



# HISTORIC KENOSHA

## Civic Center Historic District

The Kenosha Civic Center Historic District is significant because it was the culmination of two movements of city reform during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: the movement to physically improve the city and the movement to politically reform the city. It represents a significant event in the history of community planning development in Kenosha and in Wisconsin. The Kenosha Civic Center was designed to be a unit and most of the buildings are well maintained and have retained most of their original appearance. Most of the buildings were built for a public purpose, but the district, as described in this brochure, also includes some intended for private use.

One Kenosha historian believes the Civic Center development story began with a speech entitled “The Town Beautiful” given in 1905 by Mrs. George A. Yule, wife of a prominent industrialist. In this speech, she advocated clean streets, better architecture in the community, more landscaping, and more parks, sparking a “City Beautiful” reform movement in Kenosha. The “City Beautiful” movement specifically called for improvements in public architecture and the addition of monuments, arches, and statues in public spaces to instruct citizens in the importance of civic virtue.

The second component in the development of Kenosha’s Civic Center was the political reform movement that began in 1906 with the organization of the Civic Federation. This group was moderately successful in pushing reform in government, but it was after World War I that the movement for new city government and a new city plan reached fruition. In 1919, the city appropriated funds for city planning and in 1920 they appointed a city planning commission. One of the earliest ideas the new commission promoted was the building of a Civic Center where buildings intended for a public or “civic” use would be located close to each other. In 1922, Kenosha voters approved the city manager form of government, heralding an era of cooperation between the city council and manager resulting in the Civic Center and a comprehensive city plan. Prominent local industrialist, Walter Alford, was the president of the city council when it selected Clare Osborne as its first city manager. The city then hired Harland Bartholomew, a well known city planner from St. Louis, to prepare a comprehensive city plan. Bartholomew put his initial ideas on paper for the city in 1922 and submitted a more comprehensive plan in 1925. He saw the Civic Center as part of a larger development of the area between Eighth Avenue and the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad tracks along 13th Avenue. The completion of the four sides of the Civic Center took just over 10 years from the time it was officially envisioned in 1922 and the time the fourth building was placed around the plaza in 1933. An incredible amount of effort took place between several local governmental agencies, along with the federal government, to complete the Civic Center.

The architecture within the Civic Center Historic District is significant because it contains five fine and outstanding examples of Neo-Classical architecture, and because as a whole, the Civic Center is an exceptional example of early twentieth century civic architecture. Not only is the entire Civic Center significant for its use of the Neo-Classical Revival style, but the buildings are also fine individual examples of the style. Several architects contributed to the Civic Center. Architects for the Kenosha County Courthouse and Jail were Joseph Lindl, Charles Lesser, and Albert Schutte. Lindl, a Kenosha native, also designed the old Kenosha City Hall, the Eagles Club, the Danish Brotherhood Building, several churches, and a number of schools. Lesser was the architect for the Schlitz Brewing Company. Schutte was responsible for many residential designs in Milwaukee. James Knox Taylor was the federal architect responsible for the building which is currently the Dinosaur Discovery Museum, built originally as the U.S. Post Office at a location west of the current Post Office. John D. Chubb was the Chicago architect responsible for the old Kenosha High School. He was a specialist in designing schools and related buildings.

The old Kenosha High School (later named Mary D. Bradford High School and now Reuther Central High School) is important in local history because it is the only existing historic resource associated with the development of the high school program in Kenosha, the state’s first public high school program.

Many urban reformers advocated the establishment of Civic Centers, or public buildings in the Neo-Classical style sited around public green space, for their communities. But few cities actually developed full-fledged Civic Centers because the cost and coordination involved was prohibitive. The Kenosha Civic Center is an outstanding landmark of planning and coordination both in the city of Kenosha and the state of Wisconsin. The result is a truly efficient group of federal, county, and city civic buildings that serve the public in the way they were intended.

Did  
You  
Know?

Kenosha’s Electric Streetcar travels through the Civic Center Historic District. Log on to [www.VisitKenosha.com](http://www.VisitKenosha.com) for details about the streetcar and other nearby attractions.



**#1 UNITED STATES POST OFFICE**  
5605 Sheridan Road  
(1933) Neo-Classical Revival

The U.S. Post Office is a one-story Neo-Classical

Revival style building that, because of its high ceiling, resembles a two-story building. A prominent cornice decorated with modillions extends across the entire facade, defining a decorated parapet. Under the cornice is a frieze that is decorated with medallions and engraved with "United States of America" and "United States Post Office." The building has slightly projecting corners decorated by round-arched entrances flanked by shallow pilasters. The entrances have modern glass and metal doors topped with large multi-paned transoms. The slightly recessed central section of the front facade is accented by six groups of paired colossal Doric columns, with single Doric columns at the corners. Decoration on the building wraps around slightly to the side facades, but the remaining side walls are undecorated. A large modern addition joins the east wall.

The city convinced the federal government to build at the east end of the Civic Center. Although late for a Neo-Classical building, federal architect, George Daidy, designed the new post office in a style that complemented the courthouse and high school.



**#2 KENOSHA COUNTY COURTHOUSE and JAIL**  
912 - 56th Street  
(1923-1925) Neo-Classical Revival

The Neo-Classical Revival Courthouse and Jail was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 as part of the County Courthouses of Wisconsin Thematic group nomination. Constructed of gray Indiana limestone in an ashlar pattern, the three-story building has a raised basement on a pedestal and the first floor is divided from the upper floors by a cornice that runs the length of the building. The second and third stories are recessed behind a colonnade of 18 free-standing colossal Ionic columns. Tall, two-story modern windows are placed between the columns of the main colonnade except above the main entrance where there is a further recessed balcony with balustrade and three round-arched windows.

