

GREAT FALLS MONTANA



**Railroad
Historic District
Walking Tour**

The Original Townsite of the city of Great Falls nestles in, and was shaped by a broad curve of the Missouri River where it makes a large bend in its eastward meandering flow. Imposing brick towers rise from the landscape and serve as visual anchors for the Great Falls Railroad Historic District, which also contains a complex of warehouses and freight buildings in its heart that once served the bustling railroad freight and passenger business in Great Falls.

Originally set aside as the Cascade Park Reserve, the district was conceived by city founder, Paris Gibson as a *"morally uplifting, lush public space in which citizens and visitors could relax and enjoy nature."* Gibson was an advocate of the city-beautiful movement that transformed American cities in the 1900's. With a fledgling townsite, he had the unique opportunity to provide park space prior to any actual construction. *"In making our city beautiful and attractive,"* he later noted, *"we would greatly add to its growth in population and wealth, for it is true that never before in the world's history have urban communities placed as high a valuation upon public parks and attractive streets and avenues."*

Some parkland gave way to industry in 1885, when the Cataract Mill became the city's first major industry. Located on the east bank of the Missouri River near 1st Avenue North, the flour mill's success followed the growth of dryland farming in the area and demonstrated the potential of the river's waterpower. But, without a reliable transportation link the town promoters realized development would be limited.

The present appearance of the Great Falls Railroad Historic District began to take shape with the introduction of the first railroad tracks in 1887, that took advantage of the gentle terrain offered by the river corridor, dividing the Cascade Park Reserve. As part of the agreement for establishing a railhead in Great Falls, the townsite company agreed to grant right-of-way along the river

and to surrender the southern section of the Cascade Park Reserve to the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba for support buildings, including the first passenger depot. East of the depot, at the west terminus of Central Avenue, Whittier and Margaret Parks created a pleasing transitional zone between railroad and central business districts.

Little construction occurred in the Railroad Historic District prior to 1909, although its identity as a warehouse and light industrial section was already established. The area bustled with construction activity shortly after the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad initiated plans to extend its line to the Pacific coast through Montana in 1908.

Buildings in the district reflect three major construction periods in Great Falls history. One building dates from 1890, but the majority are one-to-three story commercial and warehouse buildings constructed between the years 1909 and 1928. Most are brick masonry and designed with elements of the Renaissance Revival style. The most elaborate buildings in this style are associated with the Great Northern and Milwaukee Railroads. Three buildings, constructed in the late 1930's and early 1940's were Works Progress Administration (WPA) sponsored and erected as civic improvements, including the Civic Center, Mitchell Bath house and the park support buildings at the east end of Gibson Park. The modern era was introduced in the district with these three Art Deco style buildings.

The parks and structures which comprise the Great Falls Railroad Historic District reflect the community's development into central Montana's trade, service and cultural center. The advent of the two railroads made the city the region's primary distribution point and contributed to the establishment of Great Falls as the county seat. The district remains a historically and architecturally cohesive reminder of significant forces that helped to shape Great Falls.

Margaret, Whittier & Circle Parks

Two smaller parks, now serving as a landscaped setting for the Civic Center, were part of the initial “parking” of Great Falls. These remnants of Whittier and Margaret Parks once anchored the west end of Central Avenue and formed a welcoming garden to travelers on the Great Northern Railway. The parks were heavily planted with a variety of trees and bordered a small central park called Gibson Circle, which was equipped with a circular pool that was removed in 1926 to make way for a bronze statue of Paris Gibson. The statue and park survived until 1939, when the Civic Center was constructed.



Great Falls Civic Center – 1939

In 1938, plans were announced to locate the Great Falls Civic Center at the west end of Central Avenue, where there was “free” city-owned park land, an important consideration during the Depression.

Construction costs for the new seat of local government were estimated at \$685,000, of which \$376,750 was to be obtained from the sale of city bonds. The balance was to be obtained from the Public Works Administration (PWA) as a grant. Citizens immediately took exception to the selection of park land for

the new facility and proceedings were instituted against the city of Great Falls based on the proposition that the city did not have the right to build on land reserved for park purposes. The decision was ultimately in favor of the city and ground was broken in 1939.

