewalk.