

Historic U.S. Main Street Revivals

A sampling of ten Main Street communities that have received the National Trust's Great American Main Street Award in recent years shows a variety of creative solutions to challenges that range from economic reversals to tornados and floods.

IRONICALLY, THE SUBURBAN shopping malls that trounced traditional downtown commercial districts starting in the 1960s are now emulating them, seeking to replicate the pedestrian-friendly qualities, architectural variety, and sense of authenticity that yesteryear's Main Streets offered.

In many cases, those traditional downtowns still have enough life and authenticity—if sometimes concealed beneath aluminum siding—to fuel revitalization. During the late 1970s, the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C.,

began creating a comprehensive revitalization strategy for downtowns seeking to bring back their central commercial districts.

Today, there are more than 1,200 active Main Street communities nationwide, each one headed up by a dedicated group that organizes revitalization efforts, implements promotional strategies, and works to enhance the downtown's overall appearance and strengthen the economic base. The National Trust Main Street Center reports that between 1980 and 2006, more than 2,050 communities collec-

tively achieved a net gain of nearly 70,000 businesses and 350,000 jobs, rehabilitating approximately 187,000 buildings in the process.

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BARRACKS ROW MAIN STREET

1. Barracks Row, Washington, D.C.

Barracks Row, also known as Eighth Street, S.E., is Washington, D.C.'s oldest commercial corridor, with one- to three-story brick buildings dating back to the early 1800s, when Thomas Jefferson designated it as a site for Marine barracks. After World War II, however, the area fell into decline, caused by suburban flight and exacerbated by the construction of the Southeast Freeway in 1962, a raised highway over Eighth Street. In the 1990s, the street's merchants banded together to turn the corridor around. The Shakespeare Theatre renovated and restored the abandoned Oddfellows Building. Extensive streetscape improvements followed. Between the formation of Barracks Row Main Street in 1999 and 2006, Barracks Row saw a net gain of 44 new businesses, \$20 million has been invested in the corridor, and now business is booming. The annual Barracks Row Fest brought 6,000 attendees last year.



2. Burlington, Iowa

Downtown Burlington is a case study in the power of “repurposing” historic structures. Downtown Partners, Inc., (DPI) became a Main Street program in 1986, working to revitalize a commercial core enervated by suburban shopping malls. The many rehabilitated historic structures include a 1906 hardware building that now houses a high-end restaurant with a patio overlooking the Mississippi River; the nine-story Hotel Burlington, built in 1911, which now serves as affordable housing for seniors; and the 1860s Old Stone Mill, transformed into an antiques mall. The old Schramm’s Department Store, which closed in 1997, contains small shops, loft apartments, and a business incubator run by DPI and the Small Business Development Center. Events keep downtown lively, from the weekly farmers market on the riverfront to the annual Snake Alley Criterium bicycle race.

JOHN GAINES/THE HAWK EYE

3. Encinitas, California

Once an important way station directly on Highway 101, downtown Encinitas suffered in the 1960s when Interstate 5 went up less than a mile away, siphoning off residential development, businesses, and retail. In 1988, the Downtown Encinitas Main Street Association formed to spur facade and streetscape improvements and organize street fairs. In 2001, restoring a long-disused 1920s sign bearing the town’s name and returning it to its prominent place over 101 created an icon for a branding initiative promoting Highway 101 communities. Historic treasures include a 1928 theater and an eye-catching 1930s service station. This year, the Encinitas Preservation Foundation formed to buy the city’s most-photographed icons, two 1920s houses built to resemble boats and constructed of recycled lumber. With new storefronts and residences, downtown brings back the cars, too, at its annual historic auto show.



DEMA



TOURISM COUNCIL OF FREDERICK COUNTY, INC.

