NORTH 24TH STREET WALKING TOUR

presents

RESTORATION EXCHANGE OMAHA

the
The Omaha Star
North 24th Street is pretty quiet these days. There is a little noise from the barbershops and retail outlets that dot the streetscape. A couple of restaurants are making a go of it just off the thoroughfare on Lake Street. And there’s a burgeoning arts scene. But the music that once enlivened the area is mostly silent.

For blacks who began to reside in North Omaha during the early 20th century, 24th Street became known as the “Street of Dreams.” The area around 24th and Lake Streets emerged as a lively district of music clubs, theaters, restaurants and retail shops. It was a haven for entertainment from the 1920s through the 1960s.

The street also was important to Jewish settlers, who began to populate the area in the 1890s. They called the stretch of North 24th Street from Cuming to Lake Streets the “Miracle Mile.” Jewish historian Arthur Grossman described the street as “the arterial lifeline connecting homes, shops, and sundry suppliers of products and services necessary for the maintenance of Jewish life.”

Blacks, Jews and other ethnicities coexisted peacefully for decades. In 1914, there were 17 grocery stores, five tailors, seven shoe repair shops and five second-hand stores on that stretch of North 24th Street alone, along with confectioners, barbers and butchers. Within four years, 15 of the businesses in the area were owned by blacks, including five restaurants. Black physicians, such as A.G. Edwards and W. M. Gordon, had also established offices.

While music venues such as the Dreamland Ballroom and Club Egypt began to spring up in the 1920s, bands were forming. Civil War veteran Josiah Waddle was one of the first, followed by Josie Cotton and other prominent musicians.

Members of the Marching Majorettes during a parade passing the intersection of 24th and Lake in the 1950s. Photo courtesy Great Plains Black History Museum.

Jacob Bernstein stands outside his grocery store at the northeast corner of 24th and Lake Streets. He ran the grocery from about 1912 to the mid-1920s. Photo courtesy Nebraska Jewish Historical Society.
forming a band of about 15 musicians after he moved here in the 1880s. He also set up a barbershop on Lake Street. Dan Desdunes moved to Omaha from New Orleans in 1904 and started a band of about 25 players; they often played for outings of the Omaha Commercial Club. Red Perkins, Lloyd Hunter and Sam Turner started successful bands that played throughout the Midwest. Nat Towles moved to Omaha from Texas in the mid-1930s and ran perhaps the area’s most successful touring band for about 20 years.

The area spawned local musicians who gained national fame. Wynonie Harris got his start at Jim Bell’s Club Harlem, a lavish cabaret in the former Diamond Theater at 24th and Lake. Harris went on to score a string of rhythm and blues hits in the ’40s and ’50s and was an influential forerunner of rock ‘n’ roll.

Preston Love was bitten by the jazz bug at an early age, sometimes sneaking a peek through a window or an open door of a North Side club. He became a prominent figure in the jazz, big band and popular music worlds as an alto saxophonist. Like Love, Neal Hefti was a fan of Count Basie. He caught the Kansas City bandleader’s act at the Dreamland Ballroom. Trumpeter Hefti later wrote and arranged for Basie, as well as Woody Herman, before moving on to score music for television and movies.

German, Scandinavian and Irish immigrants were the first to settle the area. The 24th and Lake hub became an important business center in the

Dan Desdunes became a popular bandleader after moving to Omaha in 1904. He also led the band at Fr. Flanagan’s Boys Town. Ad from the July 3, 1915 edition of The Monitor.
neighborhood, and by 1890 there were streetcar tracks on both streets. Within blocks of the intersection were the Swedish Mission Hospital, the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the original site of Omaha University, and Ak-Sar-Ben Coliseum, which entertained Theodore Roosevelt and other U.S. presidents at its Den Shows.

The district has witnessed brilliant highs and crushing lows. Both natural and man-made destruction have come its way. A killer tornado devastated the area in 1913. It left behind more than 20 dead men in a pool hall at 24th and Grant and all seven members of baker Nathan Krinsky’s family, plus scores of others killed or injured. Violent demonstrations in the 1960s—provoked by housing restrictions, a lack of employment opportunities and a general discontentment—left scars that are still visible today.

But the area retains a spark of hope. The North Omaha Village Revitalization Plan, formalized in 2011, calls for the re-establishment of a cultural arts district centered at 24th and Lake Streets. The 30-year plan has the backing of city leaders and community trendsetters. The plan may also be bolstered by the ghosts of jazz and rhythm-and-blues greats, who want to hear the music play again.

Omaha native Wynonie Harris, left, during a performance at the Dreamland Ballroom, was a blues shouter who gained national fame. Photo courtesy University of Nebraska at Lincoln History Harvest.

