

*Aerial view of Abilene, 1930-1940s. Photo provided by the Kansas Historical Society*

# Abilene Downtown Historic District

by James D. Holland, Sally Schwenk, and Kerry Davis

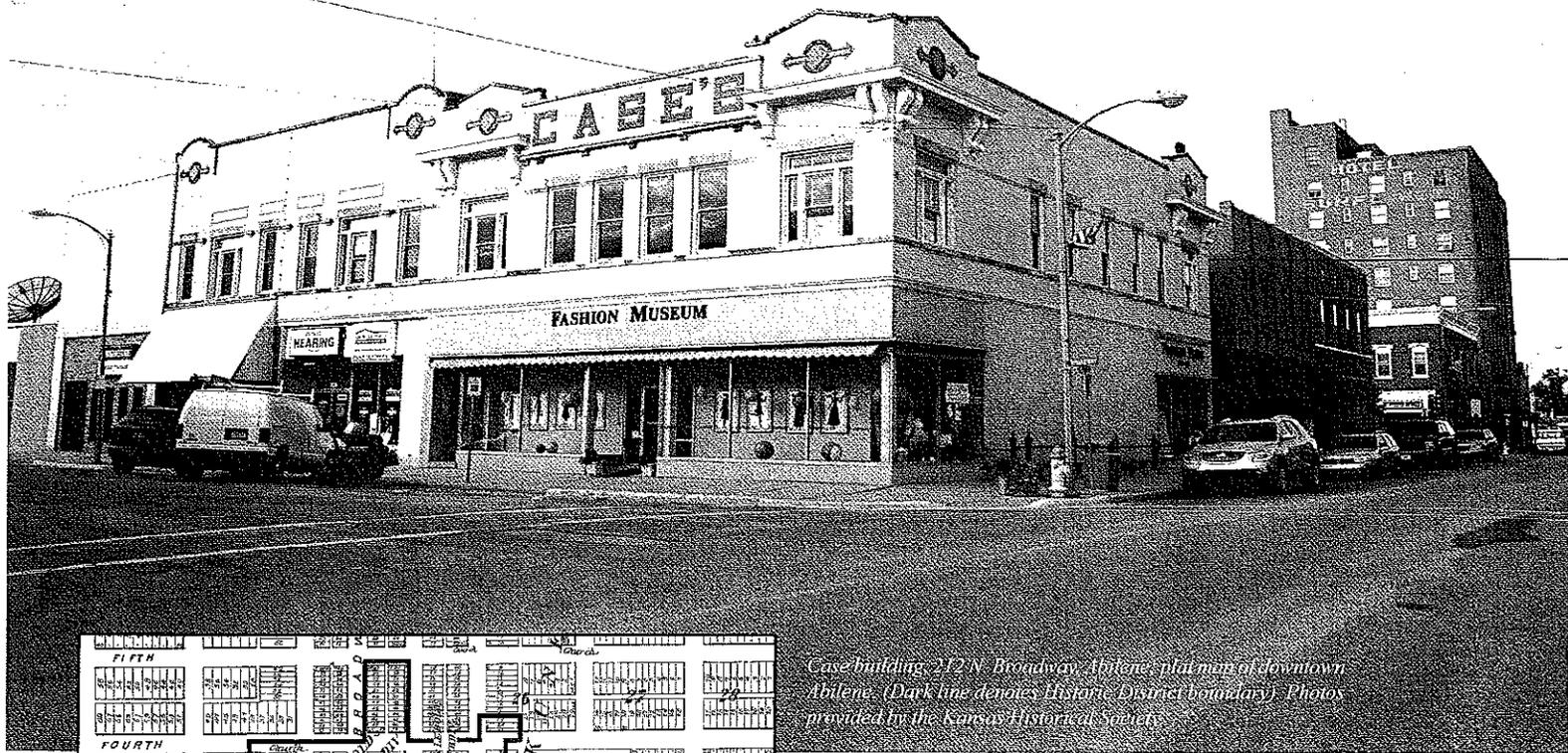
What do you think of when you hear the name “Abilene, Kansas?” The answer for most non-Kansans would probably be the Chisholm Trail and the rough and tumble Texas cattle drivers that spawned legendary saloons (The Pearl), hotels (Drovers’ Cottage), and frontier law enforcement (“Wild Bill” Hickok). Kansans are more likely to think of the boyhood home of President Dwight D. Eisenhower—the small Kansas community that shaped an international military hero and the 34th President of the United States. People near Abilene may invoke visions of a downtown with destination dining, high quality specialty shops, and retained historical architecture.