4. Frederick, Maryland

In 1976, the flooding of Carroll Creek wreaked havoc on 100 acres (40.5 ha) of downtown Frederick, which was already reeling from the loss of its retail anchors to shopping malls. After corraling the creek with a major flood control project, the city found a new downtown anchor in a county courthouse. Downtown Frederick Partnership formed in 1990, securing state tax credits for facade improvements and encouraging rehabilitation of the downtown’s many historic buildings. The city also focused on culture; the arts council converted a former dime store into an arts center, and an 1895 mill now houses a visual arts education center offering classes and exhibits. The monthly First Saturday Gallery walk brings thousands to downtown’s art galleries, restaurants, and shops. Late Night Fridays keep streets alive and businesses open until 9 p.m. Antique stores and other local shops abound.

5. Lynchburg, Virginia

Floods deluged Lynchburg's historic downtown in 1985, nearly finishing off an already ailing commercial district. Lynch's Landing, named a Virginia Main Street program in 2000, worked with the city to attract new businesses and residential development. A long-vacant Civil War-era structure became an active children's museum, Amazement Square. The historic train depot reopened as a commercial building. After six years of work, Lynchburg's historic commercial district's real estate tax base tripled. At present, the 1905 Academy of Music Theater, where Sarah Bernhardt once played, is undergoing a major renovation. The once-destructive James River now sports a revitalized riverfront, home to Riverviews Artspace—a nonprofit organization that offers art exhibitions, film screenings, poetry readings, studio space, and classes—and Riverfront Festival Park, which hosts major concerts and festivals.



LYNCH'S LANDING INC.

6. Okmulgee, Oklahoma

Oil began pumping wealth into Okmulgee in 1907, giving rise to a downtown of great architectural grandeur. Then in the early 1980s, the oil refineries closed, major retailers fled, the population shrank dramatically, and fires razed several historic blocks. In 1986, Okmulgee Main Street started working to turn things around, encouraging historic preservation and rehabilitation with grants and low-interest loans. Key projects included the rehabilitation of a structure erected in 1878 as the capitol for the Muscogee Creek Nation, now a museum showcasing the history and artifacts of the Creek people. Okmulgee Main Street also played a crucial role in offering an incentive package that drew a regional department store downtown to serve as a catalyst. In the past 20 years, hundreds of downtown historic buildings have been rehabilitated.



CREEK COUNCIL HOUSE MUSEUM



DOWNTOWN PARSONS, INC.

7. Parsons, Kansas

During the 1960s, urban renewal efforts led to the demolition of historic buildings in downtown Parsons, which were replaced with a concrete pedestrian mall—complete with concrete gazebo. With automobile traffic cut off, retail had all but deserted downtown by the end of the 1990s. In 2000, a tornado hit hard, working its own kind of urban renewal: the next year, the state gave a \$2.16 million community development block grant to raze the damaged mall and initiate streetscape improvements. That same year saw the creation of Downtown Parsons Inc., a Main Street program offering financial assistance to businesses that moved downtown and administering low-interest loans to encourage facade improvements, the addition of second-story residences, and the rehabilitation of historic commercial buildings. Events such as the annual downtown Art Walk and Loft Tour help raise awareness that downtown Parsons is alive and kicking.



