

Walking Tour #2

Historic Downtown Canal Fulton

You will be starting your tour at the ‘Heritage House & Old Canal Days Museum’ {1} in St. Helena Heritage Park {2}. Walk deeper into the park toward the Canalway Center. Once bridged by high trestles that led from the coal banks in the hills beyond the railroad tracks, the Harmon Foundation (of New York) gave the land for the park to the Village of Canal Fulton in 1926. Why did a foundation from New York get involved in the affairs of a small town in Ohio? To quote from a letter dated 1926, “to promote the moral and physical growth of boys and girls into self-respecting men and women and responsible citizens.” There were more than fifty-four Harmon Fields set up around the United States in the 1920’s.

Beside the park runs the partially restored Ohio & Erie Canal {3}. Construction began on the canal in 1825 and Canal Fulton would start seeing boat traffic in 1828. Produce could now be transported from farms to markets in the East with efficiency and needed manufactured goods could be secured at reduced cost to the local citizens. Prosperity reigned until the advent of the railroad in 1869. Farm wagons from as far away as Mansfield and Ashland lined the roads leading to Canal Fulton with grain to be shipped on the canal boats. At one time there were six grain warehouses, some as high as 60 feet tall, to store the wheat before shipment. Running from Cleveland in the north to Portsmouth in the south, the canal was 308 miles long and contained 146 lift locks.

Passing by the boat dock for the St. Helena III {4}, you will be able to see a reproduction of the old freight boat that traveled up and down the canal. The St. Helena III is operated regularly during the spring, summer and fall. Saving the boat ride for later, continue walking down the towpath.

Soon you will come to a footbridge {5} that spans the canal. Formerly located over the canal along Cherry Street, it was moved to its present site in 1937. The bridge is an excellent example of the wrought iron arched bridge and is believed to have been constructed by the Fort Pitt Bridge Company of Massillon. Crossing over the bridge you will have a view of the path the St. Helena takes from its berth at the park before going forth to Lock 4 Park.

Walk up the alley to Canal Street where you will turn left and head toward the business district. Several examples of 19th century “salt-boxes” are located on South Canal Street. They are characterized by two story fronts with a sloping roof to a one room addition in the rear. They usually have a central chimney and some have shorter windows on the second floor. They were economical to build and heat and were used by many early coal miners and others connected with canal business. Other 19th century homes in Canal Fulton show traces of Greek Revival and Italianate influence and will be described in more detail later. Many of the barns around town that graced each household have been torn down but some of the original flagstone sidewalks remain.

Entering the downtown business district you will see four Italianate buildings {6} on the left. Characterized by the elaborate carved brackets under the eaves and carved window cornices, this style was very popular around the turn of the century. While the first two buildings have had some of their original features covered but the other two display these characteristics. Beside these buildings, on the site of the brick building, stood the Fultonian Movie House, where silent films entranced local audiences in the early 1900's. On the opposite side of the street stands an excellent example of Queen Anne style Victorian architecture. This house {7} built by William Blank and his wife Harriet in 1901, shows some elaborate wood detail (which was a product of the Gilcher Lumber Company). Mr. Blank was a member of the Fultonian Imperial Marching Band and used the flat porch at the front of his house for band concerts. Turrets and different exterior siding patterns characterize Queen Anne architecture. Just beyond the Blank home (at the corner of Cherry and Canal Streets) stood the American House Inn {8}. Although re-sided and having some of its windows modified, it still retains the lines of an early inn of the 1840's. Turning your attention back to the south side of the street, you will pass a small frame building of the 1800's and at the corner sits the one remaining grain warehouse {9} from the canal days. Although one of the smaller warehouses, it gives a picture of days gone by. A pulley hanging under the eaves would hoist grain into opening above the second floor.

You are now standing at 'Brimstone Corners,' the popular gathering place for 'canalers' and later coal miners. The buildings here were all of fame and liquor could be bought at each corner. This was the finish line for footraces and the scene of occasional fisticuffs. It was said the townspeople preferred to do their business at the more respectable 'Public Square,' one block north-west of here.

Turning right (north) along Cherry Street, you will pass the site of the Lawrence Township Hall {10} (now the parking lot beside the gas station). The building originally served as the town hall but due to disrepair had to be torn down. The community mural now faces toward the empty lot. One block further on the opposite side of the street is the 'Oberlin House' {11}. The home was given to the Heritage Society in memory of an early family (who traveled here from Lancaster, Pennsylvania by ox-cart). It has been restored and furnished by local townspeople.

Return to High Street and turn right (west) toward the Canal Fulton Public Library {12}. Once a stately old home, it continues to be the site of much activity and local pride. It was along this brick section of High Street that many of Canal Fulton's merchants and community leaders lived. Examples of 19th century architecture include Italianate, Queen Anne and Gothic Revival. The latter is characterized by much mill work applied to the exterior as well as pointed arches and lines. On your left stands two of the town's early churches. The Salem Evangelical and Reformed {13}, seems reminiscent of Bavaria and was built in 1880. Across the alley, the Trinity Church {14} was originally the United Presbyterian and dates back to 1842. In 1966, the congregations voted to merge. Up ahead rises the spire of Saints Philip & James Catholic Church {15}. Originally constructed in 1868 from bricks produced by parishioners in kilns just east of town, the church was the scene of a tragic fire in 1937. Now rebuilt, the

spire once again appears as a beacon to direct people approaching Canal Fulton from all directions. The parish house next door is a red brick high Victorian Gothic and seems to step right out of history.

Turning left on Water Street, you will head back toward Canal Street, passing old 'Barn Alley' (Walnut Street), so named because of the many barns that lined the back of the properties facing Canal and High Streets. Facing Canal Street, the Ohio & Erie is down the embankment across the street. Although this part of the canal is not restored for boat traffic, the Towpath Trail and the Buckeye Trail that lead through the area are a part of statewide networks of trails that connect many of Ohio's natural areas. Turn left on Canal Street. Within this part of town are several more examples of 19th century American architecture...and the flagstone sidewalk again. A small brick building on your right once housed a tombstone maker. The building is the only reminder of a fire that swept the block north of 'Public Square' in 1910. On your left is the tan frame 'Robinson House' {15}, once the home of one of the town's principal grain buyers and warehouse owners. The Exchange Bank building {16}, built in 1898, once stood on the northwest corner of Canal and Market Streets. When the town's banking facilities proved inadequate, they were moved from the grocery store across the street to the Exchange Bank.

This is 'Public Square.' The solid brick buildings that encircled it were the site of much business and trading in the 1800's and early 1900's. The large 'Union Block' building {17} built in 1876 housed a hardware store, confectionery and grocery store while the telephone exchange and a dentist had their offices on the second floor. Another large warehouse stood across the street from 'Union Block' (the building burned down and the site is now occupied by a one story brick building). Leaving the square and continuing south, you will be able to distinguish the 'Oddfellow's Building' and its neighbor, both displaying Italianate features. Here were located a men's clothing store, a meat market and several shoe stores. It took a lot of business to keep a town running!

Across the street, lived the town doctor. His office was in the blue frame building next door to it. Although almost seeming to be one building, there are actually two, one built in 1847 and the other in 1870. On your right were large frame warehouses. At the corner of the street was the Great Western Warehouse {18}. Standing six stories high, it was the tallest building in Ohio when built in 1833. In 1873, the top floors were converted into an opera house, becoming the cultural center of the community until fire destroyed it in 1930. Its auditorium could seat 500 people with no obstruction of view. Theatrical troops from as far away as Europe entertained local residents.

Finding yourself back at 'Brimstone Corners,' you can now make your way back to the Museum.