There is no right answer or single overriding theme to Abilene’s history; all contribute to the diversity of travelers visiting this Dickinson County community. Today, Abilene’s historic downtown reflects its distinct historical eras and development patterns. An inventory and National Register nomination of the Abilene Downtown Historic District recently documented this history. The project was partially funded by a 2008 Historic Preservation Fund Grant administered through the Kansas Historical Society.

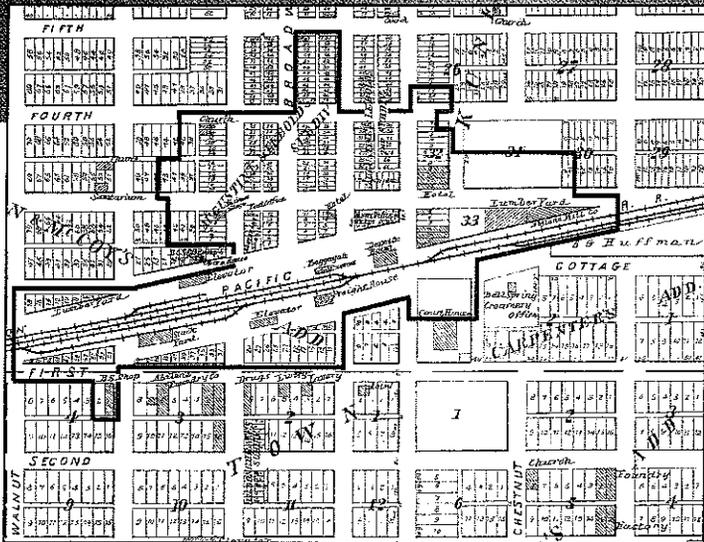
Abilene has not always touted or respected its rich history. Efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to present the appearance of an up-to-date city with historical traditions occurred as a result of the national interest in President Eisenhower’s hometown. The City organized to make the most of its enviable position by telling the Eisenhower story through new attractions and modernization.

These activities, in turn, stimulated a group to capitalize on the Texas cattle drive years through recreation at Old Abilene Town.

Despite these efforts, by the early 1980s many of the grand historic homes and downtown commercial buildings were underused and in general disrepair, reflecting regional economics, apathy, and disinvestments. However, by the middle of the decade, a strong preservation ethic emerged. Brothers Terry and Jerry Tietjens brought dreams of preserving the Seelye Mansion as a tour home. Merle Vahsholtz began preservation work on the Lebold Mansion and Lynda Scheele became a strong advocate for preservation and founded the Abilene Heritage Homes Association. By the end of the 20th Century, Abilene’s preservation movement developed into an institutionalized function of the community. In 1997, the City Commission adopted a preservation ordinance and appointed a heritage commission to administer the ordinance and



*Case building, 212 N. Broadway, Abilene; plat map of downtown Abilene. (Dark line denotes Historic District boundary). Photos provided by the Kansas Historical Society.*



be an advocacy group for preservation. On June 30, 1997, Abilene became a Certified Local Government (CLG) as part of a national and state program providing training and funding opportunities. Currently there are 19 properties, 3 districts, and 1 National Historic Landmark listed in the National Register of Historic Places within the city of Abilene.

These efforts were not able to save all of Abilene's significant resources. Two properties with associations to Eisenhower were demolished. In 1999 the Plaza Theater building in downtown Abilene collapsed due to neglect and in 1998 the Belle Springs Creamery, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, was demolished before it collapsed. These and other losses scarred downtown Abilene and are a reminder that the preservation of historic buildings is necessary to save tangible reminders of a community's history and promote a unique sense of place — a vibrant, viable downtown.

