

Re-Creating the Wyandotte Village

A Vision for Using Arts, Culture, and Heritage to Spark Renewal in Wyandotte



How can you get very far,
If you don't know Who You Are?
How can you do what you ought,
If you don't know What You've Got?
And if you don't know Which To Do
Of all the things in front of you
Then what you'll have when you are through
Is just a mess without a clue.
Of all the best that can come true
If you know What and Which and Who.
~ Benjamin Hoff, *Tao of Pooh*

INDEX

Executive Summary.....	2
Demographic Data and Analysis.....	3-4
Historic and Cultural Context.....	5-10
Landmark Buildings.....	11-14
Moving Forward	15-16

APPENDIX

Marker Program in Wyandotte.....	17-20
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Executive Summary

It would be a mistake to look to our past with nostalgia. For those who can remember what life was like a hundred years ago, they will likely tell about unsanitary conditions, great difficulty in traveling between different places, insular attitudes and small-mindedness of villagers, but above all else scarce and limited resources.

Throughout the 20th century, cities in America and throughout the world sought to overcome these constraints and to create a new way of life. Now, we are in the position of asking if we've gone too far, because we are haunted by an increasing scarcity of resources and jobs, an old housing stock, and the nagging question of what to do with former manufacturing centers like Wyandotte to make them competitive in a global economy.

An answer can be found, at least partially, in identifying what we have that no other place does. Wyandotte has an active presence of arts and cultural institutions including the prestigious and well-regarded Biddle Gallery and River's Edge Gallery. Several local entrepreneurs have opened cafes, restaurants, and bars that make Wyandotte an attractive place to live and visit. Though there is still a sense that something is missing that if found could help this city take-off.



Richard Florida in *Rise of the Creative Class* claims that a concentration of creative people drives economic activity. And to make places attractive for the 38 million member creative class requires three things: talent, technology, and tolerance.

- Talent: Wyandotte has talent in its arts and cultural institutions, but also in a core group of entrepreneurs. Recently opened businesses downtown include Austin's Hyde Park, Energie, the Victorian Tea Room, Gizzmos, and Randazzo's Bakery.
- Technology: Wyandotte has potential in this area which it has not fully realized. Wyandotte Municipal Services operates local cable and internet resources and could help to create universal access to the Internet. Further, efforts to attract technology-related businesses could be strengthened by providing facilities for businesses like this to locate and to do their work in Wyandotte.
- Tolerance: This is the area Wyandotte needs to work on most. As Wyandotte becomes an increasingly popular center for arts and culture, it is important to create a place where people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, different ages, and different life experiences can gather together to participate in Wyandotte's renaissance.

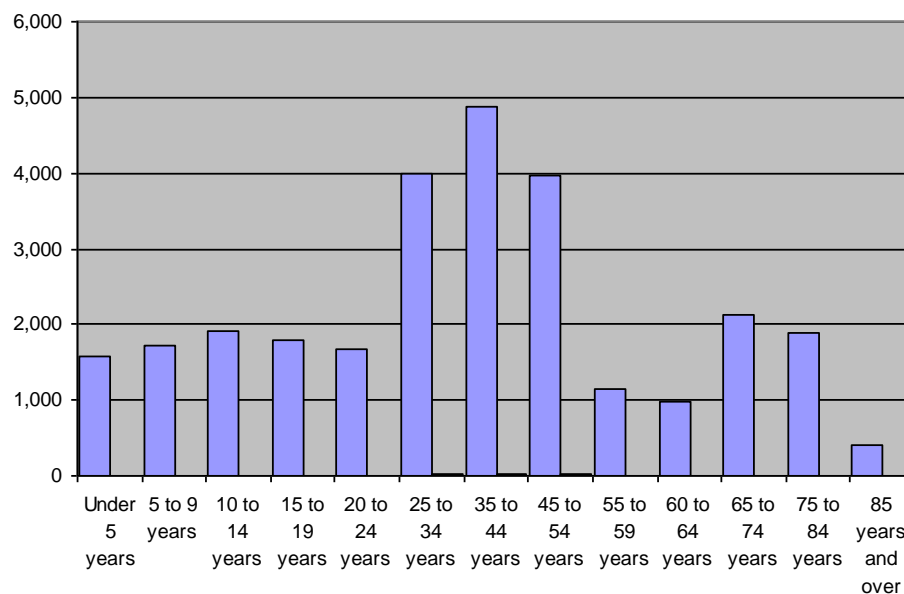
Wyandotte's heritage is something we have that no other place has. The first people to occupy this land established the Maquaqua village and trading center here, Major John Biddle set up his estate and plantation house on the same spot in 1818, later the first commercial application of the Bessemer steel process occurred here, and Wyandotte became a notorious center for rum-running during Prohibition. Today, as an arts and culture led redevelopment strategy takes hold, it is important that we look to our past for inspiration and for hints of the future.

Demographic Data and Analysis

Significant demographic changes are occurring at the national level that affects our way of life locally. An hour-glass society is emerging with the largest concentration of people older and younger, and a smaller group of people in the middle. With these demographic changes comes a change in the way people consume culture. Older people especially are a market for cultural products. Younger people who are involved in culture-generating activities are increasingly gravitating towards established centers and away from places that are cold, snowy, and industrial. Wyandotte's population is oddly enough the reverse of national trends, with a concentration of people in the 25 to 54 age range. This may indicate the need to target strategies for making Wyandotte a more attractive place for culture generators (younger people) and culture consumers (older people).

Population throughout the United States is increasing, but this is at different rates in different regions. In the East and Midwest, population increases are projected to be at 6 percent, while population in the Southwest and West Coast is increasing at a rate of 40%+. With our region being outpaced by population growth in other places, it is a challenge to retain the population we already have and to attract new people. Locally, population in Wyandotte declined between 1990 and 2004 from 30,938 to 27,247 or a decline of 12%.

