

Historic Litchfield

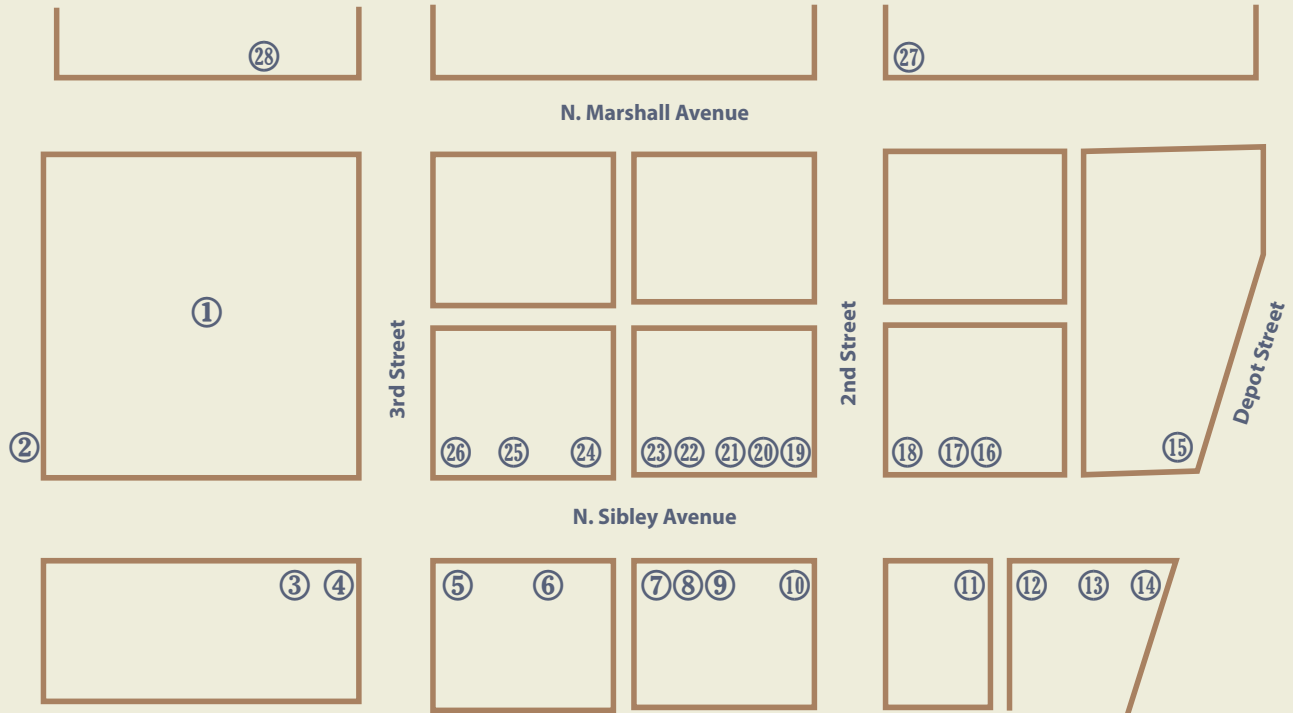
Downtown Walking Tour



Explore Litchfield's Downtown

Litchfield, Minnesota, is a city filled with historic buildings and great stories. This tour takes you through the National Register of Historic Places Commercial Historic District, introducing you to some of the city's finest architecture as well as a few of its most colorful characters. On this tour, you can . . .

- Learn about the architectural influences that shaped Litchfield's commercial buildings.
- See one of America's best-preserved Grand Army of the Republic halls.
- Visit Trinity Episcopal Church, called "one of Minnesota's most important nineteenth-century buildings" by architectural historian David Gebhard.
- Stop by the Hollywood Theatre, designed by Minnesota's foremost theatre architects, Liebenberg and Kaplan.



Historic Litchfield

Meeker County was sparsely settled at the end of the Civil War, with the 1860 census listing only 928 residents. Forest City, a small town along the north fork of the Crow River, was the county seat. Then, in 1869, the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad announced plans to lay its tracks across Minnesota, and that changed everything. The *St. Cloud Journal* announced, “The point for the location of the first depot west of the Big Woods has at last been determined. The embryo city is to be named Litchfield.” It was named after a family of three brothers who helped to finance the railroad’s construction — Erastus Darwin, Egbert, and Edwin Litchfield.

Litchfield, newly-platted, put the issue of moving the county seat on the ballot and won by forty-five votes. This designation was a major boost to the economy. The streets would be bustling with travelers, who came to town as part of the steady stream of court cases or to visit the offices of the lawyers, surveyors, and real estate agents that established offices nearby. The first commercial buildings, typically small wood-frame structures, were erected



as soon as the town was platted.

