

A Tour Of Helena's West Main Street Historic District

West Main Neighborhood

Several factors set this district apart from other modest Helena neighborhoods and give it a distinct character. The proximity of small-time mining originally attracted early residents. Virtually all the homes were built on mining claims, and most residents continued to dabble in placer mining literally in their backyards. The topography lent itself very well to the practice of building into the hillside, a feature not found as extensively elsewhere in Helena. The close proximity of several breweries and Helena's first lime kiln industry, vital to the early building of the town, add to the district's individuality. Finally, the number of immigrant settlers and their children who remained close by as adults—sometimes to the third and fourth generations, as was the norm in the Old World—further enhances the district's distinctive personality. All these factors that define the West Main neighborhood also define early Helena: mining, booming industries (lime burning, breweries, fuel, and livery), and an influx of immigrant settlers. The area was also close enough to town to accommodate the many service providers who populated the neighborhood.



Helena 1865

As shown on the map, the Helena West Main Street Historic District boundaries begin in the second half of the 500 block of West Main Street and terminate at the lime kilns. Properties that lie within the district but do not contribute are not interpreted. Information on a few important properties and sites just north of the historic district have been included in this brochure but do not appear on the map.

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Montana Historical Society

562 West Main

On this site in the 1880s, miner Conrad Reiss and his wife built their home. Reiss, a German immigrant, married neighbor Katherine Fowler in 1884. Katherine's parents, August and Louisa Fowler, also came from Germany. In 1866, the Fowlers opened Helena's first meat market, located near the Union Brewery. Reiss was a placer miner first, but at various times was also a carpenter, janitor, and bartender. He died in 1936 and Katherine in 1939. Little remains of the Reiss home, but portions of the stone walls are still standing.

573 West Main

Malcolm D. Boardman bought this property from Emil Kluge in October 1887. City directories show Boardman first living at this address in 1889. A house carpenter, Boardman spent the remainder of his life at this residence. He never married and died on October 22, 1912, at the age of 80. The home is a good example of a side-gabled log dwelling that has kept its original detail intact.

574 West Main

The core of this home dates to circa 1877. The arched windows are typical of Helena during this time period. A stone room or "root cellar" at the back of the residence is a feature common to this side of West Main Street. Although stucco now covers the walls, the windows and floor plan remain in their original configurations. Benjamin and Anna Benson were typical of early West Main residents who settled here and remained for many years. As were many West Mainers, the Bensons were of German extraction and initially came to Helena to mine. Benjamin, a hard worker and good provider, mined well into his 70s and was involved in one of Helena's early water companies. Anna Benson likely planted the ancient lilac hedge that borders the yard.



585 West Main

Emil Kluge sold this property to Thomas Nagle, who worked for Joseph O'Neill at the lime kilns. The house, important for its association with the lime kilns, was built circa 1887 and is typical of worker's cottage of simple design and no ornamentation. Louis Freeze, who later lived next door, bought the residence for use as a rental.

589 West Main

Louis and Johann Freeze occupied this house between 1895 and 1926. The Freezes came to the United States from Scandinavia in 1889 and to Helena about 1893. Louis, a laborer, poured the concrete walls and steps that characterize both this property and 595 West Main. A fire in 1969 damaged the home's interior. According to the late Gus Beaver, longtime next-door neighbor, the house is built around a log cabin core. It was the home of a working-class family and provides an interesting conglomeration of different building materials and periods. Like most West Main residences, it is built into the hillside, making maximum use of the natural landscape.

595 West Main

Also built into the hillside, this gable-front-and-wing style home dates to circa 1893. By 1908, it was home to Lawrence and Amanda (Olsson) Beaver. Lawrence (see also 696 West Main) worked as a blacksmith until an explosion at Marysville in the 1910s incapacitated him. Amanda, who came to the United States in 1902, left a comfortable life in Sweden where, according to the family, her father was the king's veterinarian. Amanda struggled to raise their six children, working as a housekeeper and taking in laundry. Amanda's son, Gus, born and raised here, remained in the home until his death in spring 2004. The dwelling and its barn strongly reflect the working-class character of the West Main neighborhood.

599 West Main

An exemplary American foursquare dwelling, Emil Kluge owned the property when this home was built in 1888. By 1898, it was home to James and Mary McKelvey. James was owner of the lime kilns at the end of the gulch. When the kilns shut down in 1910, Irish-born McKelvey became custodian at the Capitol, a job he retained until 1930.

610 West Main

Joseph O'Neill owned this property when the gable-front house was constructed circa 1885. In 1889, German immigrant Flora Schopfer bought the home. Flora was a midwife and her husband, John, was a cooper and carpenter. There are traces of foundations, evidence of early outbuildings, scattered about the property.

620 West Main

Built of square hewn logs with notched corners, this fine log dwelling was one of six log buildings on this site. A blacksmith shop and two stables were also on the premises, all dating to the mid-1880s. William and Margaret Fenn filed claim on the land in 1889. Fenn was a boilermaker by trade, but the many buildings on his property are evidence of the self-sufficiency of West Main residents.