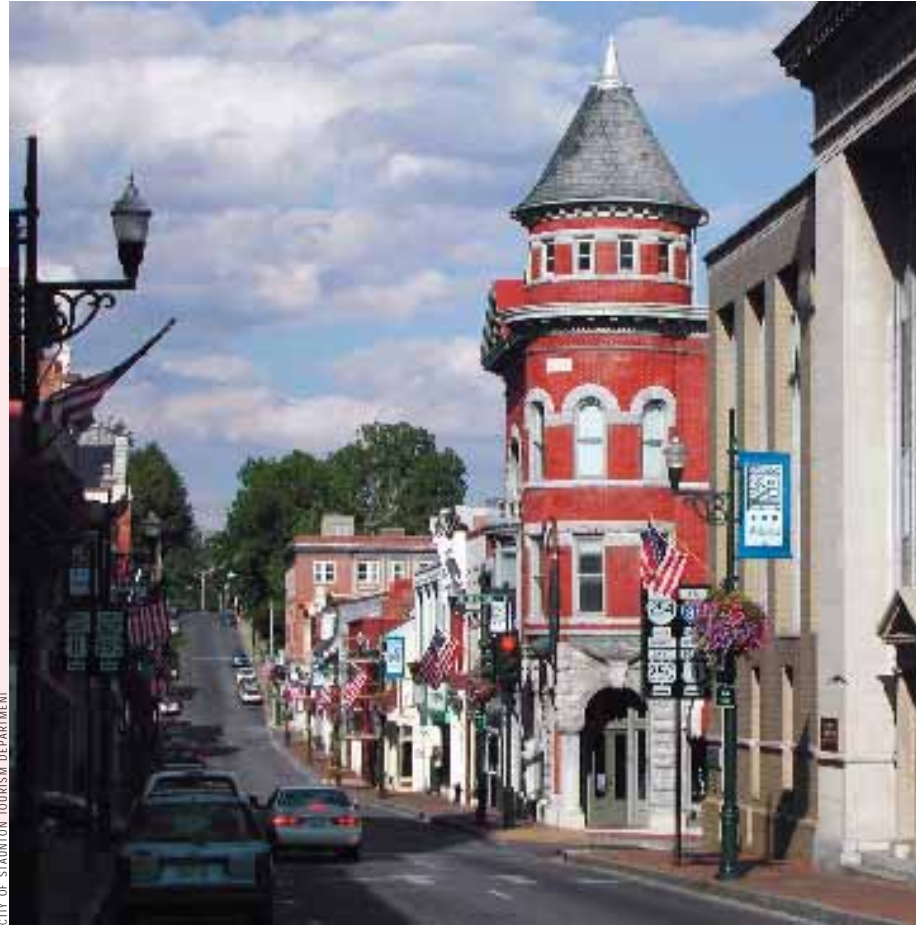
MAIN STREET ARKANSAS

8. Rogers, Arkansas

Just as the fortunes of Encinitas rose and fell with the highway, those of Rogers were linked to the railroad. Since 1881, the year the town was incorporated, its economy depended on the Frisco Railroad connecting St. Louis to San Francisco. After the glory days of rail ended, the town was left with historic buildings; the downtown's Walnut Street Historic District includes nearly two dozen structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Main Street Rogers formed in 1984, obtaining grants and coordinating resources and revitalization efforts. Community members spearheaded rehabilitation of a 1927 silent movie theater, now home to the Rogers Little Theater. An Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) grant funded the redevelopment of the Frisco Park and Trail, converting a depot site into a park hosting concerts and a twice-a-week farmers market. The four-day Frisco Festival draws tens of thousands of people each year.

9. Staunton, Virginia

The arrival of the Virginia Central Railroad in the 1850s transformed the town of Staunton into the region's commercial hub. But the decline of the downtown began during the 1950s and stretched into the early 1990s. The Staunton Downtown Development Association formed in 1993, creating a special taxing district, helping businesses with facade improvements, and coordinating private and public sector efforts. Fortunately, Staunton's many historic Victorian buildings survived the Civil War intact, and today they house shops, restaurants, and art galleries. A public/private partnership refurbished the 1924 Stonewall Jackson Hotel, one of the city's most prominent buildings, which reopened in 2005 as a 124-room hotel and conference center. Annual events such as the Staunton Music Festival attract big crowds, and retail stores get a boost from the free trolley service connecting downtown to the rest of the city.



CITY OF STAUNTON TOURISM DEPARTMENT



JOHN MARSHALL

10. Wenatchee, Washington

Since 1983, the Wenatchee Downtown Association (WDA) has been building on the downtown's heritage and emphasizing local specialty retailers to keep its commercial core vibrant despite an influx of big-box retail on the outskirts in the late 1990s. Streetscape improvements during the late 1980s uncovered historic building facades and made downtown more pedestrian friendly. Starting in 1995, the city began converting buildings in the derelict warehouse district into lofts and commercial space. The WDA's low-interest loan program helped businesses rehabilitate historic structures. This year, the WDA expanded its popular annual apple harvest festival—which reflects the municipality's historic role as a regional fruit distribution center—to highlight wineries as well, renaming the event "Taste of the Harvest."