Historic Downtown New Ulm

New Ulm is a city of charm and tradition.

The traditions come from its German heritage. The city was founded in 1854 by the Chicago Land Company, an association of German Americans under the leadership of Frederick Beinhorn. In late 1854, a party of company members embarked from Chicago and settled in the vicinity of present-day New Ulm. Then, in 1856, amidst widespread violence against German immigrants, the Turners—the most important secular German American organization in the country—authorized the creation of a colonization society. Led by Wilhelm Pfaender, this colony hoped to establish a new community based on "Practical Turnerism." Following a search of several sites on the frontier, they joined with the Chicago settlers to found New Ulm. Over the years, that German heritage has been recognized with monuments, parades, and special civic events like Oktoberfest.

The city's charm is seen in the orderly design of its streets, the beauty of the natural landscape and designed parks, and the common use of brick in building construction. In 1858, Christian Prignitz, a member of the Turner colonists, completed a town plat for New Ulm. This master plan expressed a grand vision of the city's

Wilhelm Pfaender

future based on the ideals of "Practical Turnerism" and included support of education, development of a rich cultural life rooted in German traditions, and a relative equality of opportunity.

Building on the city's natural terraces, Prignitz laid out primary streets parallel to the river. The lowest terrace became the industrial district and the location of the rail lines after 1872. Minnesota Street, on the second terrace, developed as the primary commercial center. The third terrace, location of Turner Hall and the Brown County Courthouse, became the primary residential district. The town plan also set aside small lots for gardens—along what is now Garden Street.

Geography, ideology, and regional economic development combined to create a vibrant commercial center. To reach their place of employment, workers had to pass through the business district, possibly stopping at a bakery on the way to work, picking up groceries when heading home, or lingering at one of the many local saloons at the end of a hard day. The vision conceived in 1858 continues to make New Ulm's downtown rich in tradition and charm.

The Union Hotel, circa 1860, burned in 1875 and was replaced by the Grand Hotel (210 N. Minnesota Street).

The Dakota Conflict

Little Crow

In August 1862, while many local men were off fighting for the Union in the Civil War, the area around New Ulm exploded in violence. With native culture threatened by reservation policies, and provoked by a series of broken promises by the government, Dakota warriors began attacks on white settlers and traders.

New Ulm received the first news of the conflict at noon on August 18, 1862, from survivors of a Civil War recruiting party that had been ambushed in Milford Township. Barricades were hastily erected in a three-block area on Minnesota Street under Captain Jacob Nix's command.

The first attack on Tuesday, August 19, by about one hundred Indians was repulsed. By the time of the major attack on August 23, some three hundred defenders had gathered, including volunteers from St. Peter, Mankato, and Le Sueur. Charles Flandrau of Traverse des Sioux was elected to command the defense of the town. The battle raged all day and the outcome was often in doubt. On Sunday, August 24, as reinforcements arrived, the
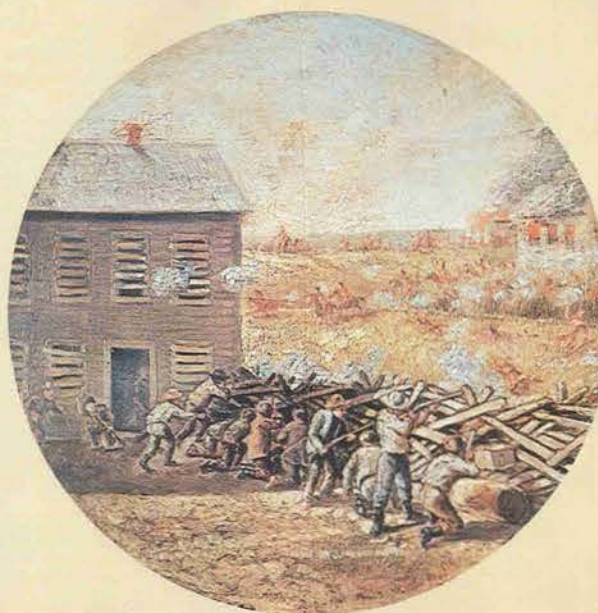
Dakota withdrew up the Minnesota Valley. Facing a shortage of food and ammunition, two thousand refuges from New Ulm evacuated to Mankato on the 25th.