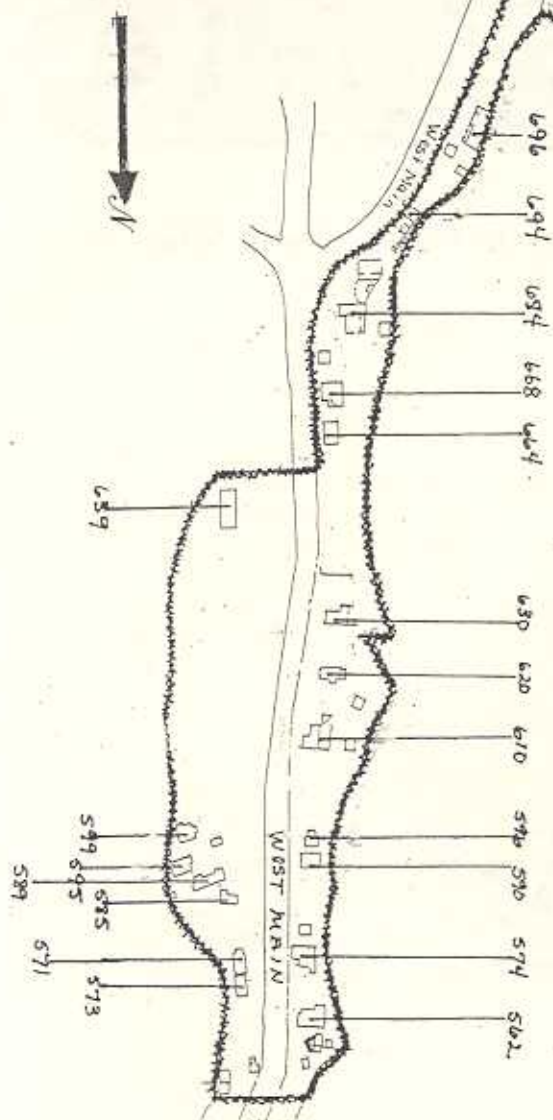
630 West Main

Joseph O'Neill was the first owner of the Grizzly Gulch lime kilns and played a significant role in early territorial transportation, freighting heavy machinery, including the first boiler that came through the Mullan Tunnel. Joseph and Eliza Phyllis O'Neill built this home circa 1875 and were among West Main's earliest permanent settlers. The house has had virtually no major alterations. The remnant stone walls to the south are all that remain of O'Neill's once-essential livery and transfer business. O'Neill stored his carriages, hacks, and equipment on the property and stabled his best teams here, too. In the 1880s, O'Neill's horse-drawn trolleys ferried the first passengers between the Northern Pacific depot and downtown. The fare was 10 cents.

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The West Main Historic District Boundaries



Jon Axline and Ellen Baumler conducted the survey, prepared the property inventories, and authored the National Register nomination for the City of Helena in 1995. These are on file at the State Historic Preservation Office, 1410 8th Avenue in Helena. This brochure has been prepared by the Montana Historical Society, 2004.

668 West Main

Henry Hay, Sr. (see below) was the original owner of this homestead. The side-gable house dates to circa 1880. The outline of the original porch is evident on the façade. The miner's log cabin of V-notched, square and round logs is of an earlier date, perhaps pre-1870. The Hays' son, Henry, Jr., brought his bride Minnie to live in the main house in 1899. Henry was born in Illinois in 1865 and came west with his parents. Henry, Jr., served Helena as jailor, then deputy sheriff, and was with the special police force when he died in 1918.

684 West Main

English immigrants Frances and Henry Hay came to Helena in 1866 or 1867. With the O'Neills, they were among West Main's first permanent residents. Their log cabin became the center of the present residence, built circa 1870. They had six sons. Henry, along with neighbors Poad and Benson, owned the water rights in this part of town, extending from here to Reeder's Alley. Their company sold the water rights to the City of Helena in 1888. Hay mined a claim and ran a fuel business, supplying Helena residents with firewood. The Hays kept a watering trough out front for the teams of horses passing by. They kept dairy cows in the barn and used the shed behind the house as a creamery. The present kitchen incorporates the original cabin; behind its plastered walls are brick veneer and then log. Although the house has been remodeled, the property as a whole is important to the district, illustrating the family industries that subsidized less profitable mining claims.

696 West Main

Neil McKelvey and his brother, James (who lived at 599 West Main), operated the nearby lime kilns. In 1891, Neil married Delia who arrived in Helena in 1888 from County Gallway in Ireland. Neil died of pneumonia in 1899, leaving four small children. Delia took in three lodgers for income. In 1908, she married Thomas Beaver. Thomas, like his brother Lawrence (see 595 West Main), was a miner and a traveling blacksmith. The family changed their name to Beaver, choosing the name because of the significance of that animal to the family clan, but Thomas still sometimes used his given name, Knudsen. Thomas adopted Delia's children, and the Beavers lived in Delia's house until her death in March 1938. Helena residents long remembered Delia for her sharp Irish wit and rich brogue.

