

City of Hillsdale



United States Department of the Interior National Park Service
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
Hillsdale Downtown Historic District
Hillsdale County, Michigan

DESCRIPTIVE STATEMENT

Hillsdale, a typical Michigan county seat city, is located near the geographical center of Hillsdale County, one of the southernmost tier of Michigan counties. Its success and prosperity was due to its being the county seat, the routing of the Michigan Southern railroad line through the town, and its selection as the site of Hillsdale College. The business district retains late 19th and early 20th Century brick business blocks **nearly in entirety**. The downtown district is dominated by a prominent courthouse in a central square, steepled churches, and formal civic and governmental buildings.

Hillsdale and Hillsdale County were named for the rolling topography of the area. The county lies at the edge of a glacial moraine area and is notable, and named, for its hills and valleys containing many small streams and rivers. The county contains the source of five major Michigan rivers: the Maumee, the Raisin, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph, and St. Joseph of the Maumee. The town site was platted along the St. Joseph, near Baw Beese Lake, both of which provided water power to the town's industries. The business district is built on the higher ground to the west of the river and mill race, and the land slopes down to the north and east, toward the river and the railroad. The terrain creates a natural boundary to the east, where a sharp drop between Broad and Ferris marks the boundary between the business district and the industrial Stock Mill complex.

The townsite, on a series of rises, is prominent from a distance. Especially from the northern approaches, the towers of the courthouse and college mark the town from quite a distance. Within Hillsdale, the rolling terrain creates spatial interest. The rising street slopes, though gradual, create a stepped elevation effect in the storefronts and allow upward and clear views of buildings, giving them dominance in the streetscape. This picturesque effect of the terrain is enhanced by the angular intersection of the major downtown streets, which forces perspective and focus on such buildings as City Hall, the County Courthouse, the Keefer Hotel, and the commercial complex called "The Point."

The 1835 town plat created a grid with major streets running north-south. The cross streets run east-west. Broad, Ferris, and Short streets were platted on a north-northwest to

south-southeast diagonal relating to the river and mill race to the east of the town plat. The diagonal of Broad Street created several triangular blocks. In the business district, the fully triangular block is known as "The Point" and is occupied by several brick commercial buildings. The major commercial streets in Hillsdale are Howell and Broad, which cross at "The Point." This diagonal intersection creates the major views in Hillsdale, of City Hall and the Federal Building, "The Point," and the Keefer House. The County Courthouse, with its high tower, is prominent from quite a distance as well as within the town itself. Its tower appears above and behind most views of the general downtown area.

The street names of the original plat were similar to those used in many newly platted communities and locate the observer in the town by their very names: North, West, South, Broad, and Short Streets bounded the area. Cross streets were named after prominent citizens and early settlers. Howell Street, for instance, refers to William T. Howell, an early settler. Broad Street was so platted; it is 99 feet wide. Other streets were platted at 66 feet wide, with alleys bisecting the blocks in a north-south direction.

The railroad, so important to the town's development, runs in a west-northwest to east-southeast diagonal line to the immediate north of the business district. The railroad and the warehouses and industries which were associated with it formed a barrier to northward commercial development, but industrial and storage development followed the railroad line to the east and west. The business district was further bounded to the east by the millrace and river and the mills, factories, and lumberyards located along the river and race. As noted, the drop in elevation between Broad and Ferris also contributes to this natural boundary. Some dwellings were built along Ferris Street between the F. W. Stock Mills and the business district, though most have since been demolished. The 19th century south and west boundaries of the business district were dictated by development type.

Residential development occupied the lots along Manning Street to the west of the business district until the early twentieth century, when business expansion resulted in commercial building spreading west along the cross streets. Some residences have been since converted to civic functions such as the library (22 Manning Street) and a social club (the B. P. O. E., 60 Manning Street).

Commercial uses extended south down Howell and Broad streets until, apparently, commercial building needs were fulfilled. Commercial uses stopped about midway on the Howell Street block between Bacon and Waldron, with residences originally completing that block. Bacon Street marked the end of commercial development along Broad Street, as well, except for the Hillsdale Manufacturing Company which occupied most of the block south of Bacon between Broad and Howell.

The most prominent and attractive feature of the town plan is the courthouse square. Actually a trapezoid, it is bounded by Broad, Howell, McCollum, and Bacon streets. Its central location within the business district is a possible formalization of more organic New England and Middle Atlantic town plans. Hillsdale's square historically served as a public park, governmental and civic site and gathering place, like those of eastern states.

Its many mature trees, monuments, and paths create a shaded and pleasant focus for the town.

The courthouse is placed near the center of the space and a parking lot occupying the site of the now-demolished jail fills the southeast corner of the square. Sidewalks are placed in functional diagonal and straight paths to the streets from the building entries. The American Legion World War Memorials and Hillsdale County Heritage Sculpture are placed on the north side of the courthouse; the WWI Memorials are in the lawn slightly away from the sidewalk and the Heritage sculpture close to the north wall of the courthouse. The DAV/VFW War Memorial is placed near the sidewalk on the southwest corner of the courthouse. Plantings in the courthouse square consist of large shade trees, flowering trees, and shrubs with some annual flower beds.

