

MICHIGAN AVENUE BETWEEN 20TH STREET AND
VINEWOOD · DETROIT, MICHIGAN

A History of Place

The German Commercial Corridor of Detroit's West Side

This stretch of Michigan Avenue from 20th Street to Vinewood is part of the Michigan Avenue Historic Commercial District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2020.

The Road Before the City

Long before Detroit had a grid, it had a trail. The ancient Sauk Trail — worn into the earth over centuries by Indigenous travelers moving between the Great Lakes and the interior of the continent — ran along what would become Michigan Avenue. When the city of Detroit was replatted after the fire of 1805, its chief surveyor Augustus Woodward laid five great radial avenues across the new plan, and Michigan Avenue followed the ancient trail's path westward, becoming the city's primary artery toward the interior of the state and, eventually, toward Chicago.

By the 1820s and 1830s, European immigrants were already moving along Michigan Avenue's corridor. The Brevoort Farm — whose lands would eventually be subdivided into the lots on which this commercial district stands — occupied the territory between the avenue and the Michigan Central Railroad tracks to the south, part of the great agricultural landscape that surrounded the young city before industry arrived to transform it.

The Michigan Central Railroad itself followed the same diagonal logic as the avenue, its tracks threading through the Brevoort Farm lands in the 1830s and 1840s, connecting Detroit to Chicago and making the corridor one of the most consequential transportation routes in the American Midwest. The railroad and the avenue together would determine the shape of everything that followed.

The Irish Foundation: Corktown

The first great immigrant wave to define this section of the west side was Irish. Fleeing the catastrophic potato famine of the 1840s, Irish immigrants — most from County Cork — settled the near west side of Detroit in such numbers that the neighborhood took their name. Corktown, Detroit’s oldest surviving neighborhood, grew along Michigan Avenue east of this district, anchored by Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church and bounded roughly by Third Street to the east and 12th Street to the west.

By the early 1850s, half the population of the 8th Ward was of Irish descent. They built modest workingmen’s cottages on 25-foot lots — the same lot dimensions that define the buildings of this commercial district today — and established the churches, saloons, and small businesses of a community intent on staying. The Michigan Avenue streetcar, horse-drawn by the 1860s and electrified by the 1880s, ran the full length of the corridor, connecting Corktown to downtown Detroit and to the townships beyond.

Michigan Avenue’s first horse-drawn trolley cars appeared in November 1863. The electric streetcar that replaced them became the spine along which every subsequent generation of this neighborhood’s life would run.

The German Commercial District: 1870s – 1900

As the Irish population of Corktown grew more prosperous and dispersed through the city, a new wave arrived behind them. German immigrants had been coming to Detroit in significant numbers since the 1820s — the earliest from the Rhineland-Palatinate region of southwest Germany — and by the middle of the 19th century they had established a notable commercial and cultural presence on the east side of the city along Gratiot Avenue, in an area known informally as Germantown.

But as Detroit grew and pushed its boundaries westward, the German community extended beyond Corktown into the open land along Michigan Avenue between 20th and 24th Streets. This was the frontier of the city in the 1870s and 1880s: farmland being subdivided, lots being platted, brick buildings rising where crops had grown the decade before. The commercial heart of this new German neighborhood took shape

along Michigan Avenue between 22nd and 24th Streets, and by 1887 the district was already built up with primarily brick commercial buildings.

The businesses of those early years tell you everything about who lived here and what they needed. A wood and coal merchant. A carriage and wagon shop. A shoe store. A saloon. A butcher. A grocer. These were the essential services of a working neighborhood, provided by tradespeople who lived above their shops, walked to their work, and knew their customers by name. The 1887 Reeber Building and the 1889 Schulte and Kaiser Building — both still standing — date from this founding period of the district.

Detroit's German population established more than commerce along this corridor. They built social halls, choral societies, theaters, and churches. Saint Boniface Roman Catholic Church was founded in 1869 by Germans living west of downtown. The Harmonie Society — the preeminent German cultural institution in Detroit — drew architects, artists, merchants, and craftsmen into a common social world that expressed itself in the buildings they designed and the businesses they opened along this stretch of Michigan Avenue.

By 1897, the commercial district extended along both sides of Michigan Avenue, with buildings occupying all available lots. A physician at 952 Michigan Avenue sat conveniently one storefront from a druggist. Wall paper merchants, tailors, shoe dealers, grocers, and saloon keepers formed a dense, self-sufficient commercial village on the avenue.

Infrastructure & Urban Growth: 1890s

The 1890s brought the infrastructure of a modern city to Michigan Avenue. In the early part of the decade, Detroit upgraded wooden sewers to six-inch water pipes on Twenty-Third Street, eight-inch pipes on Twenty-Fourth Street, and twenty-four-inch service mains along Michigan Avenue itself. Tall electric towers were installed at intervals along the avenue to illuminate the street at night, allowing businesses to operate after dark and extending the commercial day in ways that had been impossible by gaslight.