An early goal of establishing an Abilene Downtown National Register Historic District remained elusive until the heritage commission proposed the project and the City Commission agreed to provide matching funds for the grant. While the City Commission expressed support for preservation, securing municipal funding hinged on two issues: property owner support and the economic benefits of establishing the district. Although proponents did not

contact every property owner in the study area individually to discuss the project, more than a majority of the study area owners endorsed a statement of support. Signatures collected from 75% of the property owners showed that 81% of the signers were in favor of the project. Several public workshops on the federal and state historic preservation tax credit programs presented by the State Historic Preservation Office's staff served as a primer for both property owners and city officials. When historic tax credit incentives are combined with the local Neighborhood Revitalization Property Tax Rebate program, the feasibility and benefits of investing to save significant aging structures and make reuse of these buildings becomes apparent.

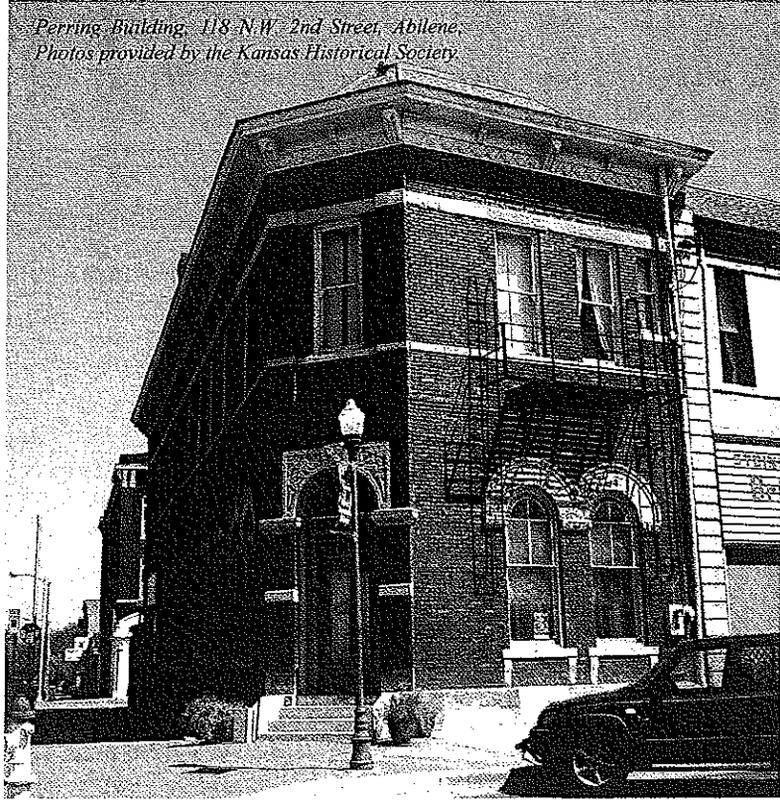
#### Commercial Significance

The origin of Abilene's central business district can be traced back to the westward expansion associated with the evolution of the transcontinental railroad after the Civil War. The first permanent settler, Timothy Hersey, settled near a natural low-water crossing on the banks of Mud Creek about a mile from where it entered the Smoky Hill River. During the years when Kansas was a territory, frequent travel on the Smoky Hill and Military Road brought many travelers to the Hersey doorstep. The rugged pioneer soon saw the benefit of developing a town site and selling off lots to entrepreneurs keen on making their fortunes in the West.

One such fortune seeker was Joseph G. McCoy, who sought a location to join the Texas Longhorn cattle trails with eastern rail connections. He established his site in Abilene and in 1867, the first longhorn cattle arrived in Abilene to be sold to buyers from eastern markets. A community quickly formed on Hersey's original town plat. Within a few short years, however, the cattle trade moved farther west and many of the town's frame buildings were dismantled and moved by train to the next railhead. A "new" Abilene grew up near the original town, north of the railroad tracks.