During the fighting, which lasted six weeks, deaths numbered nearly five hundred white settlers and an unknown number of Dakota. The effects of the Dakota Conflict lingered for years. After hostilities ended, captive Indians were savagely attacked by New Ulm residents as they were transported to Mankato for trial. Fearing another surprise attack, the downtown remained encircled with barricades until at least 1866.

Three downtown buildings remain from that period: the Kiesling House (220 N. Minnesota), the Erd Building (108 N. Minnesota), and the Forster Store (117 N. Broadway). A fourth, the Schalk Store, is still standing but was moved from its original location in 1902 and has been greatly altered. The Erd Building, in particular, played a key role in the defense of the town, providing shelter to women and children.

Friedrich Kiesling's house, built in 1861, is one of three buildings in the downtown that date from the Dakota Conflict.

The Bs

Between the arrival of the railroad in 1872 and the end of World War I, New Ulm basked in an economic boom, fueled by the "Bs," as the *Redwood Gazette* labeled the key local industries of beer, bread (flour), butter, and bricks—plus Burg's cigars.

The commercial center provided banks, hotels, and restaurants for the steady stream of traveling salesmen, as well as shops and saloons for local workers to visit on the way home. Most of the buildings within the historic district were constructed during those years.

New Ulm's breweries, led by the Schell and Hauenstein firms, produced more beer than any other Minnesota city excepting Saint Paul and Minneapolis. The city also supported one saloon for each 200 residents. During Prohibition, these became known as "refreshment parlors."
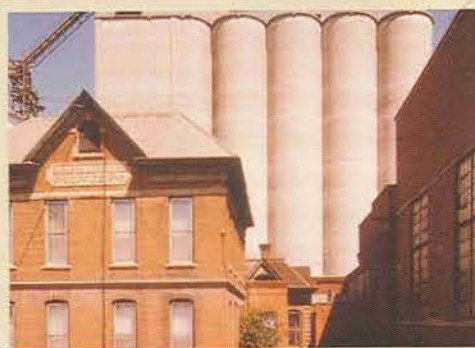
The city's flour mills—the Eagle Roller Mill and the New Ulm Roller Mill—made New Ulm the third largest milling center in the state, trailing only the Twin Cities and Duluth. The mills' company-owned elevators stretched across three states and salesmen had offices in Minneapolis, Chicago, and New York.

New Ulm's cigar factories employed around one hundred workers, again ranking third in the state. Frank Burg's cigar factory on Center Street—Minnesota's largest outside the Twin Cities—manufactured around 2,500,000 cigars a year. In Theodore Mueller's factory, workers produced the Perfection cigar.

Two major brickyards—Stoeckerts and New Ulm Brick—operated in New Ulm with a third major supplier—the Ochs Brick Company in nearby Springfield. Their bricks give New Ulm its distinctive look. Another locally made product, Artstone, was used extensively for decorative trim after World War I.

As a processing center, the city's creameries became a major industry by 1900. Today, AMPI is the largest butter-packaging plant in the United States. Around 500,000 pounds of cream from five states arrive daily to be manufactured into 250,000 pounds of butter by 150 employees.

A German Town

New Ulm has a well-earned reputation as a "German" town, confirmed by the 2000 census. It reported that sixty-six percent of the city's residents claimed at least some German ancestry—the highest percentage of ethnic identification for any city in the country of more than 5,000 residents.

You will see evidence of the city's heritage as you walk around the downtown. For example, the Brown County Historical Society is located in the former U.S. Post Office, designed in the German Renaissance style. You can visit Schonlau Park and listen to the Glockenspiel. Just one
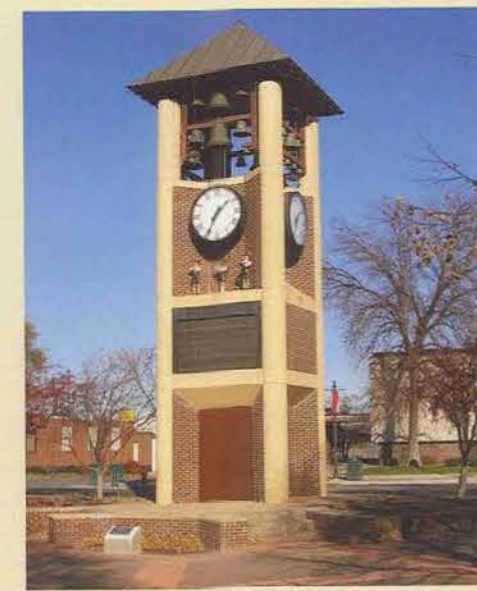

block away, German Park hosts frequent concerts throughout the summer. At local restaurants, you'll often find barbecued ribs, German potato salad, sauerkraut, and homemade sausage on the menu.