The Great Falls Civic Center was designed by George Shanley and Johannes Van Teylingen and is the largest civic structure in Great Falls. It is an excellent example of the twentieth century Art Deco style on a monumental scale. Described at the dedication as *“the fruition of hopes, dreams and inspirations long held by our people,”* the Civic Center also is a significant performing arts and social center.

Commercial Buildings and Warehouses

Only three buildings remain from the more than a dozen warehouses that sprang up on the Great Northern right-of-way or on lots leased from the railroad, in response to the rapidly developing rail freight business in the opening years of the century. Facing the slightly diagonal tracks on irregularly shaped and sized lots, symmetry was introduced to the area in the design of the utilitarian structures. Although less elaborate than the retail commercial and railroad affiliated buildings in the district, details such as stepped parapets, segmental window heads, pilasters and symmetrical, horizontally-oriented elevations introduced classical architectural elements to the structures. Some buildings used vitrified brick from the Anaconda Copper Mining Company kilns. By 1915, the three major Great Falls warehouses, Stone-Ordean-Wells, Heisey Company and Ryan Mercantile were shipping over 50,000 orders per year.



2 Stone-Ordean-Wells Company Warehouse — 1914 - (Montana Children's Museum)

The 1914 Stone-Ordean-Wells Company Warehouse is significant for its associations with the railroad-influenced economic development of



Great Falls during the early twentieth century and for its association with prolific architect, George Shanley. It was one of three large wholesale grocery warehouses erected in close proximity to the railroad tracks by 1915. The grocery concern remained in the building until about 1934. Northern School Supply then moved in and remained in the building until

1958. Since 1999, the building has enjoyed a new use as the Children's Museum of Montana.

3 Heisey Company Warehouse and Garage — 1911 - (Big Sky Transfer and Storage)

Charles E. Heisey was one of many Great Falls businessmen to profit from associations with the railroad. The Heisey Company began in this location in 1911 and was liquidated in 1961. It is representative of the successful wholesale businesses that developed along the railroad tracks to provide large storage space for perishable and non-perishable goods.

4 Massey-Harris Building — 1913 - (Yaw-Kinney)

Originally a wholesale farm machinery warehouse, the Massey-Harris building served as a distribution point for machinery sold to area farmers in north-central Montana. In 1929 it housed the Montana Highway Commission equipment warehouse and repair shop and road-building equipment was sold out of the north side addition by Northwest Equipment Company.

5 Mitchell Pool & Bath House — 1936

Mitchell Pool and the surrounding park were originally planned to be part of the Cascade Park Reserve, set aside for recreational purposes in the original town-site plat. The city gained deed to what they called the new Riverside Park, in 1908, and it quickly became the municipal nursery and home to over 17,000 nursery trees and several hundred larger trees moved from the original nursery. It was also the terminus for a 1909 scenic river drive. Prior to construction of Mitchell Pool, a city tourist park occupied the area. The park remained relatively unchanged until the 1930's and the creation of



the New Deal, when plans were made for a Works Progress Administration (WPA) swimming pool. Named in honor of Bill Mitchell, the director of the Cascade County Emergency Relief Committee, the pool was officially opened on August 12, 1933.

In June of 1935, the Montana Relief Commission approved plans to construct a bath house for Mitchell Pool. Montana Governor Elmer Holt dedicated the building, noting that the project reflected great cooperative effort among many parties and agencies. The Art Deco style building features a stepped and battlemented parapet with a ziggurat-influenced central entrance. It has served its original purpose for 72 years with little change. The original pool was demolished and a new pool built in 1966-1967.

6 Great Northern Express/Commissary Building – 1917

This Renaissance Revival building is significant for its historical associations with the development of the Great Northern Railroad and the



associated growth in Great Falls in the 1910's. The north addition and a second floor were added around 1919. Billed as the *"best appointed express office...west of Chicago"* the GN continued to develop the Great Falls holdings as part of a greater plan by James Hill

to dominate the railroad industry, with facilities centralized at a few key locations in Minneapolis, Great Falls and Seattle. The railway chose the Renaissance Revival style for most of its urban structures. Because of its associations with classical designs and its references to Old World architecture through the application of corner quoins, keystones and formal, symmetrical facades, the Express Building conveys images of stability and security. This proclivity for the Renaissance Revival style is further echoed in the neighboring business and warehouse area, and contributes to a stylistically cohesive district.