Located in Grant Township in Dickinson County, Abilene's role in the 1860s as the county seat and as the railhead for the Chisholm

*Ferring Building, 118 N.W. 2nd Street, Abilene. Photos provided by the Kansas Historical Society.*



railroad market centers. Here as in other Midwestern market centers, the arrangement of the railroad grade dictated the location and arrangement of industrial buildings, commercial business houses, and residential neighborhoods, visually defining Abilene's built environment.

### **Architectural Significance**

The Abilene Downtown Historic District also derives its significance from being a contiguous and unified entity, composed of a wide variety of architectural and functional resources. These resources represent the spectrum of building technology, design, stylistic features, form, and function that define the history of Abilene's downtown commercial center.

Dating from the 1860s through the mid-20th Century, most of the buildings found in the Abilene Downtown Historic District are simple load-bearing brick or limestone commercial buildings of one to three stories. The traditional building materials are red or buff brick and limestone. Approximately one-third of these buildings exhibit popular architectural styles from the period of their construction including Italianate, Gothic Revival, Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals, Classical Revival, Art Deco, Mission Revival, and Modern Movement styles. Other contributing resources include simple vernacular designs with various, and sometimes subtle, stylistic references, which retain architectural features and physical forms that reflect the then—popular design trends.

The District also includes four significant structures—three-grain elevators and the historic railroad alignment. The industrial and railroad freight buildings and structures are at the edge of the downtown retail area adjacent to and within the railroad right-of-way. Their design and materials are function-specific. Their builders utilized both traditional and new construction techniques and materials in a variety of combinations to create efficient, fireproof, functional space. Identified by their plan, size, and materials—brick, stone, tile, corrugated metal, and/or concrete construction—the vast majority of these buildings do not reference any architectural styles. Their period of construction, however, played an important role in the choice of plan, materials, and methods of construction.

Abilene's central business district is a unique assemblage of buildings and structures built by early pioneering bankers, land agents, and entrepreneurs who staked their future on the rapidly growing "new" town north of the Union Pacific rail lines. Joining these efforts in the 20th Century were town leaders, business owners,

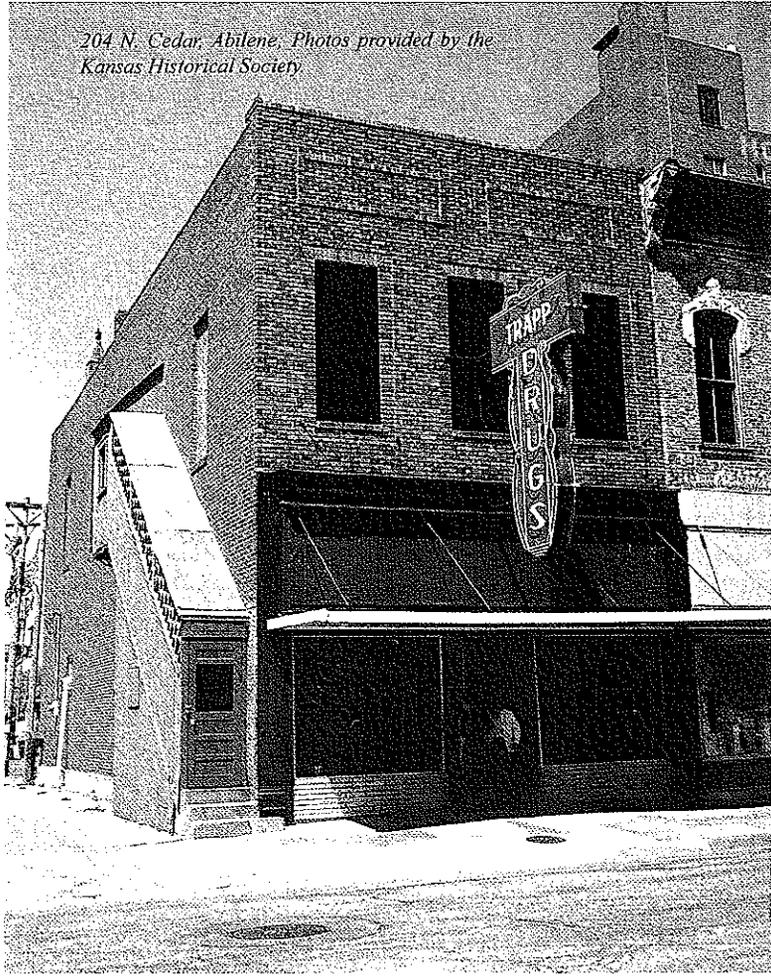
Trail grew in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries to that of a major agricultural market center in the state. The Abilene Downtown Historic District reflects the role of Abilene as an important commercial center during an era in which America became a major economic power as the result of the expanding railroad system and the enormous growth of its population. This period created national markets for the agricultural products of the region. Abilene's railroad freight depot and yards received what farmers harvested and stockmen raised in the surrounding area—livestock, grain, fruits—passed them on or processed them into products people needed locally, or for an additional fee, shipped them to competitive markets outside the region. At the same time, the city's business concerns received manufactured and processed goods from the East, stored them (for a fee), and reallocated them (for a fee) to markets in the region and farther west. Today, the District serves as a tangible reminder of the importance of organized public and private entrepreneurship that enabled Abilene to compete with a regional network of villages, towns, and cities, and to attract and dominate investment. The individuality and evolution of the retail stores, offices, banks, and hotels; the courthouse and city hall; the special use institutional, manufacturing, and processing facilities; warehouses and wholesale houses; and railroad freight and passenger-related buildings and structures gave Abilene's downtown and the community itself its unique collective image.

