

# WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## **Lost Stillwater**

Stillwater is a town that has a lot of pride in its historic buildings. The commercial district of town is on the National Register of Historic Places and the citizens are proud of that. It was a great thing that the "Urban Renewal" of the 1960s didn't take all the majestic buildings from the skyline of Stillwater, but it did take a few.

Today, the most talked about building that is no more in Stillwater is the Union Depot. Built in 1887, and opened with a grand celebration in early 1888, the depot was the most impressive building downtown Stillwater for decades. Designed by Chicago architects Edward Burling and Francis M. Whitehouse, the depot was constructed by local contractor L.W. Eldred.

Passenger service from the Union Depot ended in 1927, but the Northern Pacific Railway operated a ticket office in the building until 1954. A restaurant was operated in the depot for many years. Morey Crotto took over the restaurant in June 1932 calling it the Depot Café, which continued until 1955.

The old depot was purchased by Russell Gilbert in February 1955 and used for his new company called United Fabricators and Electronics, UFE, which made radio and television parts. Gilbert sold the depot in 1959 to the Hooley's who, in turn, torn the old building down in March 1960 to build the Hooley Supermarket.

The Hersey & Staples block that was located on the corner of Myrtle and Main Street, where Stillwater Antiques is now and formerly the Cosmopolitan Bank, was constructed in 1871. In the Stillwater Messenger of June 2, 1871, there was a sizable article about the construction of this building. The building was to be "50 feet on Main Street, and 125 on Myrtle Street, it will be three stories in height, with a basement, The building will be built of Stillwater stone, with the corners, window and door caps and trimmings of Lake Superior stone, which is of the same quality as that of the Milwaukee Court House. The front at the top of the building will have an exceedingly neat attractive appearance."

On the first floor of this new building would be two large rooms fronting Main Street, one of which was already to be used by the Lumberman's National Bank. There were also two offices for rent on the Myrtle Street side. A center staircase led to the second floor where there were two large offices fronting Main and four offices fronting Myrtle Street.

The third floor was originally a large open room, 50 X 120 feet with 15-foot high ceilings, perfect for a lodge or a fraternal organization.

Over the years there was a dry goods store, groceries, a bakery, and of course, the bank occupying one of Stillwater's most beautiful buildings. The Lumberman's National Bank later became the Cosmopolitan Bank. In 1967, the bank officials decided it wanted a more modern "log-cabin type of building" in which to do business. So the decision was made to raze the nearly 100-year old building and construct something else.

In September 1967, Bolander & Sons of Minneapolis started the demolition of the old Hersey & Staples block. It took until early the next year to complete and clean up the site. The local company of George W. Olsen Company constructed the present building. The architects were Kilstofe & Vosejka, Inc. of Wayzata and the new Cosmopolitan Bank was opened in the spring of 1968.

Another outstanding building in downtown Stillwater that is no more was the Auditorium Theatre on South Second Street.

The plans for the Auditorium were drawn by the firm of Kinney & Detweiler of Minneapolis and the local construction firm of O.H. Olsen was the company to build it. The grand opening of the Auditorium took place on January 27, 1906 when the comedy play of "Piff, Paff, Pouf" took the stage.

In 1919 the first motion picture was shown at the Auditorium. It was a 10-reel version of "Shepherd of the Hills," and from then on movies could be seen at the theatre. During July 1939, the theatre was closed for two days while a new sound system was installed.

As time went on, the building began to show its age. By the early 1970s, structural problems along with declining attendance made it hard to keep the building open. Though many people tried very hard to keep the Auditorium going [there was even a plan to make it into an evangelism center] the condition of the building made its closing inevitable.

The headline of the November 10, 1976 issue of the Stillwater Gazette said it all: "Auditorium Theatre to be Razed." The Battle Wrecking Company of Minneapolis was to begin demolition of the building on November 13 and be completed by the week of November 28<sup>th</sup>.

There were other buildings that fell to the wrecking ball such as the Mower and Torinus block and the little white building on North Main Street that was Morey's Café.

Stillwater did well on preserving much of its heritage, but like everywhere else, some of Stillwater was lost forever.

*Brent Peterson is the executive director of the Washington County Historical Society. For more information, please visit [www.wchsmn.org](http://www.wchsmn.org).*

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