7 Great Northern Passenger Depot – 1909

The Great Northern Railway and James J. Hill were two of the major influences in the creation and development of Great Falls. Money for the city's 1883 platting came from Hill, who was also a stockholder in the Great Falls Townsite & Water Company. Serving as a central distribution point was important, not only for the growth of Great Falls businesses, but also for the thousands of homesteaders who flocked to Montana in response to the creation of the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act.



A 1909 article describing the Renaissance Revival style Great Northern passenger depot hailed it as *"a handsome and imposing ap-*

pearing building, large enough to meet the demands of a city several times the present size of Great Falls." It was not until competition in the form of the impending 1908 extension west by the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad that Hill decided to have a new depot constructed. The building's appearance and setting were important factors intended to impress the high volume of passengers traveling to Great Falls. Extensive paving utilized over 300,000 bricks and created "one of the most delightful promenades in the city" and the landscaped parks bordering the tracks provided a picturesque setting for the Great Northern buildings that reflected well upon the company and the city. Its 150-foot clock tower has been a significant landmark since its grand opening September 25, 1910.

8 Chevrolet Motor Company Plant – 1929 **- (Police Station)**

The Chevrolet Motor Company Plant building is significant for its associations with the railroad-influenced economic development of Great Falls



and for its associations with the development of the automobile in American life. Intended for use as an assembly plant and large storage space, it was built in close proximity to the railroad tracks. Chevrolet was drawn to Great Falls because of the railroad, County seat, refinery and electrical power source. Original publicity indicated that the plant

would employ 300-600 men with one of the largest payrolls in the city. It was originally planned to be five stories.

9 Great Northern Freight Building – 1913 **- (Hub International)**

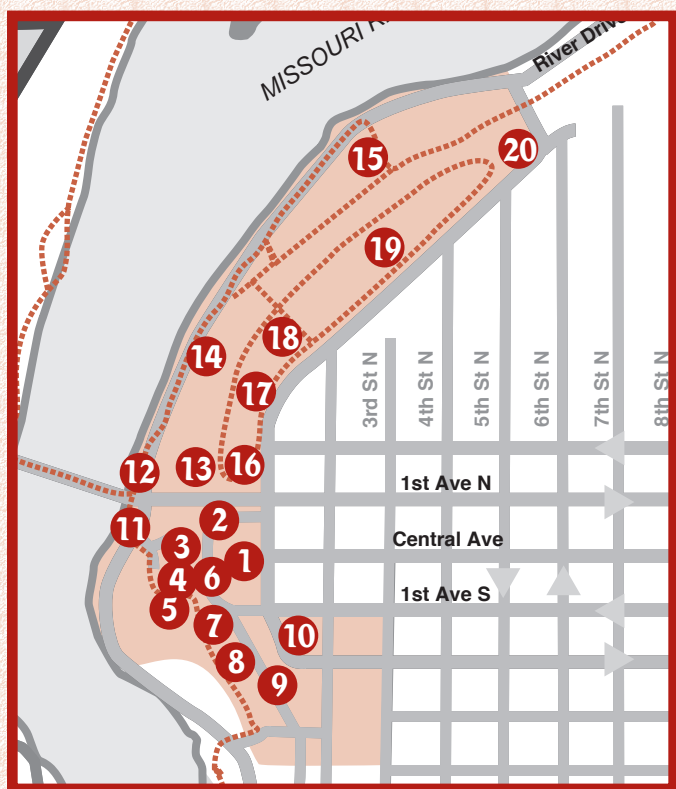
The construction of this substantial brick Great Northern Freight Depot exhibits a response to the increased freight traffic on the GN Railway. By 1913, the 6,000 square foot freight depot recorded about 600,000 pounds of freight passing through the buildings daily.

The *Great Falls Tribune* noted that the \$75,000 structure was prompted by a 50 percent increase in business between 1912 and 1913 and went on to say that railwaymen hailed the building as



"the best equipped and most modern freight house in the whole northwest. It is a known fact that its equal does not exist on the Great Northern system west of St. Paul."