New Ulm also has a well-deserved reputation for its festivals, including Oktoberfest, River Blast, Fasching (the German Mardi Gras), Bockfest, and Bavarian Blast.

But New Ulm is not a theme park. The historic district, as represented

in its well-preserved buildings, shows a downtown that remained vibrant over the years. Its architecture is not encased in a single period or style—despite past attempts to impose a German theme—but reflects a changing local economy. Today, the city's commercial center retains an important economic role in the region.

1 **4th North and Minnesota Streets**
Glockenspiel, 1980 M

The New Ulm Glockenspiel was dedicated on May 25, 1980. The thirty-seven bronze bells—including one donated by the City of Ulm, Germany—were cast in Holland by Royal Eijsbouts. The Glockenspiel's twelve animated figures illustrate significant facets of the community's rich heritage. There are performances at noon, 3, and 5 p.m. all year round.

2 **225-227 North Minnesota**
Louis Buenger Building, 1892, 1902
Architect: Herman Amme M

Louis Buenger Sr. opened his first furniture shop on the corner of Minnesota and 3rd North in 1876. In 1892, Buenger erected a brick building at 225 North Minnesota Street. The business was actively expanded when, a few years later, in 1902, the frame building was removed and the large three-story building was erected on the same corner. Although built ten years after 225 North Minnesota, the exteriors were harmonized in material and design.

3 **220 North Minnesota**
Kiesling House, 1861 M

The frame house erected in 1861 by Friedrich Kiesling was an important defense post during the Dakota Conflict of 1862. Born in Germany, Kiesling settled in New Ulm in 1860, where he worked as a blacksmith. In August 1862, the house stood inside the barricades placed around the city to defend against two attacks by Dakota Indians. It is the oldest frame building in the city remaining in its original location. For many years, the house sat in relative obscurity behind commercial buildings on Minnesota Street. Used as a residence until 1970, it was given to the City of New Ulm.

4 **210 North Minnesota**
Grand Hotel, 1875
Architect: Julius Berndt M

In 1856, Phillipp Gross opened a hotel in a wood-frame building called the Minnesota Haus, which became the Union Hotel in 1860. The hotel was a focal point of activity in New Ulm and served as a hospital during the Dakota Conflict. In July 1875, it was destroyed by fire. Gross immediately built a new two-story brick hotel, designed by Julius Berndt, later the architect of the Hermann Monument. Gross operated the hotel until retiring in 1885. In 1899 Peter Manderfeld, a new owner, added a third floor and changed the name to the Grand Hotel.

5 **204 North Minnesota**
Theodore Mueller Cigar Factory, 1898

Theodore Mueller was one of the leading cigar manufacturers in the state, producing 300,000 a year. "New Ulm's cigars," noted a local paper, "are smoked by all classes and conditions of men." He learned his trade under William Gebser (20 N. Minnesota) and Frank Burg (506 Center) and began his own firm in 1885, renting spaces on N. Minnesota. Wishing to expand, he acquired the land, and completed this building for his factory in 1898. Mueller's factory is seen in the middle of the photograph on the left, while Schell's Hall is on the right.

6 **202 North Minnesota**
Schell's Hall, 1894
Architect: Henry Gerlach

This two-and-a-half story brick commercial block was constructed in 1894. The building was known as Schell's Hall after its first owner, brewer Otto Schell, and designed by Henry Gerlach, a prominent Mankato architect. Its second floor hall space proved highly popular, hosting meetings for bands, labor unions, the German American Alliance, and the local socialist organization.