The streetcar lines were electrified and running at thirty-second headways during peak hours, carrying factory workers, shoppers, and residents along a corridor that was simultaneously residential, commercial, and increasingly industrial as manufacturing moved into the blocks south of the avenue. The alley between Twenty-Third and Twenty-Fourth Streets between Michigan Avenue and the Michigan Central Railroad was formally opened by the city in 1904, signaling the intensification of land use that the automobile era was about to demand.

Western Market — established by Detroit's Common Council in 1891 at Michigan Avenue and 18th Street, the west-side counterpart of Eastern Market — anchored the commercial life of the district from its eastern edge. The market shed, serving as a wholesale food distribution hub where produce vendors set up from carts and trucks, drew shoppers from the surrounding neighborhoods and reinforced the avenue's role as the commercial spine of the west side.

The Automobile Age: 1900 – 1930

The first Ford automobile rolled through Detroit's streets in 1896. The Ford Motor Company was founded in 1903. Within fifteen years the city that Von Mach and Kastler and the Reeber brothers had built along Michigan Avenue was being transformed by forces none of them could have anticipated. Detroit's population doubled, then doubled again. By 1910 more than a third of the city's residents were foreign-born. The Michigan Central Station — the great Beaux-Arts terminal whose tower dominated the skyline west of downtown — opened in 1913 at Michigan Avenue and 15th Street, pouring workers and visitors into the corridor daily.

The automobile economy brought new waves of workers to the west side, and the commercial district responded. By 1929, the two-block stretch of Michigan Avenue that defines this district was still flourishing, housing a grocer, a jeweler, a movie house, a candy store, a bank, an interior decorator, and a furniture store. The Wolverine Theater brought motion pictures to the neighborhood. People's State Bank — its building still standing — served the financial needs of a community newly prosperous on factory wages.

Jazz arrived with the workers. The same industrial wages that drew hundreds of thousands of migrants from the American South and from eastern and southern Europe also created an audience with money to spend on Saturday nights. The Graystone Ballroom, Baker's Keyboard Lounge, the Flame Show Bar, and the clubs of Paradise Valley drew Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Art Tatum, Dinah Washington — and produced from Detroit's own community Tommy Flanagan, Kenny Burrell, Barry Harris, and Donald Byrd. The music that defined American culture in the 20th century ran on the same engine as the cars built in the factories south of Michigan Avenue.

Decline & the Long Patience: 1930 – 2000

The Depression arrived in 1929 and did not leave quickly. By 1940, vacancies had increased throughout the district as the economic catastrophe of the 1930s erased the prosperity that factory wages had built. A project in the mid-1930s to widen Michigan Avenue resulted in the loss of buildings on the north side of the avenue, leaving the south side — the section that survives today — as the most intact collection of commercial architecture on this stretch.

The postwar decades brought further erosion. By 1950, many of the local automotive factories had moved to larger, more modern plants, and the surrounding neighborhood began to lose population. Urban renewal schemes and highway construction — the Lodge Freeway to the east, the Fisher Freeway to the north — physically severed the neighborhood from the broader city, destroying hundreds of homes and displacing residents who had built their lives along these streets. Western Market was demolished in 1965 to make room for Interstate 75. By the late 1960s many buildings along the district were vacant.

But the buildings stood. The brick that German immigrant craftsmen laid in the 1880s and 1890s proved more durable than the economic forces arrayed against it. Through the decades of disinvestment, through the white flight and the factory closings and the population losses that defined Detroit's late 20th century, the two-block commercial district along Michigan Avenue between 22nd and 24th Streets held its bones together, waiting.

Recognition & Return: 2000 – Present

Detroit's return has been uneven, contested, and ongoing — but it is real. The Ford Motor Company's purchase and restoration of Michigan Central Station, reopened in 2023 after decades of abandonment, announced the revival of the corridor with unmistakable force. The Corktown neighborhood to the east, long the city's most resilient historic district, has drawn new investment, new businesses, and new residents while working to retain its working-class character and immigrant memory.

In 2020, the Michigan Avenue Historic Commercial District — the two-block stretch from 3301 to 3461 Michigan Avenue encompassing the core of the old German commercial neighborhood — was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The designation recognized what the buildings themselves had been saying for 130 years: that this is a place of genuine historical significance, built by immigrant craftsmen who understood that beauty and commerce were not opposites, and that a well-made building could outlast the economy that produced it.

While the Western Market was demolished for the freeway in 1965, the commercial district survives. The avenue's historic brick pavers — laid in the 1890s and preserved through decades of pressure to replace them — remain underfoot, a literal connection to the corridor's founding generation. The businesses opening along this stretch today join a lineage that runs from the wood and coal merchants of the 1880s through the saloons and grocers of the immigrant era, the jazz clubs of the automotive boom, and the neighborhood bars that held on through the long decades of decline.

The avenue that began as a trail, became a streetcar corridor, then an automotive spine, then a vacancy — is becoming something again. The question it has always asked is the same one its founders answered: what do people need, and who will provide it?

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Michigan Avenue Historic Commercial District

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, 2020

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