The village grew rapidly in the 1870s, boosted by a wave of immigration from Scandinavian countries, Germany, and Ireland. In 1870, one year after Litchfield was platted, the town’s residents numbered 353. By 1880 it had almost quadrupled to 1,250. The population grew 1,899 by 1890.

During these years, the social, religious, and political life of the community blossomed. The Litchfield Band, one of the oldest in the state, gained renown as one of Minnesota’s finest, led by shopkeeper Ole “Music” Olson. Churches erected beautiful new houses of worship, including Trinity Episcopal Church, one of Minnesota’s outstanding examples of Carpenter Gothic architecture. Fraternal organizations met in second-floor halls of downtown buildings, while

the Grand Army of the Republic, the association of Civil War veterans, erected a castle-like hall next to Central Park. The magnificent Litchfield Opera House hosted concerts, plays, and community gatherings.

A time-traveler from 1900 would easily recognize Litchfield’s downtown today — half of the buildings in the historic district were built by then. Beginning around 1880 the original shops and offices were replaced by Italianate-style two-story brick commercial buildings. The distinctive cream-colored brick would be familiar as well, much of it from the brickyard of Henry Ames, located on his farm two miles northeast of Litchfield.

By the early twentieth century, Litchfield had secured its economic position as one of Minnesota’s most important agricultural centers, leading the way with the formation of

farmers’ cooperatives. In 1886 the Farmers’ Cooperative Elevator was organized in Litchfield. In 1908 the Farmers’ Livestock Shipping Association was established.

The Meeker County Creamery Cooperative joined others to organize the Minnesota Cooperative Creamery Association in 1921, with John Brandt, a Litchfield farmer, as its president. That statewide cooperative built Minnesota’s first milk drying plant in Litchfield in 1926, and, in that same year, changed its name to Land o’ Lakes.

The downtown reflected the continuing prosperity of the countryside. The streets were illuminated with lights, a telephone exchange opened, and a new bandstand was constructed in Central Park in 1913.

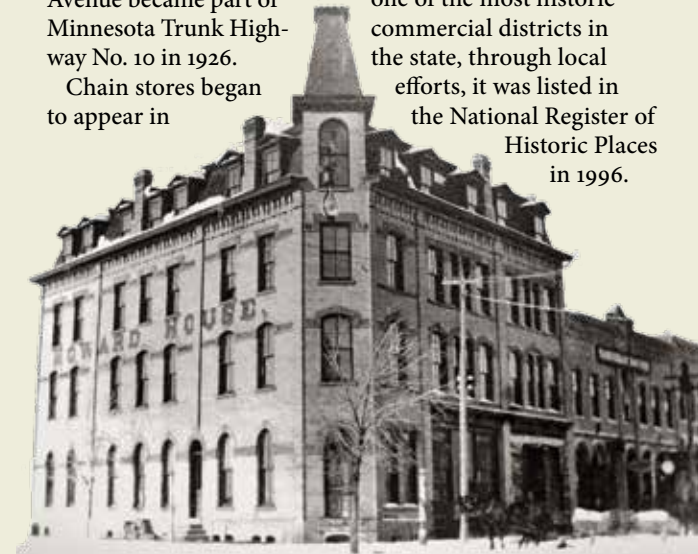
The automobile became the way to travel, eclipsing the train. With the expansion of the state road system during the 1920s, Sibley Avenue became part of Minnesota Trunk Highway No. 10 in 1926.

Chain stores began to appear in

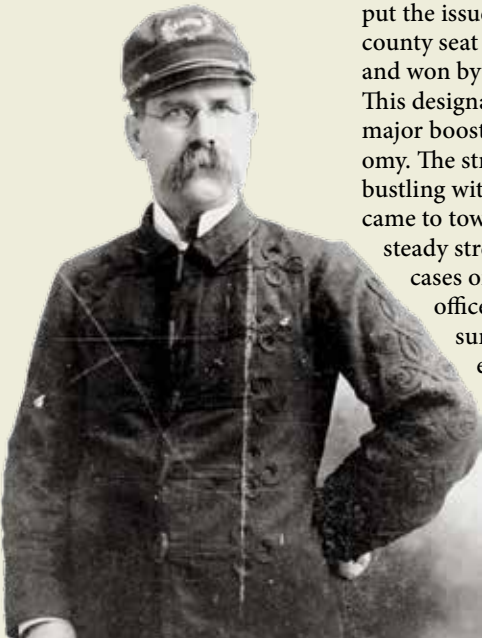
town, including only the second Ben Franklin store in the country, which opened in 1905. Movies came to downtown Litchfield as well, first, at the Unique Theatre, then, in 1936, at the Hollywood Theatre.