The 45-acre Abilene Downtown Historic District encompasses the city's largest intact grouping of the historic commercial, institutional, industrial, and railroad-related resources and comprises 123 resources constructed circa 1867 to circa 1960 that include 75 contributing buildings, 4 contributing structures, 9 National Register listed buildings, and 35 non-contributing buildings. Where once they shared the same distinctive characteristics with many buildings of their time; today many of these resources are important as lone survivors of their period of construction, functional, and/or architectural property type. Today as in the past, the District reflects the dense urban configuration typical of late 19th and early 20th Century commercial areas in rural

*300 N. Broadway, Abilene. Photos provided by the Kansas Historical Society.*

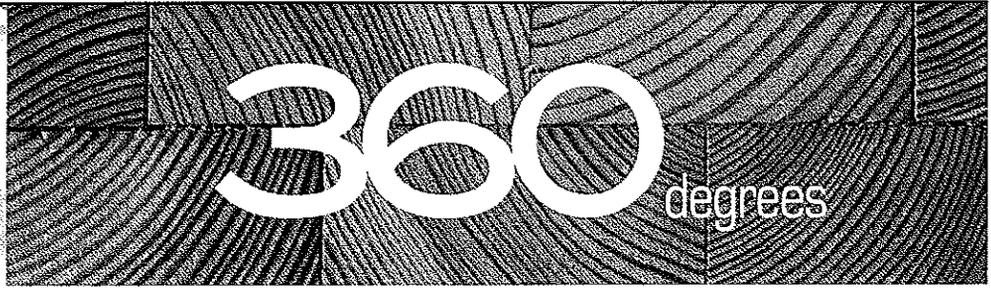


204 N. Cedar, Abilene. Photos provided by the Kansas Historical Society



and professionals influenced by the City Beautiful Movement who added early 20th Century Revival-style civic buildings and businesses to the mixture of 19th Century Victorian era architecture. The most dramatic change to the downtown came in the 1950s with the construction of a sleek Modern Movement-style courthouse erected on the site of the historic county courthouse. Throughout both centuries, towering grain elevators and mills dominated and delineated the commercial center's boundaries. Despite two world wars and the Great Depression, Abilene's singular business district remained downtown, centered in the historical grid of streets anchored by the Union Pacific rail lines on the south and the city hall, library, and fire department complex on the north. To recognize nomination of Abilene's Downtown Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places is a crucial step in protecting one of the state's most storied railroad towns for future generations.

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