Wyandotte Population Distribution by age in 2000

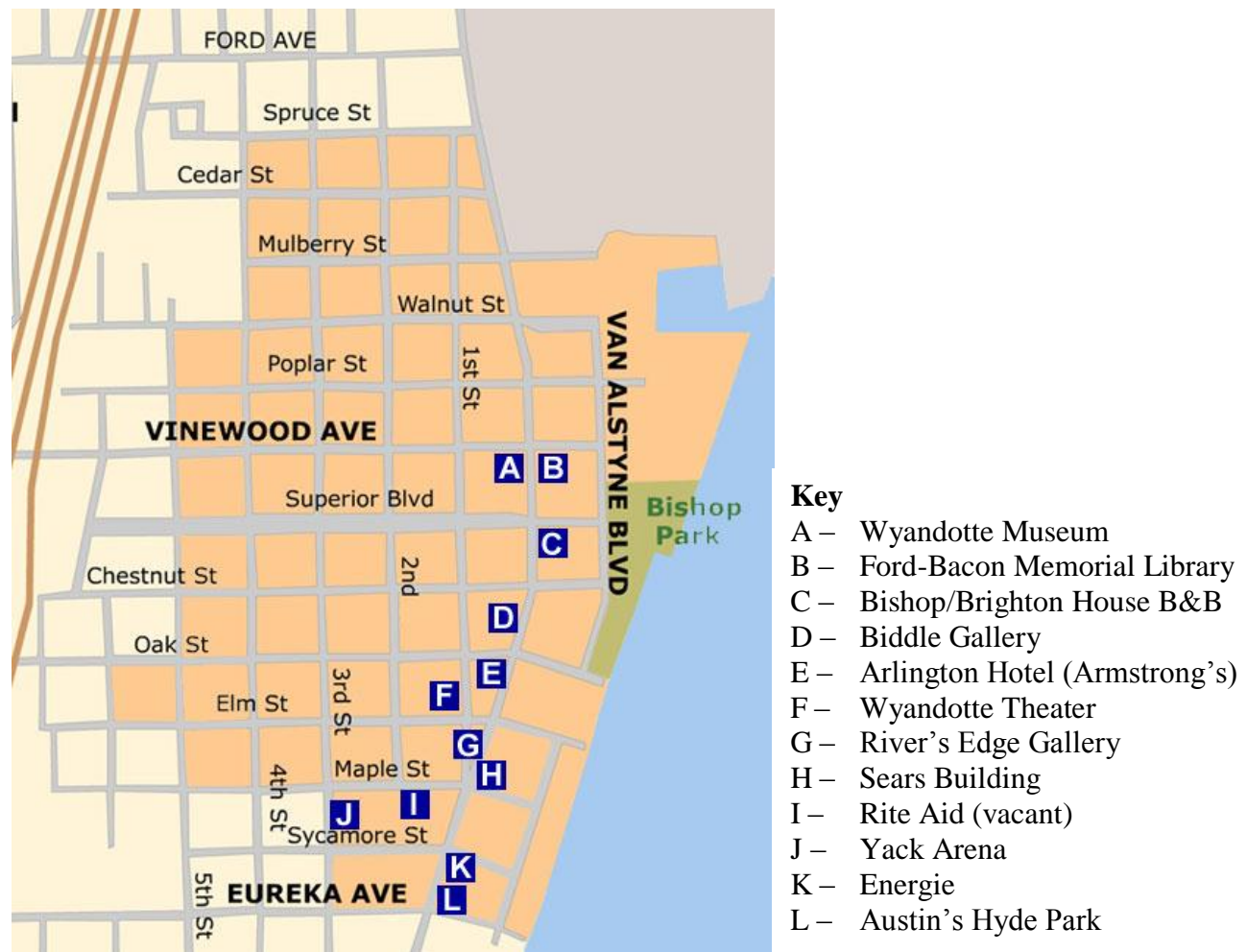


The racial makeup of Wyandotte neither mirrors that at the state or national level. An overwhelming majority of people in Wyandotte are white (96.3%). Wyandotte is slightly more diverse in terms of ethnicity with significant concentrations of Poles and Italians especially, and with other ethnic groups represented as well.

Between the 1990 and 2000 Census, the City of Wyandotte lost more than four percent of its households (more than 500). Median housing values citywide are \$117,400, approximately eight percent below the national median of \$127,700, however, Wyandotte's median income of \$48,400 exceeds the national median income of \$44,400 by more than nine percent, making a

case that Wyandotte provides a good housing value for those who choose to live here. More than 21% of Wyandotte's households have incomes of over \$75,000.¹

The historic center of Wyandotte is located primarily between the railroad to the west and the riverfront to the east, and between Ford Ave. to the north and Eureka Ave. to the south. At the center of the area is downtown Wyandotte with several blocks of older one- and two-story buildings. Most of the city's civic buildings are located downtown, Henry Ford Wyandotte Hospital is north of downtown, and downtown Wyandotte offers a range of local specialty establishments, including restaurants, gift shops, galleries, clothing stores, jewelry stores, financial services, office supplies, ice cream parlors, and coffee shops. There are several corner stores in this core area, but also in surrounding areas, though most of these have been converted for residential or other uses. Most residents travel outside the borders of Wyandotte to shop, attracted to big-box retailers in surrounding areas, depriving Wyandotte of valuable tax revenue generated from retail sales. And despite the concentration of historic resources in and around Downtown Wyandotte, the modernization and removal of several resources, and half-hearted efforts to market them, has limited Wyandotte's attractiveness for residents of neighboring communities to locate here.



¹ Market Analysis of Residential Market Potential by Zimmerman/Volk Associates.