The rear and side facades of the building are more simply decorated. Behind the courthouse is the three-story jail of the same material as the courthouse and connected to it by an underground passage. The jail also features a cornice separating the first and second floors. Windows are similar to those on the courthouse, but consist of their original sashes, instead of modern replacements. Architects were Joseph Lindl, Charles Lesser, and Albert J. Schutte.

The Kenosha County Board of Supervisors had selected land for the new courthouse by 1922. At the same time, the City of Kenosha changed their government to the council-manager plan. The city manager and civic leaders, who were promoting the "City Beautiful" concept, convinced the county to exchange their land for the land on the north side of the proposed Civic Center plaza. The county land would then go to the school board for the new high school. The Jail is now known as the Annex. A recent move to demolish it was thwarted, and the building was renovated for use by the District Attorney's offices. The Jail and the Courthouse were designed as a unit.



**#3 OLD MOOSE LODGE (Kenosha County Administration Building)**  
1010 - 56th Street  
(1926-1927) Neo-Classical Revival

This three-story Neo-Classical Revival building has

a gray limestone veneer on its street facade and tan brick construction on the non-street facades. The flat-roofed building is decorated with a stone cornice defining a narrow parapet. The upper two stories have shallow pilasters that divide the street facades into arcades of round-arched windows which were later significantly enclosed. Another cornice line separates the second and third floors. There are large show windows dividing several storefront entries on the first floor. A large overhang, probably added later, sits over the main entrance on Tenth Avenue. Joseph Lindl was the architect.

The Royal Order of Moose, a large fraternal group in Kenosha at the time, occupied this building until about 1943. In 1943, the Kenosha Labor Association purchased the building for the Union Club to house offices and meeting places for various labor unions in Kenosha.

In 1994, Kenosha County purchased the property and rehabilitated the building. The building currently houses the Kenosha County Administrative offices, continuing the public use of the Civic Center.



**#4 DINOSAUR DISCOVERY MUSEUM**  
5608 Tenth Avenue  
(1908-1910, moved 1933) Beaux Arts

This one-story building is richly detailed in the Beaux Arts style, a more decorative

classical style which was popular at the same time as the Neo-Classical Revival style and related to it. The building sits on a raised gray limestone base faced with granitestone. On the four facades of the building are highly decorated recessed areas covered with terra cotta. Decorative elements on the front facade include four groups of attached paired colossal Ionic columns separating windows and doors. Single columns and partial pilasters in the same order appear at the corners of the recessed areas. The capitals of the columns feature leaves, rosettes, and darts. Period light fixtures flank a concrete staircase leading to the main entrance, which consists of a wood and glass double door with a transom. The entrance is framed by a frontispiece of pilasters, a pediment, and an eagle over a window. A cornice molding runs across the top of the building, creating an unadorned parapet. The building was designed by federal architect James Knox Taylor.

The former Kenosha Public Museum was originally the United States Post Office and was located on the southwest corner of 56th Street and Eighth Avenue, behind the current Post Office building. In 1933, when the new post office was completed, this building was moved foot by foot across the Civic Center to complete the last side of the Civic Center project. It was then acquired for the Kenosha Public Museum and, until 2001 when the Museum moved to a new facility, it served the community as an educational and cultural institution. The building opened as the Dinosaur Discovery Museum in 2006.



**#5 OLD KENOSHA HIGH SCHOOL (Reuther Central High School)**  
913 – 57th Street  
(1924-1926) Neo-Classical Revival

Taking up an entire block of land, this three-story Neo-Classical square building features slightly projecting corners and pedimented entry pavilions. A prominent decorated cornice runs across the entire building and creates an unadorned parapet. Corinthian pilasters run between window banks on the second and third floors. Built of gray limestone, the building also features a rusticated first floor sitting on a pedestal foundation. The pedimented entry pavilion on the front facade features attached Corinthian columns between paired windows. Projecting corners of the building have recessed panels decorated by Corinthian columns and an arch with a keystone. The architect was John D. Chubb.

The location of the old Kenosha High School was the result of an almost unprecedented agreement between the City of Kenosha, Kenosha County, and the School Board. The school was later known as Central High School, then Mary D. Bradford High School, and is now the location of Reuther Central High School. Mary D. Bradford was a significant figure in the development of the educational system in Kenosha.

## Other Points of Interest



**A – HENRY M. SIMMONS MEMORIAL CHURCH**  
5810 Eighth Avenue  
(1909) Gothic

Formerly the Unitarian Church, this building is on the National Register of Historic Places. The church also served as the Boys' and Girls' Library and the

Landmark restaurant. N. Max Dunning was the architect.



**B – ELKS CLUB**  
5706 Eighth Avenue  
(1917) Georgian Revival

Designed by architect Robert Messmer, this imposing brick building

was Kenosha's largest meeting hall. The building features a Doric portico which rests on a base of square brick piers in front of round-arched windows. The Elks Club was originally organized in 1901 and continued to meet in this location until 1990. The building is currently vacant.



**C – ST. JAMES' CATHOLIC CHURCH**  
5821 Tenth Avenue  
(1884) Gothic

This High Victorian Gothic church of cream-colored brick has a steep gable roof and features a massive, tall front corner tower with a steep pyramidal roof. The building has a Gothic-arched portal, lancet and tracery windows, and a profusion of ornamental brickwork.

Organized by Irish Catholics in 1837 as St. Mark's, the parish was officially incorporated in 1844. The name of St. James was adopted in 1884. The present church replaced an earlier church building named after St. Mark.



The miniature Statue of Liberty that used to be in Civic Center Park can now be found inside the Kenosha History Center at 220 51st Place.

## National Register of Historic Places, 1988

### Acknowledgements

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