933-639 West Main—Site of the Union Brewery

The brewery established on this site was conveniently located on the bank of the creek that ran alongside the road at this section of West Main. Like the Helena Brewery at the north end of West Main, this was an extensive industrial site. It included a horse-powered malt mill, beer kettles and coolers, fermenting cellar, and malt storage. The extensive corrals indicate the plant's reliance upon horse-powered machinery whereas the Helena Brewery was equipped with an engine room. Today all traces are gone, but the brewery operated until at least 1900.

Properties North of the West Main Boundaries

440 South Park, Tatem House (Hair Hair Salon)

Charles Hendrie opened Helena's first iron foundry on this site before 1868. The property's third owner, Benjamin Tatem, built this two-story residence circa 1875. Wide eaves, low-hipped roof, and tall arched windows are Italianate influences and accurately convey the original appearance of this well-preserved early home. By 1884, Tatem had located his iron works, one of two in Helena, across the street to the north side of the Helena Brewery. His stamp can still be found on the lovely ironwork gracing many of Helena's nineteenth-century buildings. This property lies within the Helena Historic District.

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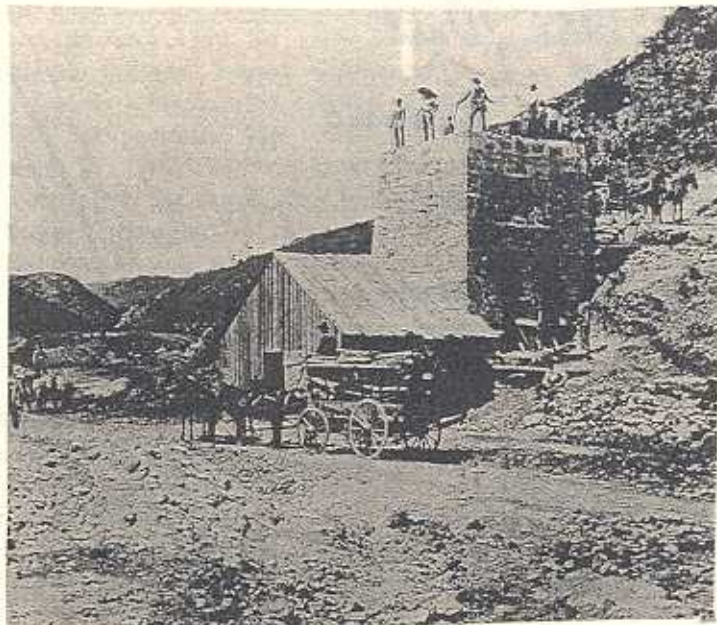
447 S. Park - Site of the Helena Brewery

Founded in 1865, this huge complex eventually included a four-story stone and wood building that housed a beer cellar, icehouse, fermenting vats, and coolers. Originally water from the creek ran through, but by the 1880s, the 600-gallon water tank was filled from the City Water Works. There was also an engine room, bottling plant, malt mill, and malt kiln. Later known as the Capital Brewing & Malting Co., the brewery by 1910 had been converted to the Artificial Ice Company. The facility was later used as a theater—the forerunner of Grandstreet—before it was razed in the 1970s. Apartments and condominiums now occupy the site.



540 West Main, Emil Kluge House

Rare European half-timber construction illustrates how pioneer buildings reflected cultural traditions. After distinguished service in two wars, German-born Emil Kluge came to the United States in 1871. Kluge, his wife, and small son arrived in Helena in 1873 where Kluge mined unprofitably, but he became one of Helena's first policemen and served as constable, street commissioner, and justice of the peace. He also ran contracting and quarry businesses, and later was well known as secretary of the Masonic bodies of Montana. Kluge brought his family to live in an 1860s cabin of hewn square logs. Salvaging timbers from a nearby abandoned flume, Kluge added the half-timbered upper story using a technique he learned in his native Prussia. It is one of only several such examples in the United States. Later abandoned, it was stripped by vandals and nearly burned down by vagrants. Known as "the Maverick" because it stood alone, federal funding allowed restoration in the early 1970s. This property is independently listed in the National Register.



Grizzly Gulch Lime Kilns

Lime manufacture was an essential industry for building in brick and stone in the nineteenth century. The Grizzly Gulch outcrops and the kilns below them supplied the entire region with lime of the highest quality. Joseph O'Neill built the first of these kilns in the late 1860s. Hewn timbers, hand-forged metal braces, and finely laid fire brick shipped from the East illustrate the kilns' sturdy construction. Workers blasted or quarried the limestone out of the hills behind, conveyed the rocks on handcars to the kilns or tumbled them down the embankment, and dumped them into the tops of the chimneys. Pine fires in the furnace beneath burned constantly. After several days, workers shoveled the powdered lime into the cooling shed adjacent the kiln, and teamsters hauled it to building sites. Each kiln could produce some twenty tons of lime every eight hours. James McKelvey later leased and then owned the kilns, supplying the mortar for the construction of the State Capitol. Lack of railroad access eventually forced closure circa 1910, although one kiln operated again briefly in the 1930s.

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