7 **(112-114 North Minnesota)**
Theodore Crone Dry Goods, 1876
8 **110 North Minnesota**
Crone Brothers Clothing, 1869 M

The Crone Brothers Clothing Store was the largest retail business in New Ulm for many years. Theodore Crone Sr. established a general store in New Ulm in 1857. Following the Civil War, he erected a two-story brick building for a dry goods store, now part of the structure to the south (110). In 1871, he added a third story. Then, in 1876, a second building was constructed (on left in the photograph) and opened as a clothing store.

9 **108 North Minnesota**
Erd Building, 1861 M

Built in 1861 by Francis Erd, the basement was used as a refuge for women and children during the Dakota War. Originally, the structure was two stories high. In 1870, Erd completed a substantial addition, raising a third floor. Willibald Eibner bought the building in 1883 to use as a restaurant. At times, there were sections for making Eibner's ice cream, a large bakery, and candy-making facilities. After a fire in 1936, Eibner rebuilt the street facade in the Moderne-style.

10 **125 North Minnesota**
Pioneer Drug Store, 1868, 1881

The Pioneer Drug Store opened in 1868 by Dr. Carl Weschcke, a druggist, physician, and longtime mayor of New Ulm. He tended to the wounded during the Dakota Conflict, working alongside Dr. William Mayo. In 1881, a cyclone ripped through the downtown, seriously damaging the building. The current storefront reflects the reconstruction following that event. Pioneer Drug is seen draped in bunting in the photograph on the left. The tall building in the middle is the Weigand Hauenstein Saloon.

11 **123 North Minnesota**
Weigand Hauenstein Building, 1899

Weigand Hauenstein, the brother of brewer John, operated a saloon on this site. In 1899, he tore down the wood-frame building and constructed this three-story brick structure. The Hauensteins operated the city's second largest brewery, which closed in 1970.

12 **117 North Minnesota**
Reim Jewelers, 1907

The Reim Jewelry Store, built in 1907, is a two-story brick structure with a light cream-colored brick. This site originally held the Frederich Beinhorn store. In 1905 C. G. Reim bought the building with the intention of opening a jewelry store. Shortly afterward, the building collapsed and had to be rebuilt. In 1910, Reim installed a freestanding electric clock in the front of the store.

13 **13. 504-510 1st North**
Fritsche Block, 1925

Dr. Louis Fritsche was a prominent physician, historian, and community leader. Trained at the University of Berlin, he received the first official medical license in the state of Minnesota. He was actively involved in politics, serving four terms as mayor. In 1917, he was removed from office by Governor Burnquist for pro-German sympathies, subsequently winning vindication with reelection in 1920. In 1925, he expanded his medical office with the construction of this office building.

14 **100 North Broadway**
New Ulm Municipal Building, 1919
Architect: Tyrie & Chapman M

Under pressure from fire and police departments for additional space, the city council voted to erect a new city hall in 1919. It designed by the Minneapolis architectural firm of Tyrie & Chapman, which had recently completed a new school building for the city. The one-story addition on the north side of the building houses a cannon of New Ulm Battery, an artillery unit first organized in 1863.

15 **205 North Broadway**
New Ulm Armory, 1914
Architect: Albert Shippel M

The New Ulm National Guard Armory was built in 1914. The city had a long tradition of supporting the militia and prized the regimental bands associated with the local units. In 1871, Joseph Bobleter, a New Ulm resident, organized the Governor's Guard, the precursor of today's Minnesota National Guard.

16 **117 North Broadway**
Forster Building, 1861 M

Frederick Forster was the city's first official postmaster. In 1861, he began a pottery manufactory on this site, in partnership with Friedrich Gommel. During the Second Battle of New Ulm, the building served as a defensive outpost, manned by about twenty men under the command of Henry Swift, a future Governor of Minnesota. It is the oldest commercial building in the city.

17 **27 North Broadway, 1937**
New Ulm Public Library
Architect: Albert Plagens M

Constructed in 1937, this Moderne-style building was built with locally-made Artstone. George Saffert began a concrete block manufacturing company, which eventually became American Artstone, in 1910. He completed much of the design for the library, working with architect Albert Plagens, who was appointed to prepare the specifications and supervise the construction.

18 **26 North Broadway**
Arbeiter Hall, 1873 M

Originally built for the Arbeiter Verein, or Workingmen's Association, this building served as the home of the Union Opera House for many years. The hall was a cultural center, hosting plays, operas, lectures, and concerts. It was used as a National Guard armory in the early twentieth century, but was later converted into a service station.