Historic and Cultural Context

To create a vision of where we want to go in the future, it is important to understand where we have come from. There are many sources available for those with an interest in reviewing the history of Wyandotte, and many of these can be found at the Wyandotte Museum or in the library. For the purpose of this document, however, we will focus on general themes and special people, buildings, and events which have been integral to our growth and development. Much like an Impressionistic painting, we use large brush strokes and splotches of color to represent those characteristics of this place whose details are infinitely more complex.

The Maquaqua Village

The area called Wyandotte and home for thousands of people today, was chosen by Native-Americans as a suitable home. This area was favorable for settlement because it was the highest land on the Detroit River between Detroit and Monroe. It was here that the Maquaqua village was established, and a village remained until the first European settlers arrived.



Little physical evidence remains from this period. Despite the absence of buildings, archeological resources likely remain below ground. Interest and scholarship in Native-American heritage is advancing, and with several prime sites suitable for archeological study (with several of these located in or near our historic downtown) the potential of studying and marketing Wyandotte's Native-American heritage is very strong.

Major John Biddle and his Plantation

During the War of 1812, Major John Biddle passed briefly through the area later to become Wyandotte. He then went on to become the fourth mayor of Detroit. In 1818 Biddle decided to move 10 miles to the south and to build himself a plantation and country house which he named "The Wyandotte" after the Indians who first inhabited this spot. His model was Jefferson's Monticello and George Washington's Mount Vernon. And for eight years Biddle remained in Wyandotte. Eventually he became overcome by living in the wilderness, and traveled back to his family home in Philadelphia and then on to Paris, leaving his Wyandotte estate behind.



**Major John Biddle
(1792-1859)**

During this time the Detroit River served as the primary method of transportation and communication, and for the shipping and delivery of goods. Biddle's home was built facing towards the river with his front yard sloping down to the riverbank (where Van Alstyne Blvd. is located today).

After leaving Wyandotte, Biddle's estate fell into disuse and was written off as a failure and forgotten, until 1854 when a group of Detroit businessmen purchased Biddle's house and the 6,000 acres it is located on to establish the Eureka Iron Works. The presence of this factory would transform Wyandotte for decades to come.

Establishment of the Wyandotte Village

After bailing-out Biddle and acquiring his estate, a group of Detroit businessmen established the Eureka Iron Works along the Detroit River. The name of Biddle's estate was adopted as the name of the village. Establishment of this factory in the wilderness required that people be brought here to build the factory and to work in it, and these people required places to live, to purchase goods, and to seek intellectual and moral improvement through schools and churches.



**Eureka Iron & Steel
Works on the east side of
Biddle Ave. between Elm
St. and Eureka Ave.**

The center of village life was the Old Brown School (located on the south side of Chestnut between Biddle and 1st where the Masonic Temple is today). It was here that classes were held, the village council met, and the congregations were formed and held their earliest services.

Arrival of the railroad gradually diminished reliance on the river for communication, transportation, and exchange of goods. Oak St. became a major thoroughfare, connecting the railroad tracks with the center of the village several blocks to the east. The main line of the railroad tracks were connected with local industries by way of spur lines, with a major spur line on Eureka Ave connecting to the Eureka Iron Works.

When the Eureka Iron Works was established, its primary function was the removal of impurities from iron ore sent from Northern Michigan via the Detroit River. Wood from the surrounding area was harvested, burned to create charcoal, and this charcoal burned in the kilns to produce iron. After lots were cleared for their timber, they were sold speculatively for residences or business to be built on the newly cleared land. "Steel" was added to the name of the Eureka Iron and Steel Works with the first commercial application of the Bessemer steel process in America taking place here. The Bessemer process allowed the inexpensive manufacture of a new and highly durable material – steel – that was used in warships and skyscrapers and helped to bring about the modern way of life as we know it today.

John S. VanAlstyne served as manager for the Eureka Works and also helped to found the Wyandotte Savings Bank which he served as president of. These two organizations shared a building at the south-east corner of Biddle Ave. and Elm St. This building still stands today,



**John S. VanAlstyne
1st Mayor**

though was substantially altered with removal of the mansard roof, replacement of historic windows, and change of name to the “Municipal Services Building.”

The steel works operated for many decades, though found a constraint in the availability of fuel to burn in the kilns. As timber resources in this area were exhausted, experimental drilling for natural gas in this area occurred. Regrettably for the Eureka Iron Works, gas was not found, but salt was, and this was necessary for establishment of the chemical industry in Wyandotte. The Eureka Iron Works was diversified and involved in real-estate, so when industrial activities ended and the factory building was taken apart and sold for scrap, the land it rested on was immediately subdivided, platted, and sold for residential and commercial use.

Wyandotte Chemicals and Growth and Development of Other Industries

As the activities of the Eureka Iron & Steel Works wound down, the chemical business in Wyandotte was just getting started. While passing through Wyandotte by train, Pittsburgh industrialist J.B. Ford heard that salt reserves had been discovered here. Salt is a critical ingredient in the manufacture of soda ash, which is needed for the production of ash. So in 1890, Ford established his Michigan Alkali Company south of the center of Wyandotte. An 1896 Birdseye map by T.M. Fowler and James B. Moyer shows the buildings of the Eureka Iron and Steel Works still standing, a ship works with large slips to the south (where BASF Park is located today), and the Michigan Alkali Company, “Built by J.B. Ford, President” south of that.



**John Baptiste Ford
(1811-1904)**

Much like the Detroit industrialists who founded the Eureka Iron Works, Ford never lived in Wyandotte. When visiting here he would stay at the Arlington Hotel located at Wyandotte’s busiest intersection at Oak St. and Biddle Ave. His son Edward Ford did live here, as did Edward’s daughter Mary. Mary Ford married Mark Bacon and they lived in their house on the south-east corner of Biddle Ave. and Vinewood (which later became home of the Bacon Memorial Library). Bacon was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and was one of the only Congressmen to vote against U.S. entrance into World War I. One month after that vote he was recalled, returned to Wyandotte, and continued to live in Wyandotte until 1942 when he moved to California and died.