Great Falls, Railroad Historic District



..... River's Edge Trail

Railroad District Site Key

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Civic Center | 10. South Side Commercial /Warehouses |
| 2. Stone-Ordean-Wells Co. Warehouse | 11. Site of the Cataract Mill |
| 3. Heisey Co. Warehouse | 12. Milwaukee RR/ Weissman Memorial Bridge |
| 4. Massey-Harris Building | 13. Milwaukee Depot |
| 5. Mitchell Pool & Bathhouse | 14. Girls Playhouse |
| 6. G.N. Express/ Commissary | 15. Elks Riverside Park |
| 7. G.N. Passenger Depot | 16. Gibson Park |
| 8. Chevorlet Motor Co. | 17. Vinegar Jones Cabin |
| 9. G.N. Freight Building | 18. 1930 Band Shell |
| | 19. Gibson Lake |
| | 20. Park Support Buildings |

10 South Side Commercial/Warehouses

Unlike the randomly sited warehouse buildings along the railroad right-of-way, the commercial/warehouse buildings in the platted portion of the original townsite, assumed an ordered, urban configuration. The buildings conformed to standard lot sizes and are, or were, generally attached to neighboring buildings.

Many of the buildings within the Railroad Historic District on 1st and 2nd Avenues South and 2nd Street South, which became known as "Machinery Row," are one-to-three story commercial and warehouse buildings constructed between the years 1909 and 1928. Most are brick bearing-wall construction with pressed brick veneer and display Renaissance Revival style details.



Anchoring the Railroad Historic District on the eastern boundary is the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Freight Depot at 427 2nd Street South. Like its GN counterpart, the freight depot has a two-story element and a long freight section that was served by four rail sidings on the west side of the building.

One major exception to the warehouse function is the 1890 Arvon Block at 114-116 First Avenue South. The Western Commercial style building has been identified as one of the few surviving late 19th century commercial buildings in Great Falls. It originally housed a 40-room hotel and the Axtell Stables. Proximity to the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba (later the Great Northern) served it well. An Axtell Stables' hack met all trains and conveyed passengers to local hotels.

11 Site of the Cataract Mill

The Cataract Flour Mill was constructed at this site in 1884-1885 by contractor, W.G. "Vinegar" Jones for Paris Gibson and Herbert Chowen. The unfinished mill was the site of the first ball in Great Falls in March of 1885, with the military band from Fort Shaw providing music for the dancers. Replaced by larger, more efficient flour mills, in 1893, Graham & Ross purchased the mill for use as a feed and fuel outlet.



12 Milwaukee Railroad/Weissman Memorial Bridge

The last steel girder was laid upon the piers of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad Bridge in May of 1914 and for the first time the east and west sides of the river were connected by Milwaukee rails. The bridge remained in service until the Milwaukee terminated all rail service west of Miles City, in 1980. Railroad trustees sold the bridge to Montana Compressed Steel and Carl Weissman & Sons in 1985, conceivably for scrap. The family, however, donated the bridge to the city for a

significant, accessible river crossing for the River's Edge Trail, as a memorial to Maurice B. Weissman, who was involved in many community development projects. With the help of the Montana Conservation Corps and a community-wide "Planks for the Memories" campaign, the bridge has been part of the River's Edge Trail system since 2002.



13 Milwaukee Depot – 1915

A landmark building on the Great Falls landscape is the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Passenger Depot. Railroad architects incorporated sophisticated, Mission Revival style detailing on the building that features an imposing 135-foot square tower, replete with colorful



tile mosaics bearing the line's insignia. The building is veneered with brick fired in the Anaconda Copper Mining Company kilns. The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railway was the last of the transcontinental rail lines to traverse Montana. The line, constructed between 1907 and 1909, consolidated Great Falls' position as a major urban center. Rapid settlement of the Central Montana plains by homesteaders from 1915–1925 helped transform the community into a major railroad center and marketing terminus, with numerous branch lines emanating from the city. Four years of drought, pestilence and falling prices after the First World War precipitated one of the worst

agricultural depressions in the State's history. New immigration to Montana virtually ceased and thousands of central Montana homesteaders lost their newly acquired farms to foreclosure. The passenger depot played its most important role during the settlement period, although it did continue in operation until the 1950's. The depot was given to the city and remained vacant until 1970.

