Downtown Topeka
‘Urban Living’ Tour

Living downtown, of course, dates from Topeka's earliest days. The first structure of any kind, a log house located near 1st and Kansas, housed in December, 1854, the nine men who would be recorded as the Kansas capital's founders. Constitution Hall, the first true, permanent structure likewise, down through the years, provided shelter for people as did many future commercial buildings along "the Avenue."

ROSS ROWHOUSES, 513-521 Van Buren. While downtown's business blocks frequently served as home for stores on the ground floor and families on the upper, Ross Row was an early instance of a building devoted exclusively for residential purposes. Saved from demolition by Historic Topeka, pioneer editor William W. Ross commenced their construction in 1880. Italianate, the six town houses also go by the name "Washington Row" after the numerous examples found in the nation's capital. Ross, something of a vagabond, was no doubt familiar with the type, having practiced law the previous decade in Washington, D.C. For a century, countless Topekans called the Ross home.

JOHANNES ARMS/formerly ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN SCHOOL, 315 W. 4th (1922). St. John's Evangelical Lutheran School was built in 1922 at a cost between $20,000 and $25,000. A plain, 2-story over basement brick building, the only significant exterior decorative features are the shallow entablature above the central entrance plus the stone belt across the front, near the roof line. The school moved in 1951, and later the Shawnee County Medical Society and blood bank occupied quarters here. In 1978 Topeka Ballet purchased the building for studios and rehearsal halls but relinquished it not long afterwards. During the 1980s it was converted into residences as the Johannes Arms Apartments. On the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

HOTEL KANSAN/Commerce Bank & Trust Downtown office, 9th & Kansas (1924). The 1920s saw two hotel companies race to see which would complete the first "modern" hotel in downtown. Both experienced setbacks, but the Kansan -- the company headed by Frank MacLennan, David Page, James A. Troutman, C.B. Merriam, and many other distinguished Topekans--opened ahead of the Jayhawk. Ten-stories of reinforced concrete, it contained a handsome columned lobby, 300 rooms, banquet rooms, coffee shop (the Purple Cow), several stores, and a roof garden ballroom. The Kansas City architectural firm of Shepard and Wiser designed the U-shape structure, typical of its era, the special feature of which is the "Greek Temple" or columned pediment atop the upper stories (one amusing incident after it opened, in 1925 a stuntman climbed the outside walls and proceeded to "sit" on its flagpole--the "crazy '20s"). The hotel closed in 1968 and soon thereafter remodeled into apartments; in 1987 Commerce Bank renovated the lobby for banking purposes.

GEM BUILDING, 508 W. 10th (1928). The late 1920s witnessed a major spurt in apartment house construction in Topeka, many along the 800, 900, and 1000 blocks of Topeka Blvd. and Tyler St. Vaguely Spanish or Mediterranean in style, the firm of Cuthbert and Suehrk designed the Gem (at the same time they completed plans for Gage School and the Jencks residence, 1998 Designers' Showhouse). Unlike most local apartments but typical of those back east, a drugstore and grocery occupied space on the ground floor. The market and building were owned by Fritz Leuenberger, a grocer well remembered by
older Topekans. On the 2nd and 3rd floors are 12 five room apartments, notable for their built-in bookcases, beneath an arch, which separates the kitchen from the living room. Most have original light fixtures and some French doors opening onto balconies. Given HTI Preservation Award in 1992.

**GAGE-GRISWOLD RESIDENCE,** 1031 Fillmore (1886). An example of a central city Victorian home converted into apartments, it is a classic Queen Anne style house possessing decorative siding, an "eyebrow" dormer, and ornate interior woodwork. At the turn-of-the-century this was the home of Josiah P. Griswold, President of the Shawnee Milling Co. and a promoter of the street railway system and the Edison Electric Co., a predecessor of KP&L. Too, he was the step-father of sculptor Robert Merrell Gage who created in the backyard barn (razed) the "Seated Lincoln" for the Kansas Statehouse grounds. Sometime during the 1940s owners converted it into a multifamily dwelling, but in recent years it has been well maintained and preserved, receiving the HTI Preservation Award in 1990.

**THE DEVON,** 12th & Taylor (1887 & 1906). Topeka contractor Henry Bennett built the first "apartment" house on this site in 1887-8, calling it "Bennett's Flats." Then in 1906 prominent attorney and businessman James W. Gleed remodeled it, among other alterations changing the attic into a full 3rd floor and refacing the facade into its present Prairie Style character of broad horizontal lines and arched openings. Each of the some 20 apartments are unique, some with pocket or French doors, plus hardwood floors and distinctive wood trim and moldings; open staircases "spiral" to the top floor. On ground level, a market occupied the southwest corner until the mid 1980s and on the southeast corner a drugstore from 1906 to 1959. In the latter space, today the Cafe' Holliday looks out onto verdant Holliday Park--The Devon, a distinct landmark in a distinct, historic neighborhood adjacent to downtown.

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN TOPEKA**

The Shawnee County Historical Society seeks to promote the preservation of Topeka's historic neighborhoods, buildings and sites through education and advocacy. Volunteers have rallied to save countless historic properties in the city, and have sponsored special events, publications, tours, lectures, preservation awards, and fundraising for projects such as the restoration of the 1880 Ross Rowhouses, acquired by Historic Topeka, Inc. in 1993. HTI merged with the Shawnee County Historical Society in 2003.

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