A second square, now disappeared, was Railroad Square. This was located between the railroad and “The Point” and is now occupied by the City Hall. Railroad Square functioned as a commercial counterpart to the courthouse square and was the waiting and gathering place for railroad business especially when Hillsdale had many freight forwarding businesses and shippers and farmers would line the streets waiting for trains.

Broad Street, fittingly enough, was platted at 99 feet wide; Howell Street is a more common 66 feet wide, as are the cross streets and other town streets. Sixty-six feet is a near-standard width for town streets. Hillsdale, small and so well served by the railroad, did not have a streetcar line in its downtown. Since the business district was west of the river, no bridges were needed in the downtown area to serve business uses.

The earliest commercial buildings in Hillsdale were of log and wood frame construction. These early frontier-settlement stores, mills, and hotel/taverns were replaced with brick buildings as settlement progressed and after the almost inevitable fires destroyed several wooden buildings. Many growing communities passed ordinances requiring brick construction to aid in fire prevention especially after the great Chicago fire. The railroad’s arrival in Hillsdale made materials more readily available. The brick commercial buildings were built in the familiar party-walled manner using all the street frontage and most of the lot to maximize the valuable land area.

The building at 27 N. Broad Street is purported to be the oldest remaining commercial building in Hillsdale (1844), although its Italianate stylistic details suggest either an extensive remodeling or a later date of construction. It is typical, however, of the nineteenth century brick commercial buildings seen throughout Michigan and the Midwest, with its symmetrical two story brick front facade, rectangular plan, flat roof, and simple storefront.

The commercial buildings lining Broad and Howell streets are a mixture of two and three story brick blocks, with occasional one-story buildings. One story buildings generally typify mid-to-late 20th century infill or reconstruction. Several buildings are “blocks,” that is, several tenant spaces with separate addresses, separated by fire or party walls but all constructed as a whole building with identical or similar street facades.

Some blocks were named after their owners or builders, such as the Englehardt Block, Waldron Block. etc., and until about 1920, some addresses referred solely to the block's name. The largest block remaining in Hillsdale is the building at 12-24 N. Howell Street, comprising at least seven separate addresses and tenants with offices, a meeting hall, and apartments in the second floor. Other, more typical blocks contain two or three major divisions only.

The majority of the mid-19th century commercial buildings have Italianate stylistic details, with bracketed cornices and arched window hoods, among other typical Italianate details. The building at 39 and 41 N. Broad are excellent examples of the commercial Italianate seen nationwide. The Commercial Italianate style was an extremely long-lived one; the style was attractive and dignified, just decorative enough to please the desire for ornament but not florid.

Later buildings from the 1880's and 1890's display the Picturesque approach to detailing, with somewhat more ornate cornices coupled with corbel tabling, more highly ornamented window details, and a looser expression of fenestration. The Gelzer Block at 92-94 N. Howell Street, built in 1885, is a good example of this approach, with incised decoration on the arch impostes and a creative approach to the upper floor fenestration. The building at 2 S. Howell, originally a drug store, retains the gabled parapet which was a common feature of commercial buildings in the mid-to-late 19th Century, but also displays a Commercial Italianate expression of detailing. The Keefer Hotel also retains the shaped parapet and is further embellished with polychromed tilework.

The Classical Revival was also used occasionally, particularly where an impression of gravity and stability was desired. Thus, it is seen in Hillsdale on buildings which originally housed banks and other institutions. The current Courthouse Annex, at 49 N. Howell, and the Taylor-Moore Insurance Co., at 67 N. Howell, are two strong examples of the style. Both buildings were originally used as banks.

Most of the design effort and construction expense on these commercial buildings was spent on the money-making facade, the street facade. The rear of the lots was the utilitarian, service side, and as it faced an alley lined with storage sheds and stables, little concern was spent on the rear facades, save that they be reasonably clean, functional, and tidy. One story ells were often attached to the rear of the larger store buildings. Since in most cases the storage buildings and stables have now been removed from the alleys and rear lots, the rear facades of the commercial blocks are now more visible. Along Howell Street, the city has built public parking lots in the block between the alley and Manning Street. Modernizations and additions have been made to create rear entrances into certain stores and restaurants from these parking lots.

Public buildings in Hillsdale's business district display a variety of styles similar to that of the commercial buildings. The Methodist Church at 45 Manning Street is a slightly altered Romanesque appearing in its massing like a large Italianate villa, with a square inside-corner tower, and a residential scale. The tower was originally steepled, but lost the steeple to fire. The Presbyterian Church across the street at 31 North Street, an early 20th century replacement of a Gothic Revival building which burned, uses the robust

Tudor Revival with rough-cut stone and heavy massing. The two churches nearest the Courthouse, the Catholic St. Anthony's and Episcopalian St. Paul's (17 N. Broad and 3 N. Broad), are both more delicate interpretations of Gothic Revival, with prominent, graceful, and slender spires.