Emergence of a Local Industrial Elite

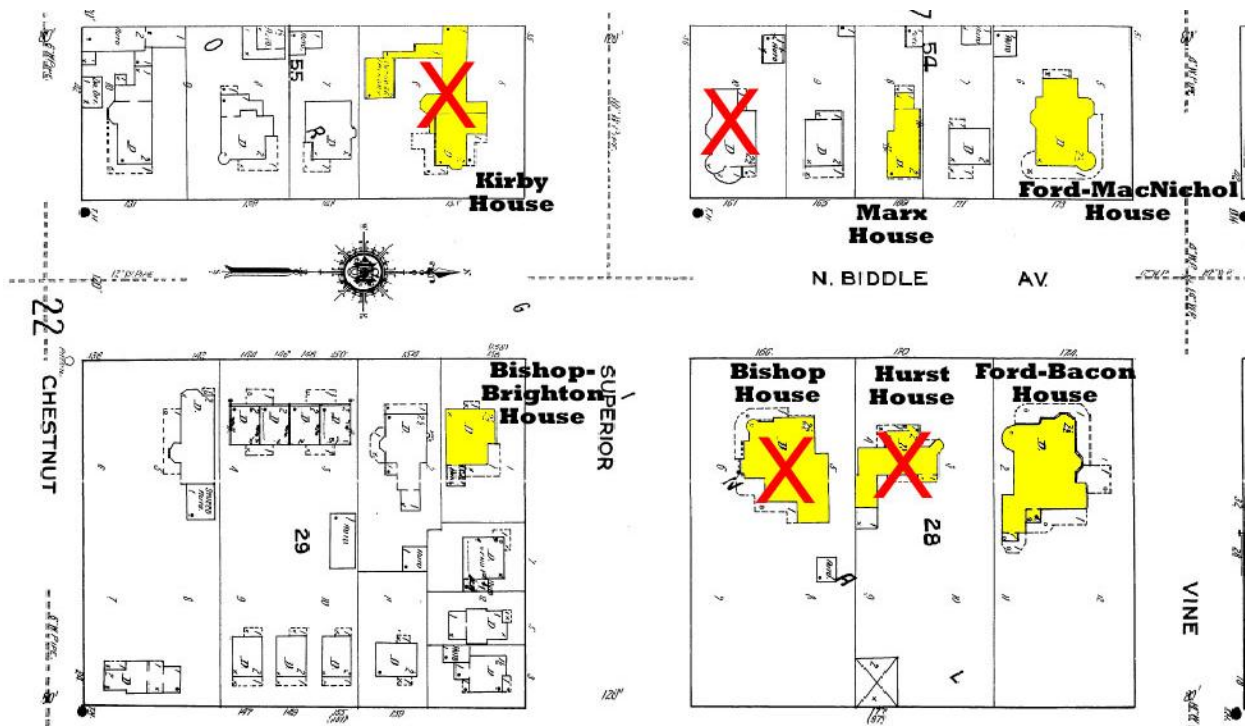
Biddle’s plantation house that served as a symbolic center of power for the surrounding agricultural area remained on its site on the south-west corner of Biddle Ave. and Vinewood until the 1890s. It was used to accommodate newly arrived immigrants who came to work in Wyandotte’s factories, was severely damaged in a fire, and then subsequently moved several blocks to the north (where it still stands today) and was renovated. In the place of the house Biddle built rose a second house built by Edward Ford.

Several other houses along this stretch were built and occupied by Wyandotte’s leading families. The effect these large and impressive houses had was to provide visual evidence of the effectiveness Wyandotte had in accumulating wealth. And while not everyone could live in luxury, the possibility that a few people could live this way helped to elevate local pride.

Jerome Holland Bishop was another important local elite. He served as superintendent of schools between 1871 and 1875. During that time one building was constructed (the Third Ward School at 640 Plum Street), though this was demolished in 1902. After resigning as superintendent in 1875, Bishop established the J.H. Bishop Fur Company. This company had its factory where the current Bishop Park is located today. The company imported furs to Wyandotte, transformed them into rugs, hats, and coats, and then exported them throughout the U.S. and the world. And through this work Bishop generated a substantial amount of wealth.

Bishop expressed his wealth in the home he lived in: a 30+ room mansion with eleven fireplaces on the north-east corner of Biddle Ave. and Superior. Bishop also gave generously, especially to the Congregational Church for construction of a new church building in 1902. Like John VanAlstyne before him, Bishop's reputation as a business leader, recommended him for political leadership as well. Bishop was elected mayor for five separate terms. His home was subsequently used as the second City Hall. The onset of World War I halted trade in furs from foreign sources, causing Bishop's factory to close. The factory buildings were demolished and the land sold to the city and transformed into use as a park – the popular Bishop Park. In 1965, when the City of Wyandotte stopped using Bishop's house as City Hall, this was demolished and replaced by the modern multi-story Bishop Tower that stands on this site today.

Biddle Ave. between Vinewood and Chestnut, c.1922



During the lifetime of both Bishop and Bacon, dramatic changes were occurring in business and politics. These changes at first allowed the emergence of a local elite who amassed a substantial quantity of wealth and who became influential leaders, but this local determination in many places was subsequently replaced with powerful institutions – corporations and government. What was lost with this transformation was the steady hand of local elites and leaders in shaping the place where their employees lived and worked.

And, while it is something of a tangent, during this time a girl of three years of age moved to Wyandotte with her family in the early 1900's. She lived with her family on Biddle Ave. several blocks south of Eureka Ave. Her father was a lineman for the telephone company, helping to introduce one of those innovations that would create our modern way of life. Instead of dying from his highly dangerous work, it was the local ice cream that killed him. Showing how unsanitary conditions were abundant even in the early 20th century, he contracted typhoid fever and died. This story while tragic is not uncommon, except for the fact that the girl's name was Lucille Ball, and according to one biographer the death of her father in Wyandotte would later cause her to go on to become a comedic actress. Ball would maintain connections with people in Wyandotte and return several times throughout her career.