14 Girl's Playhouse – 1937

The "Girl's Playhouse" was built in the Craftsman style as a "recreational center for supervised groups of all Great Falls girls of grade and high school ages." W.E. Mitchell urged the construction of the facility while he was in charge of the Public Works Administration (PWA). Projects under the "New Deal" greatly benefited the Great Falls park system, including roads, walks, stone walls and recreational facilities. Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls conducted a "blessing of the house" ceremony as part of the opening festivities in April of 1937.



Cascade Park Reserve

In 1882, when Paris Gibson looked over this landscape and its potential for a great city, he probably didn't realize that forces at work, far from the Great Falls of the Missouri would have such a dramatic influence on the future city. In New York City, that same year, inventor Thomas Edison threw the switch on the first public electric lights in the country and in Butte, Marcus Daly struck copper three-hundred feet down in the earth in Montana Territory. Philadelphia born and educated architect, George W. Bird, on the advice of James J. Hill, arrived in the settlement of Johnstown, near the future city of Great Falls, on the west bank of the Missouri. In November of 1882, plans for a new town were solidified in a meeting between Hill and Gibson, and Herbert Percy Rolfe prepared for a survey of the area. Bird (1861-1961) was hired by Gibson as city engineer to lay out the townsite's streets, parks, and boulevards. The plan provided for residential, commercial and common spaces and included the Cascade Park Reserve, an open stretch of land situated between the east bank of the river and city blocks. The Reserve extended from Tenth Avenue South to Eighth Avenue North, from the east bank of the Missouri River to Park Drive. The Cascade Park Reserve was subdivided into smaller parks with the arrival of the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway. The western half of the park north of 1st Avenue North became Riverside Park. The east half was renamed Gibson Park in 1903.

15 Elks Riverside Park

A big part of Riverside Park was acquired by the Milwaukee Railroad for their operations and when rail service was terminated, they sold their holdings in Riverside Park to the Elk's Club, which allowed the city to use the land for park purposes. Riverside Park also benefited from the WPA program, which built recreational facilities and stone retaining walls.

16 Gibson Park

Gibson Park has remained the *"lush public space in which citizens and visitors could relax and enjoy nature"* envisioned by Paris

Gibson and designed by George Bird. The park originally contained ponds, fountains, streams, that were crossed by rustic wooden bridges, and a rock lined drive.



17 Vinegar Jones Cabin – 1884

The “Vinegar” Jones Cabin has graced the Great Falls original Townsite since the town was platted, in 1884. The small, 14 by 20 foot, hand-hewn fir cabin was the first permanent residence in the community, built by Josiah Peeper, a carpenter from Fort Benton. It was purchased in 1890 by Whitman “Vinegar” Jones, who moved it to his lot, a scant block away, and preserved it until his death in 1931. The cabin survived the ravages of time until 1983 when a fire damaged the 99 year old cabin, rendering it uninhabitable. The Great Falls-Cascade County Historic Preservation Advisory Commission took on the challenge to restore the cabin and moved it to Gibson Park in the winter of 2002. A community-wide effort moved, restored and furnished the cabin.



18 The Band Shell

Built in 1930, the band shell was dedicated to Edward H. Cooney, who served as a park commissioner for 17 years and was its president for ten years. Free concerts are performed throughout the summer on Wednesday evenings.