19 **15 North Minnesota**
Amann's Saloon, 1894

Andrew Amann built this two-story brick building in 1894—one of more than two dozen saloons in the city. In 1909, temperance crusader Carry Nation visited the establishment, but kept her famous hatchet in her purse.

20 **9-11-13 North Minnesota**
Masonic Block, 1891
Architect: Frank Thayer

Three investors built this impressive block in 1891. Local Masons held their meetings on the top floor, while Jacob Klossner used the ground floor for his hardware and implements store. On the second floor, Congressman John Lind had his law offices. In 1898, Lind was elected governor of Minnesota, serving for one term. The Schoch-Ottomeyer Block is pictured in the foreground of this photograph.

21 **3-5 North Minnesota**
Schoch-Ottomeyer Block, 1898

Alex Ottomeyer and Dr. J. L. Schoch erected this building, in part to provide space for G. A. Ottomeyer's dry goods store. The block was the scene of one of the most notorious crimes in New Ulm's history. In November 1904, a young dentist, Louis Gebhardt, was brutally murdered in his office. Another dentist, George Koch, was accused. The case went to trial three times before the jury acquitted Koch.

22 **6-8-10 North Minnesota**
Boesch/Hummel/Maltzahn Block, 1890
Architect: Carl Struck

The Boesch-Hummel-Maltzahn is probably the most conspicuous building in downtown New Ulm with its elaborate cornice and bay windows. Three local businessmen—William Hummel, Edward Maltzahn, and Werner Boesch—hired architect Carl Struck to design the building. Struck had recently completed the Brown County Court House.

23 **2 North Minnesota**
Brown County Bank, 1871

The Brown County Bank, along with the adjacent Behnke Store, is among the oldest commercial properties within the district. It opened in November 1871 and provided financial services to the growing commercial district. The storefront was altered in 1901 with the installation of large plate glass windows.

24 **2 North Broadway**
United States Post Office, 1910
Architect: James Knox Taylor

In 1910, the federal government erected the post office building on the corner of Center and Broadway, designed by James Knox Taylor. When the tentative plans were received in New Ulm, there was a most vigorous protest because they "showed a lack of architectural beauty." A new design reflected a German Renaissance style in the stepped gables, the decorative details, and the combined use of brick and stone.

25 **405 Center**
George's Ballroom, 1947

George Neuwirth's "Greater Amusement Center" opened in October 1947, featuring a ballroom, eight bowling alleys, and "the longest bar in the northwest." It had a capacity for 3,000 patrons, with 164 booths in the dining area. For the next decade, the ballroom was a popular stop for local and touring bands, ranging from Harry James and the Dorsey Brothers to local favorites, the Six Fat Dutchmen, Emil Domeier, and Fezz Fritsche.

26 **1-5 South Minnesota**
City Meat Market, 1927 M

A successful businesswoman, Rosa Schnobrich had run a butcher shop at 13 S. Minnesota from 1914 to 1927. In that year, she acquired this lot and built this structure. Following Schnobrich's death in 1929, two sons, Oscar and Hugo, continued the business. This is the site of the August Kiesling blacksmith shop, where the last crucial engagement of the Second Battle of New Ulm took place on August 23, 1862. After Dakota forces occupied the building, Charles Flandrau and about sixty men charged from the defense lines toward the blacksmith shop, driving out the Dakota, and ending the day's fight.

27 **21 South Minnesota**
South Side Auto Garage, 1911, 1926 (new front)

In 1911, the South Side Auto Company built this garage, run by J. C. Siebenbrunner who later bought out his partners. In 1926, he made improvements, adding plate glass windows, and altering the front with Craftsman-oriented flourishes. The new brick front was of "Hy-tex"—a brick with four slightly different colorations, made at New Ulm Brick & Tile. Locally-made Artstone was used for trim. Siebenbrunner remained at this location through 1944.

To learn more

Podcast
M Historic Marker

Map Key

Podcast
NRHP Contributing Building

3rd North
2nd North
1st North
Center Street
1st South
North Broadway
North Minnesota
South Broadway
MarktPlatz