Wyandotte also has a rich tradition of brewing and the legal and illicit trade of distilled spirits. George Marx founded the City Brewery here in 1863. This facility operated on the Detroit River between Oak and Elm St. until 1918, when Prohibition forced liquor production underground. During the Prohibition era, imported liquor would come through Wyandotte from Canada via the Detroit River.

Creating a Modern Way of Life

Those who first arrived to the area later to become Wyandotte did the best they could to live off the land. Industrialization brought a boom in population, and wealth, and was largely responsible for creating the physical form and most of the buildings in Wyandotte today. Industrialism brought with it the possibility of mass production of products for a mass market, increasing the quality of life through inexpensive manufacture and creation of modern conveniences. Electricity, sanitary water and sewage services, and improved methods of transportation, created a way of life that was different from any period that came before.

Few architectural styles better capture and express the spirit of the modern way of life than Art Deco. And in Wyandotte, the Wyandotte Theater was a fine example of the Art Deco style. Built as an ultra-modern theater in 1938, this 3,800 seat theater was the largest venue south of Detroit. A second screen was added in 1942 making this one of the first two-screen theaters in the country. Art Deco features on the exterior included porthole windows, enameled panels, and multi-colored bricks. Though renovations in 1966 covered-up many of these features, the potential for adaptive reuse makes preservation of this building still a possibility today.

Industrialization and the modern way of life were not unconditionally good. Not everyone benefited from the wave of new industrial activity. Divisions by race and class persisted, and tensions grew between members of different groups. And, as the Great Depression demonstrated, it appeared that the American economic and political system was on the brink of failure at many times, going from one crisis to the next. Record numbers of unemployed people and scarcity of resources affected people from the lowest to the highest echelons of society.

During this period, control of local corporations was lost, with corporate and political power passing to far away organizations. The combined effect of the Great Depression stripping local elites of their wealth and power, and the return of a large number of servicemen after the



war to communities that had been altered by economic crisis and war, caused this generation to seek to recreate the places where most American's lived in a way and with resources that no generation had before. In the post-war period traditional industries experienced a boom of activity when international competition was low since so many of the world's industrial economies had been crippled by the war, providing this generation with unprecedented resources to carry out their vision. With increasing resources generated by increasing activity, people moved from central cities to outlying areas. They were aided by the National Defense Highway System (or the Interstate) built by the federal government primarily for purposes of defense. Over time the Interstate system replaced the dominance of railroads and became a popular method for personal transportation and shipment of cargo and goods. For those older communities far away from major Interstate intersections, gradually it became more difficult to compete in an era when economic, political, and social realities had changed so radically.

Perhaps the defining feature of the post-war era was the generation of unprecedented levels of wealth and concentration of this within very powerful corporations and government. In order to remain competitive, many older communities sought to "modernize" their appearance to compete with the new shopping malls, and to demolish large swaths of older buildings to accommodate needs of the automobile. These were temporary fixes, however, for very quickly it became apparent that those features which best defined a place were being lost, and without these features older communities had little to distinguish themselves from the newest suburban areas. An underlying reality is that social and economic relations had changed so substantially in the Great Depression and during the war that when people returned to older towns like Wyandotte, these places did not make sense functionally compared to the modern America that veterans returning from the war sought to create.

At times the destruction in the name of modernization and change was extreme. Because of this, efforts were made to re-build and strengthen the relationship between people, the relationship between people and the place they live (preservation movement), and the relationship between people and the environment (environmental movement).

Today at the start of the 21st century we live in a competitive global economy that is very different from the Wyandotte village as it was established 150 years ago. Discount big-box retailers have made it nearly impossible for small-businesses in traditional historical centers like Wyandotte to compete. Techniques have emerged, like the National Trust's Main Street program, to make communities of Wyandotte's size more competitive. Most of these seek to define what is it that makes this place different from any place else. Then these strategies seek to take these features that are unique, to reinforce them, and to use them to promote historic centers like Wyandotte.

Arts, culture, and heritage are all activities that have evaded the consolidation and concentration that other sectors of the economy have gone through. And it is increasingly being found that fostering activities like this in historic areas like Wyandotte, has proven successful in helping older communities to find new ways to be competitive, successful, and to grow; transforming the older historic buildings that we have from a liability into a valuable asset.

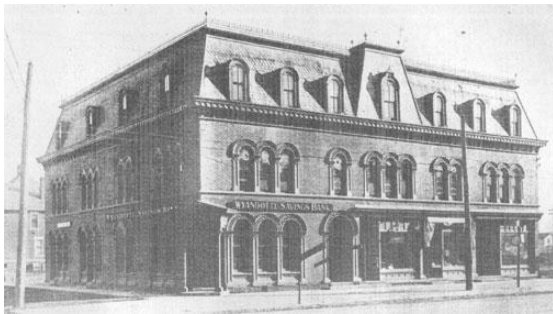
What follows is a brief overview of those landmark buildings that Wyandotte still has.

Landmark Buildings

A small selection of landmark-quality historic buildings in Wyandotte follows. There are numerous other buildings deserving of recognition, and a comprehensive inventory needs to be completed to better identify all of those historic resources in Wyandotte.

Major John Biddle House, 1818

This house which served as the center of Major John Biddle's plantation between 1818 and for eight years to follow was subsequently vacated by him. Later when Biddle's property was sold, his house became a staging point for establishment of the Eureka Iron & Steel Works, serving as a stagecoach stop and later as a way-station for newly arriving immigrants. The house was burned, moved several blocks to the north, and turned around on its side. Today this house still stands on Biddle Ave. though its historic significance is not acknowledged and this most historic building has slipped into obscurity.