During the Great Depression, as the federal government helped to bring electricity to rural areas, farmers met in Litchfield to organize the first REA co-op in Minnesota. The following year, the Meeker County Cooperative received the first loan in the nation.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Litchfield remained a tightly-knit community rooted in its agricultural economy. At times, historic buildings gave way to new construction, notably when the Howard Hotel (below), opened in 1881, was demolished in 1978. Recognizing that the downtown was one of the most historic commercial districts in the state, through local efforts, it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1996.



Ole “Music” Olson was one of Minnesota’s best-known conductors, leading the Litchfield Band for more than forty-five years.



① Central Park

Given to the city by the St. Paul and Manitoba Railroad in 1869, within a few years, a volunteer committee planted trees and shrubs using private donations. Later the village erected a bandstand so that the Litchfield Band, one of the oldest in the state, could play summer concerts there. The current bandstand dates from 1913.

**② Trinity Episcopal Church
3 E. Fourth**

The church was completed in 1871 and is one of Minnesota's outstanding examples of what is often called Carpenter Gothic architecture, with its steep roof, board and batten siding, lancet windows, and trussed interior arches. The design is likely by architect Richard Upjohn.



**③ Black & White Restaurant
311 N. Sibley**

In 1936 this new building opened as the Black & White Inn, sharing the northern half with Olson's Park Cafe. Although its tile front was not white, it still captured the look of the small, inexpensive, but clean, hamburger stand.

**④ Robertson Hospital
301-305 N. Sibley**

In 1909 Dr. James Robertson, who trained at the Detroit Medical College, opened the city's first hospital, joined by two sons, William and Archibald. The architect was Lowell Lamoreaux of Minneapolis. The hospital closed in 1915.

**⑤ Branham, Harris, Stevens Block
231-237-241 N. Sibley**

This building, with its three storefronts, was completed



in 1887, although the center section dates from 1881. Virgil Harris ran the City Drug Store, the southern storefront was the Stevens Bank and insurance office, while D. E. Branham operated a grocery and sold crockery on the corner. Later it was home to the second Ben Franklin store in the country.

**⑥ Cairncross Block
223-225 N. Sibley**

Alex Cairncross was born in Scotland, emigrating to the United States as a young man. He came to Litchfield in 1874

and purchased a general store. After joining in partnership with John Palm, Cairncross erected this block in 1886.

**⑦ Litchfield Independent
217 N. Sibley**

This is the home of the *Litchfield Independent* newspaper. Established in 1876 editor Henry Peterson managed the paper for more than sixty years. It is the oldest continuing downtown business.



**⑧ Palm Building
215 N. Sibley**

This building was erected in 1894 by merchant John Palm. A native of Sweden, he came to the United States with his parents in 1870. The building has served as a hardware and grocery store for most of its history. The elaborate metal cornice was added in 1900.

**⑨ Litchfield Ice Cream Company
213 N. Sibley**

In 1913 the Litchfield Ice Cream Company opened for business under the management of Harry Hanson. It was a success, and so, in 1924, Hanson erected this building with a factory in the rear and a dairy store in the front, selling not only ice cream but also cheese, butter, cream, and milk.

**⑩ First National Bank
201-205-207 N. Sibley**

Bank president, Peter Hanson, was born in Sweden and became one of the largest land owners in the state. As president of the Meeker County Bank in 1898, he pushed to build a new home that would reflect its growing success. Soon after, the bank secured a federal charter and changed its name to the First National Bank of Litchfield.

**⑪ Howard Block
123-127-129 N. Sibley**

Jacob Howard was one of the town's most important businessmen — owner of its best hotel, a principal organizer of the Litchfield Woolen Mill, and a major stockholder in the Creamery Association. His grain elevator, built in 1872, was the first independent one on the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba line. In 1884 he sold the elevator to the Cargill Brothers of La Crosse, Wisconsin. That same year, Howard erected this impressive business block.



**⑫ Meeker County Bank
115-119 N. Sibley**

The Meeker County Bank first organized in 1878, and moved into this building in 1881, one of the first brick blocks on Sibley Avenue. The *Litchfield News-Ledger* noted, "This institution is regarded as one of the strongest and most reliable features of Meeker County's business interest, and entitled to unlimited public confidence."