The governmental buildings in downtown Hillsdale are the most prominent and formal, dominating the town and surrounding area. The County Courthouse is a notable example of the Classical/Renaissance Revival style and is listed on the National Register. Designed by Claire Allen and built in 1898-1899, it is a symmetrically organized and elaborately detailed sandstone building with a prominent central tower. An associated jail and sheriff's residence has been demolished.

The Hillsdale City Hall is an unusual pentagonal-plan Classic Revival building with a large pillared portico. Placed on the former Railroad Square, the City Hall turns its back to the railroad and faces the business district and the County Courthouse. The Federal Building, containing the Post Office, completes a triangular arrangement of formal buildings in Hillsdale's downtown. This Georgian Revival building from 1911-1912 is similar to other such small-town post offices built nationwide during the period of postal service consolidation. Its brick and stone facade, with stone pilasters and fanlit arched windows, complements the nearby City Hall. The Post Office's public interior space is virtually unchanged, with extraordinary paneling and service windows. These governmental buildings, with the spired churches and courthouse-square town plan, form the core of Hillsdale's downtown framework and character.

The transportation-related buildings at the north end of town include the New York Central headquarters facility (50 Monroe), a Prairie/Craftsman hybrid featuring brick and stucco walls, a hip roof, and interesting proportions. It is scaled and detailed to its residential context. The nearby Hillsdale Depot (38 Monroe) is a brick Italianate station with a bracketed and dentilled corbel table. It has, unfortunately, recently been subjected to a metal-sided addition. The freight depot, at 16 Hillsdale Street, is more utilitarian in its architecture, but retains most of its original appearance. The large Wilson Auto Parts store and warehouse at 25 Hillsdale is included in this district. The three story warehouse is a typical example of an early 20th century storage facility, but the attached building is an exuberant example of late 19th century ornamentation and massing. It has a chamfered plan with two major blocks. Circular projected second story bay windows, projected square bay windows, and a two story porch further enliven the building.

The fringes of the downtown business district contain commercial buildings from the early 20th Century and houses converted to civic or business uses. The Hillsdale Daily News Building (33 McCollum) and the Midtown Building (34 McCollum) are two interesting examples of early 20th Century commercial architecture. The Daily News building is a Prairie Style brick building with fine brickwork and a residential character.

An architectural style now sometimes known as "Commercial Brick" has representation in Hillsdale's downtown district. This early 20th Century vernacular commercial style is marked by extremely simple massing and ornament, and is a major precursor to modern commercial architectural styles. "Commercial Brick" buildings are, as is evident, built of

brick. They generally have a shaped or stepped parapet with functional storefront or show windows, and ornamentation is limited to brick patterning, stone, brick or tile medallion or lozenge panels, and incised stone, cast stone, tile, or concrete name panels. The genesis of the style is a vernacular response in building to building economics, a desire for simple “modern” forms and an inclusion of Arts and Crafts concepts into commercial building types.

The Midtown Building (34 McCollum), and the Broad Street Market (55 N. Broad) are two excellent examples of the style. Both display the textural brickwork, medallion ornament, and simple expression of fenestration of the “Commercial Brick” style. It may be interesting to note that both of these buildings were built as new automobile dealerships; the new industry introduced new building types and new expressions were needed to suit the changing times. The Midtown Building is the former Pinkham and Wright Ford Dealership built in 1922 and retained its character through its 1980’s conversion to a business center. The transoms of the show windows of the original sales floor remain; the building’s upper floor contained recreation space, offices and other uses.

Several other early 20th Century buildings of one and two stories display the “Commercial Brick style of simple, almost utilitarian massing and detailing, with subtle texture in the brick veneer, geometric tile accents, and large show windows. The office block at 57-59 N. Broad is another excellent example of this response to the needs of economical and simple commercial construction.

Of the residences included in the boundaries of the proposed district, most have been converted to commercial or civic use. The Mitchell Library, a major civic building, is a converted residence. The Mitchell Residence, a mansarded Second Empire dwelling, was converted to serve as the library in 1908 by a Chicago architectural firm. Little of the building’s residential character was lost in the process. The mansard is now heavily altered, and extremely slender columns added. The B.P.O.E. Club (60 Manning) is another picturesque residence, with unusual mansard roofs and masonry window hoods.

Hillsdale’s downtown business district is a cohesive entity spanning the town’s development from a small pioneer community through its railroad and government boom and its present incarnation as a small college and government town. Its clear organization with the railroad spine crossing the twin commercial streets, Broad and Howell, its anchorage of large, formal governmental buildings, create a strong and “tight” urban plan. The central courthouse square provides both a focal point and a public green space. The buildings display a range of well-preserved architectural styles from Commercial Italianate through “Commercial Brick,” with few physical or stylistic gaps.

Hillsdale’s National Register of Historic Places district contains approximately 44 acres, with 96 contributing buildings, 28 noncontributing buildings, and six contributing objects (memorials and sculpture).