Eureka Iron & Steel Works Headquarters, 1860

This building first constructed in 1860 as the headquarters for the Eureka Iron and Steel Company was originally a three-story building with Second Empire details, most notably with a mansard roof. The building was larger than the company needed, so in 1871 a bank was opened on this site. John VanAlstyne served as manager of the Eureka Works and president of the bank. He was also instrumental in selling property in the surrounding area. Although the basic structure remains the same, modernization inside and outside was completed in 1955, replacing original windows and applying a brick veneer.

Oakwood Cemetery, 1869

The first burials on this site occurred in the early 1800s, though this area was not officially recognized as a cemetery until 1869. Just north of the northernmost boundary of Wyandotte at that time; many of Wyandotte's earliest residents were buried here, including mayors, doctors, attorneys, business leaders, and veterans of the Civil War and Spanish-American War.

St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, 1871

Wyandotte's first Catholic congregation has continuously occupied this spot since 1857. Their first building was a wood frame structure, established with support from Catholics in Ecorse, and named St. Charles Borromeo. This building was moved west to serve as a school, and work on the second and present church building began in 1871. Architectural features include brick quoins at the corner, gable roof in a cruciform pattern, belt course under the 1st and 3rd story windows, and round arched doorways. This building was remodeled at the same time that a new school was built in 1906.

John and Emma Lacy Eberts House, 1872

Construction of this house was begun during the summer of 1872, with this house to become home of John Eberts and his wife Emma Lacy Eberts. This house had the first coal burning stove in Wyandotte, so during that first winter Eberts had to purchase a carload of coal to fuel his stove. Quickly other residents of Wyandotte asked if they could purchase coal from him. This caused Eberts to become actively engaged in the coal business. Later he would branch out into concrete and other building products. His sons took over ownership of the company from their father, securing the reputation of the Eberts family as a leading family in Wyandotte. Only one other family has occupied the house since being built.



Arlington Hotel, 1884

When originally built, this served as the premier “Class A” hotel in Wyandotte, with distinguished businessmen visiting Wyandotte staying here. In 1920 the building was leased by Frank Armstrong and was converted for use as a clothing store and then an antiques store. Windows on the Oak St. side were filled in with bricks and the Biddle Ave. elevation was modernized with enameled panels and a saw-tooth canopy replacing the brick that was there before. A potential preservation treatment for this building might involve removal of panels and the canopy and re-constructing historic details that were removed.

Laura Ford and George P. MacNichol House, 1896

This house was built by Edward Ford for his daughter Laura and her husband George P. MacNichol, M.D. as a wedding gift. A round tower with conical roof is in the corner facing the intersection of Biddle and Vinewood. A covered porch runs along the north and east sides of the building. Palladian windows are set in the gables, with the remainder of the gable clad in shingles. The Drennan family was the next to occupy the house, and did so for over sixty years.

Mary Ford and Mark Bacon House, c.1897

Built as the home of Edward Ford, son of Captain J.B. Ford, founder of the J.B. Ford Company (later to become BASF). The house when complete had 27 rooms and 11 fireplaces. Mary Ford and Mark Bacon lived in the house from 1902 until 1942, when the family moved to California and donated the house for use as a public library. Mary Ford was the daughter of Edward Ford and grand-daughter of J.B. Ford, founder of the Michigan Alkali Company. Mark Bacon was a



lawyer and U.S. Congressman. In 1917 he was one of the only members of the U.S. House of Representatives to vote against U.S. entry into World War I. He was recalled in a special election one month later.

Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church, 1900

Polish residents worshipped at St. Patrick and St. Joseph Churches before organizing Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church in 1899. Dedication of the first church building at Tenth Street and Superior Blvd. was held on July 8, 1900. The present church was built in 1915, and has two towers with steeples flanking the entrance. WHS plaque.



Congregational Church, 1902

This church is a fine example of English Gothic church architecture. Popular legend goes that it is a replica of Shakespeare's church in Stratford-on-Avon. There are some similarities stylistically with the tower and steeple, but, otherwise, these are two very different buildings. The building and furnishings here were a gift of local businessman, mayor, and philanthropist Jerome Bishop (who also lived one block away at the north-east corner of Biddle and Superior). WHS plaque.

Bishop-Brighton House (Biddle 2709), 1902

Tudor Revival with split beams as a decorative though not a structural feature. Steeply pitched roof and gable facing street. WHS plaque.

Marx Hotel, 1905

The Marx Hotel, in close proximity to the headquarters of the Michigan Alkali and Wyandotte Chemical companies, was part of a network of hotels for newly arrived laborers, providing housing until they could purchase homes of their own. (APH, 116)

Masonic Temple (I.O.O.F. Hall), 1912

A fraternal group, the International Order of Odd Fellows built a one-story temple on this site in 1912. Later an upper floor was added. The building was sold to Wyandotte's Masons in 1944. Later Wyandotte's and Trenton's Masons merged and the building was sold. The temple occupies the site of the Old Brown School – which served dual-functions as a school and a place for public meetings and religious services.

Roosevelt High School, 1923

This landmark building, built in 1923, replaced a 40 acre race track that occupied this site.



Wyandotte General Hospital, 1926

Two smaller hospitals were replaced by the Wyandotte General Hospital in 1926. When it opened it had only 50 beds but was quickly expanded. Later the Henry Ford Hospital took over operation and ownership of the facility. A new hospital building was built facing Biddle Ave. though the old hospital building may still be seen to its rear.



Oak St. Fire Station, 1927

This handsome structure with hipped roof, wall dormers, and tower was built in 1927 to serve as a fire station. In 2004, Wyandotte architect Tom Roberts oversaw preservation and adaptive reuse of this building so that it could become home for a health-services firm.