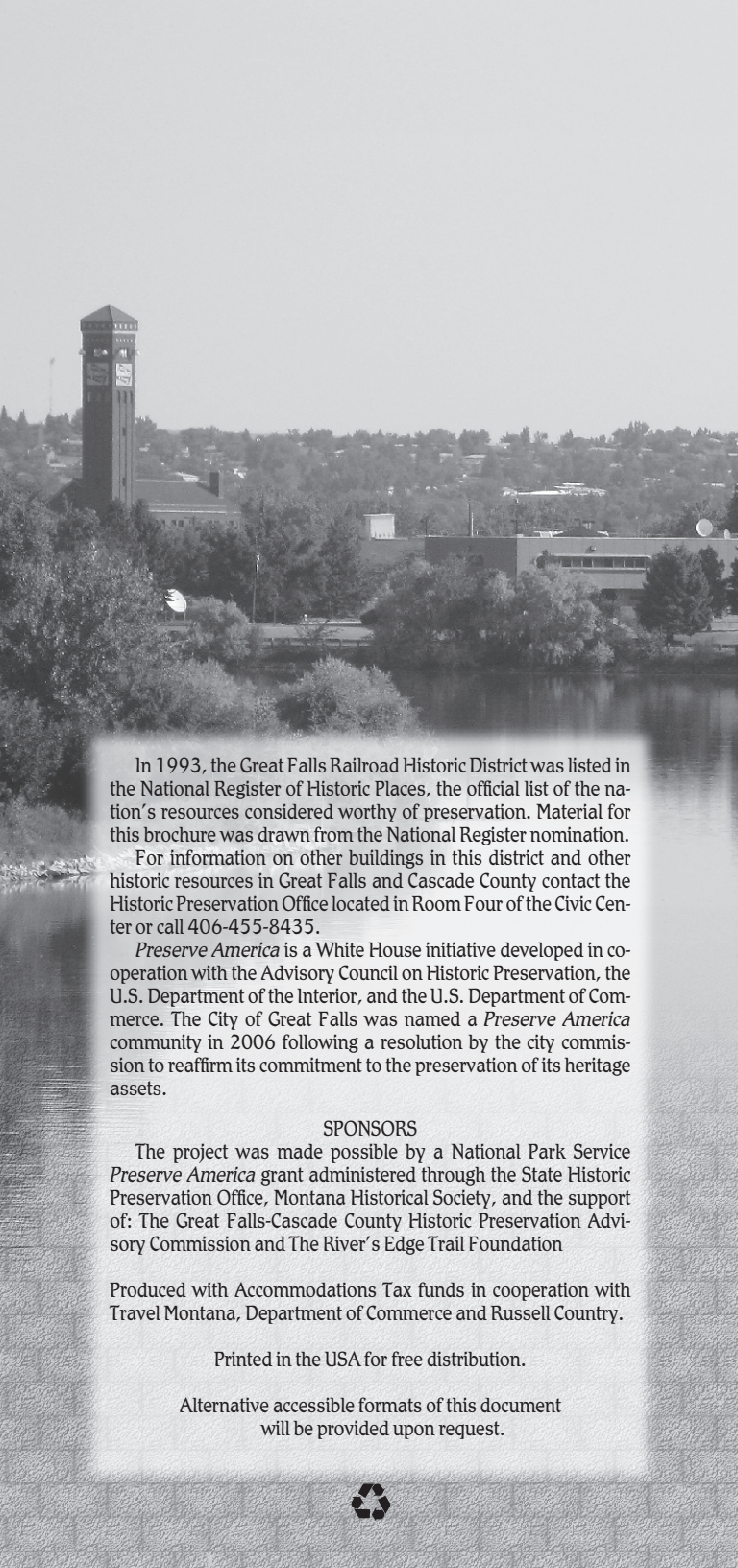
19 Gibson Lake

Plans for Gibson Lake were begun in 1905, under the guidance of George Bird. The circumference of the stone embanked lake measured 2,000 feet and it had a 4,750,000 gallon capacity. It was used year-round, as a skating rink in the winter and a boating area in the summer. The water supply was pumped from the Missouri River, with the overflow used to irrigate the northern end of the park. In 1934, as part of the WPA-sponsored civic improvements conducted in Great Falls, Gibson Lake received a rock bottom, a warming house (demolished) and a battered stone wall on its western perimeter. The stone came from a rock quarry near the city filtration plant.



20 Park Support Buildings

The park service department buildings were constructed over a period of time from 1934 – 1940. The WPA-sponsored concrete office and garage were designed in the Moderne style and provided needed storage and office space for the city park maintenance personnel, while their construction provided needed work for out-of-work citizens.



In 1993, the Great Falls Railroad Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the official list of the nation's resources considered worthy of preservation. Material for this brochure was drawn from the National Register nomination.

For information on other buildings in this district and other historic resources in Great Falls and Cascade County contact the Historic Preservation Office located in Room Four of the Civic Center or call 406-455-8435.

Preserve America is a White House initiative developed in cooperation with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Department of Commerce. The City of Great Falls was named a *Preserve America* community in 2006 following a resolution by the city commission to reaffirm its commitment to the preservation of its heritage assets.

SPONSORS

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