**⑬ Early Meeker County Offices
109-113 N. Sibley**

In 1869 Litchfield won a referendum to secure the county seat. In 1880 local brick maker and contractor Henry Ames offered to construct a brick block for the county on Sibley Avenue. The offices were here until 1885 when the new courthouse opened.

**⑭ Site of the Howard Hotel
105 N. Sibley**

In 1881 Jacob Howard built a grand hotel — three stories high with a prominent mansard roof — on the corner of Sibley Avenue and Depot Street. It was torn down in 1978.

**⑮ Wells Store
100 N. Sibley**

The Wells Brothers store, built in 1892, was the largest in Meeker County at the turn of the century. Known as The Big Store, inside you could get everything that you needed within four departments assisted by a staff of ten clerks — shoes, clothing, dry goods including dress fabrics, and groceries.



**⑯ Scarp's Cafe
126 N. Sibley**

Ed Scarp opened a coffee shop here in 1916. It was popular with railroad workers and with farmers delivering crops and livestock to town.

**⑰ Koerner's Meat Market
130 N. Sibley**

In July 1884 Gottlieb Koerner died, leaving his widow with seven children to care for. With the assistance of her older sons, Fritz and William, she reopened the Koerner Meat Shop and kept it going for more than thirty years. This building dates from 1899.

**⑱ Brill's Drug Store
134 N. Sibley**

Built in 1869, soon after the town was platted, it was one of the first four businesses on Sibley Avenue. It was a drug store in those early years, described as "the superb establishment of W. S. Brill."

19 Brown's Block
202 N. Sibley

Norwegian immigrant Mons Brown built this commercial block in 1884. Above the central window, you can see a date block inscribed: "Brown's Block 1884. J. M. and P. Peterson, Builders." Recognized for his business prowess, Brown would serve as Litchfield's first town clerk.



20 U.S. Land Office
208 N. Sibley

Beneath its stucco exterior, you will find one of the oldest buildings in the downtown district. For a few short years, beginning in 1869, it served as the Litchfield District of the U. S. Land Office.

21 Hollywood Theatre
210 N. Sibley

In 1936 the Schnee family turned to the Minneapolis architectural firm of Liebenberg and Kaplan to design their new theatre. The architects brought the Moderne style to downtown Litchfield — with a sleek exterior and the striking marquee that lit the night sky.



22 Deilke Dry Cleaners
214 N. Sibley

In 1923 Clarence Deilke moved here from Winona, where he had learned the trade. Six years later, he decided to expand and put up this new building. It would be, the *Meeker County News* boasted, "the most modern and best equipped building of its kind outside of Minneapolis."

23 Johns Brothers Hardware
218-222 N. Sibley

In 1914 William and Daniel Johns built a new fifty-foot front brick store. The hardware store not only supplied tools and supplies for construction projects, they also stocked agricultural equipment, such as incubators and brooders for chickens.



24 Dart, Berens, Konsbrick Block
226-230-234 N. Sibley

This was built in 1886. Dart was a flour and feed dealer;

Berens, a furniture store merchant and undertaker; and John Konsbrick, who was described as "one of the leading saloon men of the town and a square business man."

25 Dan Brown's Eat Shop
236 N. Sibley

Dan Brown opened a cafe here in 1929. Business was going well, especially after prohibition ended and he could sell beer. He decided to expand in 1936 and erected this new building.

26 Masonic Block
240-242 N. Sibley

In 1889 the Golden Fleece Masonic Lodge erected a new hall. It wasn't surprising, as a local newspaper observed, "Litchfield has always been what might be called a strong Masonic town."



27 Litchfield Opera House
136 N. Marshall

In 1900 the Litchfield Commercial Club built the opera house, designed by Minneapolis architect William Towner.



The hall quickly became one of the central gathering places for the community, whether for concerts by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra or lighter, more humorous entertainment. Threatened with demolition, in 2008, it was purchased by the Greater Litchfield Opera House Association Inc.

28 GAR Hall and Meeker County Historical Society
308 N. Marshall

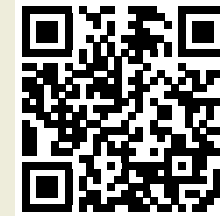
The Daggett Post of the Grand Army of the Republic was established in 1883. In 1885 the group erected this building. Gilbert Phelps drew up the plans for the building while the Henry Ames Brickyard supplied the brick. It is now home to the Meeker County Historical Society.



GAR Hall, Meeker County Historical Society

About the tour

This tour brings story and place together, using new technology to offer a self-guided video walking tour of the downtown historic district. You can download, or, if you have a smartphone, use this QR code to stream the tour.



For more information

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