Wyandotte Power Plant, 1928-1933

Electrical service in Wyandotte began in 1889. In 1892 a special election was called to vote on borrowing money to build a city owned electric plant. The plant was completed in 1894. Additions were made in 1897 and 1907. Subsequent additions were paid for from earnings of the plant. Plans for a new plant began in 1928 and excavation for this plant began in 1932.

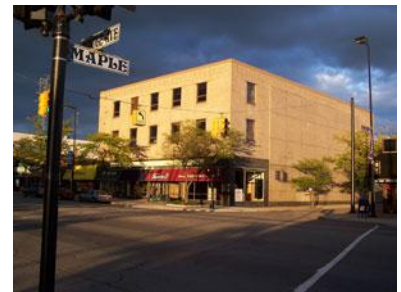


Wyandotte Theater, 1938

Built in 1938, the Wyandotte Theater was the largest performance space south of Detroit with 3800 seats. A second screen, "The Annex" was added in 1942, making this the first two-screen theater in the country. Other theaters downtown were subsequently closed and entertainment downtown was consolidated in the Wyandotte Theater. A renovation in the 1960s significantly altered this building. The Art Deco enameled panels are still visible beneath the surface that was added to the façade. Adaptive reuse of this building, upgrading it to contemporary needs and restoring the façade to its original appearance is still a possibility, though is a diminishing one as the building continues to be vacant. Finding an owner and use for this building is very important, for without this facility there is no other place presently for live performance in Wyandotte.

Sears Store, 1940

When completed in 1940, this building had the distinction of being the largest building between Detroit and Toledo. Later it was organized into a hard goods and catalog store with other merchandizing transferred to the new Sears store in Lincoln Park. The Wyandotte store closed local service in 1977.



St. Stephens Episcopal Church, 1964

This building replaced a much earlier wooden Gothic Revival church building that was constructed on this site in 1866. After this building was burned and dismantled, a new modernistic church building was constructed on this site, which is there today.

Moving Forward

What follows is not a comprehensive plan, but a rough outline, or a hint of what the future might hold. Some of the initiatives below could be pursued immediately and with limited resources could lead to immediate results. Others are more long term and will require consensus building and public dialogue prior to implementation. Such a public process is necessary to assure the vision which is selected has broad buy-in and public support.

Preliminary Steps

1. Document historic buildings in Wyandotte. Photograph and document the approximately 12,000 buildings in Wyandotte or at least the approximately 3,000 buildings in Wyandotte's historic core.
2. Digitize historical materials such as historic photographs, prior surveys that have been done, and city directories, to tell the story of Wyandotte on a block-by-block and building-by-building basis, emphasizing significant people, places, and events.

Organization

1. Engage in a community visioning effort to guide future activities. Engage stakeholders including banks, business people, elected and appointed officials, and residents. Identify those characteristics which make Wyandotte unique and develop strategies and a plan of action to use these things as a foundation for future development.
2. Assess the effectiveness of existing organizations (DDA, WBA) and consider re-organizing these, perhaps following the framework of the Main Street approach. Four committees would focus on organization, promotion, economic restructuring, and design. The effect of organizing and focusing volunteer effort, is that goals may be set and measurable results achieved.
3. Establish a relationship with the Architectural Salvage Warehouse of Detroit (www.aswdetroit.org), providing them first option on a property when demolition is being considered. Skimming is the removal of easy-to-remove building materials that can be done for free. Deconstruction is the physical disassembly of a building so that up to 80% of its parts may be recycled. Giving ASWD the first option when a property is considered for demolition would both support the work of this new organization, and establish Wyandotte's reputation as an innovative and progressive place.

Promotion

1. Create a brand and identity for Wyandotte by bringing consistency to several conflicting marker programs. More detail on markers in Wyandotte follows in the Appendix. To summarize, the challenge is to bring together these several different programs into one that is visually attractive, well-designed, and consistent.
2. Place reproductions of historic photos in vacant windows downtown to add visual interest to the street, distract attention from the fact that these spaces are vacant, and to assist in the promotion and marketing of these buildings by placing them into their historic context, and emphasizing their importance as historic buildings in Wyandotte.
 - a. Wyandotte Theater – place several large reproductions of photos of historic theaters in Wyandotte. Provide a brief and concise narrative about each theater to tell the story of performance in Wyandotte.

- b. Sears Building – include photos of people shopping and of past and present retail stores, telling the story of retailing in Wyandotte.
3. Develop a tour program.
4. Interpretive marker program. Currently the WHS has a plaque program, the Historical and Cultural Commission have several interpretive markers, though these efforts are not coordinated together, the markers are made of materials that are not durable, and the scholarly and informational content of these markers could be improved. Interpretive signs with historic images and text at critical locations (possibly along a potential tour route) and with numbers and letters on the marker referring to notations on a tour map or guide book, would help to better promote Wyandotte’s historic and cultural resources.

Economic Restructuring

1. Make wireless Internet available to businesses downtown where people gather. Then aggressively advertise this, establishing Wyandotte’s reputation as a technologically-sophisticated place that welcomes people specializing in creative and technological work.
2. Consider deconstruction and removal of buildings (or parts of buildings) that do not reinforce or add to the historic character of Wyandotte. In the downtown area especially this would include buildings that do not have residential areas above or that do not extend to the sidewalk edge.
3. Establish a “Wyandotte Buck’s” program – a system of local currency that businesses may exchange between one another. Especially when dealing with services, this would limit the cash outlay required for services, and allow for work to be done free from taxation. Such a cooperative system has proven very effective in places like Ithaca, New York.
4. Approach property owners with buildings for lease or sale downtown and that are presently vacant. Establish a plan to market these resources, tying them in to the theme of Wyandotte as a historic town, seeking to become a center for arts and culture. Then work with a firm or several firms to market these properties to a regional and national audience. Have property owners contribute funds to support such an effort.

Design

1. Replace street banners downtown with banners that incorporate themes of local heritage, but also of arts and culture as well. These will reinforce Wyandotte’s identity and reputation as a historic town that also serves as an emerging center for arts and culture.
2. Engage local artists to develop murals, sculpture, and public art which references the heritage of this place, but also reinforces Wyandotte’s reputation as a center for arts and cultural activity.
3. Yack Arena renovation. When renovating the Yack Arena, incorporate a lively and inspiring color scheme. Also, incorporate murals or other artwork that refers to Wyandotte’s heritage, reinforcing Wyandotte’s reputation as a historic town and as an emerging center for arts and culture. Also, Yack Arena could be better connected with the downtown by way of Biddle Alley (pictured at right).



MARKER PROGRAM IN WYANDOTTE

Historical markers are a highly visible way for a community to show that it honors and respects its heritage, and desires to share this heritage with residents and visitors alike. In Wyandotte, several competing markers have diluted the effect that any single marker has, and have failed to capture the potential to use Wyandotte's heritage to promote economic development through heritage tourism and the like. Examples of markers in Wyandotte follow, with recommendations for how to improve marker programs in Wyandotte.



State Historical Markers

These large green State Historical Markers with gold letters are perhaps the best way to recognize historic resources in Wyandotte. Currently we have two of these markers in Wyandotte. For a marker to be awarded, an application must be submitted along with money to fabricate the marker itself. Total fee per marker would range from approximately \$2000 to \$3500. The award and dedication of a marker is an event of great civic significance and pride – a big reward for the small cost of each marker. Wyandotte has eight properties eligible for a marker now. Funds simply need to be allocated and an application submitted to receive these markers.



American Society for Metals Plaque

This marker presently hanging on City Hall recognizes this as the “site of the Eureka Iron Works where the Bessemer converter was first used, in 1864, for the commercial production of steel in America.” The ASM could be approached and asked if they would be interested in funding work, such as creating a series of raised-relief panels depicting the steel-making process that are hung from the walls of City Hall facing Biddle Ave.



Marx Home Marker

This marker recognizes that the Marx Home has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and little else. This building is eligible for a State Historical Marker, which would provide a more thorough description of the building, and help to describe why it is important.



Ford MacNichol Home Marker

Much like the Marx Home marker, a State Historical Marker or some other marker could better present the significance of this building.

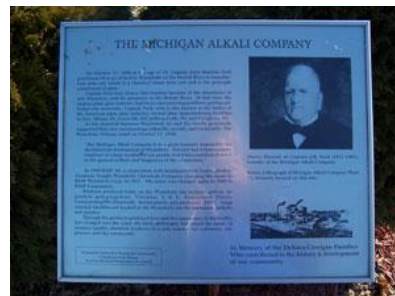
The Wyandotte Historical and Cultural Commission has initiated an interpretive marker program. The construction of these markers and their limited durability has caused them to decay. Further, the informational content, while good, could be better connected with the story of Wyandotte, tying into a comprehensive economic development and heritage tourism strategy.



Wyandotte Street Scenes



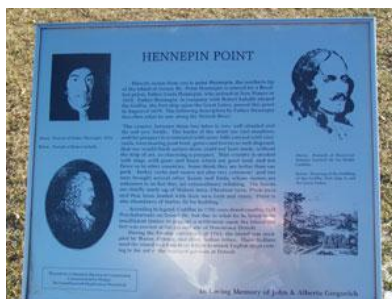
The Eureka Iron Works



Michigan Alkali Company



The Wyandotte Indians



Hennepin Point



Former Site of Ford Building

Other local markers are in violation of State of Michigan statutes which make it very clear that no markers are to resemble the State Historical Markers.



BASF Waterfront Park Marker

This marker is in most direct violation of the rule against creating markers similar to State Historical Markers. A sign with the name of the park and commemorative plaques could replace this existing sign, both helping to attract attention to this handsome amenity but to also commemorate those involved in its creation appropriately.



Wooden Markers

These two wooden markers, while recognizing two very important homes, also violate the rule against creating markers similar to State Historical Markers. Both properties are eligible for State Historical Markers, however, so by submitting the application and collecting the application fee, these may be replaced by the more durable, informative, and attractive State Historical Markers.



Wyandotte Historical Society Plaque Program

Not to be outdone, the Wyandotte Historical Society has developed a plaque program of its own. These plaques present the building's date of construction and little else.

Rules establishing the WHS plaque program attempt to say what building owners may or may not do with their building. The WHS has no legal authority to enforce these restrictions. Instead, they are copying the enforcement powers that a Local Historic Preservation Review Commission created by local ordinance would have.

Elimination or modification of the WHS Plaque program should be considered.



WHS Sign at Oakwood Cemetery

This sign at Oakwood Cemetery is very visible and advertises the fact that the WHS is involved in a project there. The materials it is made of are not durable. It is advisable this is removed and replaced with a more permanent sign.



WHS Stone Marker at Oakwood Cemetery

This marker at Oakwood Cemetery, while acknowledging significant burials which occurred at the site, does not place the cemetery in its appropriate historical and cultural context. Further, this marker is placed in a location with limited visibility.

If possible, a State Historical Marker would replace the WHS Sign and WHS Stone Marker at this site.

Other Signs in Wyandotte...



Wyandotte Recreation Department Signs

These markers are well-conceived in terms of design, choice of materials, and effectiveness in presenting information. There is a possibility to tie these in better with other signs and markers in Wyandotte, to create a more unified appearance, and making possible the branding and promotion of historic, cultural, and recreational resources, by creating a consistent recognizable image and identity.



Welcome to Wyandotte Signs

These markers at the entrance to Wyandotte, while seeking to represent the Native-American heritage of this area, fail to do this adequately. The stretched buffalo hide appearance of the background is inaccurate. Buffalo were common in the south and west, but not in Michigan. Also our heritage as a manufacturing center and today as a center for arts and culture is equally significant to our Native-American heritage, if not more so, and deserves to be represented in the entrances to our town as well.