Workers outside a North 24th St. clothing store circa 1940. Photo courtesy Great Plains Black History Museum.
1. Dreamland Park
24th & Lizzie Robinson Dr.
Dreamland Park was dedicated in 2004 as part of a $2 million streetscape beautification program that included distinctive tree-lined brick sidewalks, improved lighting and benches. The crown jewel of the park is the “Jazz Trio” cast bronze sculpture by Littleton Alston. The park, with its fountain, stage and metal chairs and benches, was named for the famed Dreamland Ballroom.

About 150 people attended a free jazz concert that inaugurated the park. It featured Lafayette Reed and his band, along with the Dreamland Jazz All-Stars.

The street name—Lizzie Robinson Drive—pays homage to the black woman who organized the women’s ministry of the Church of God in Christ International, the largest black Pentecostal denomination. Her home at 2864 Corby St. is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

2. Charles Washington Residence
2402 N. 25th St.
Charles Washington, who lived in this house from the late ’60s until his death in 1986, was an author, talk show host, civil rights activist and mentor to a number of young Omahans, including Ernie Chambers, Bob Boozer and Johnny Rodgers.

He started at the Omaha Star while still a teen, first as a sportswriter. He went on to write major news stories and editorials. Washington considered his interview with Malcolm X as the highlight of his career. He was perhaps the only local journalist to interview the controversial figure.

Following Washington’s death, former Mayor Mike Boyle ordered flags at city buildings to fly at half-staff. Washington was a frequent speaker at City Council and County Board meetings. Washington was a staunch supporter of education, so it was fitting when the north branch of the Omaha Public Library was named in his honor just five months after his passing.

The house was also the boyhood home of pro basketball player Bob Boozer. He was an All-American at Kansas State before going on to an 11-year career in the NBA.

3. Obee Funeral Home 2518 Lake St.
G. Wade Obee’s funeral home was the scene of the combined funerals of five men who died at the Idlewild Pool Hall in the 1913 Easter Sunday tornado. Obee offered “unequaled conveniences” and “the latest and most scientific methods” at his funeral home, and his staff were “specialists in post-mortem facial expressions.” The funeral home was designed by Clarence “Cap” Wigington, Nebraska’s first black architect.

Obee was much more than an undertaker. He published The Progressive Age newspaper for about two years starting in 1912.
He once debated attorney John Grant Pegg, espousing Theodore Roosevelt for president, while Pegg backed William Howard Taft. In 1911, he was one of several black citizens who traveled to Lincoln to oppose a "Jim Crow bill" being sponsored by a state representative.

Obee moved to a new funeral home on Cuming Street in 1917. Silas Johnson then moved his Western Funeral Home into the building. After Johnson died in 1922, William L. Myers bought the building and operated his funeral home there. Myers moved to 22nd and Lake five years later, and the house was converted into a family residence.

4. Broomfield Rowhouse
2502 Lake St.
The Broomfield and Crutchfield Rowhouses were built shortly after a tornado ripped through northeast Omaha on Easter Sunday, March 23, 1913. Jack Broomfield and Billy Crutchfield, partners in the notorious Midway saloon in downtown Omaha’s Third Ward, commissioned Clarence “Cap” Wigington to design the twin commercial duplexes.

As a “lieutenant” of city boss Tom Dennison, Broomfield helped deliver black votes for Dennison-backed candidates. When Broomfield died of a heart attack in 1927, Dennison was one of his pallbearers. Of Broomfield, he stated, “He never failed a friend, and about the only enemies he had were those who owed him money.” At the time of his death in 1927, Broomfield also owned a commercial building at 24th and Erskine and his home at 2124 Lake St. His brother, Levi, operated a barbershop and billiard hall at 2024 N. 24th St.

Wigington, who apprenticed with Thomas Rogers Kimball, created the rowhouse designs four years prior to their construction as part of a competition for Good Housekeeping magazine. The design won first prize for the best two-family dwelling. He designed nine homes between 1912 and 1914, mostly for black community leaders. Seeking new opportunities, he left Omaha in late 1914 for St. Paul, Minn., where he became a municipal architect. He went on to design many public buildings in St. Paul; three are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Crutchfield Rowhouse, located to the west of the Broomfield, was razed following a fire in 1986. The Broomfield Rowhouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.

5. Elks Building
2420 Lake St.
Constructed in 1919, Columbia Hall was at first a meeting place for African American groups, a political rally spot and the home to the “colored”
commercial club. The club helped employ the hundreds of blacks who were streaming into Omaha from the South each month in the early 1920s.

In 1929, the hall became home to the Iroquois Lodge 92 of the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World, whose existence in Omaha dates back to 1905. The lodge in 1939 hosted more than 6,000 Elks from seven Midwestern states. Attorney Charles F. Davis was the exalted leader of the lodge for 22 years.

The blond-brick building continued to host rallies, dances and oratorical contests through the years has been one of several locations to host Native Omahan Days. The club’s band performs at funerals and parades.

6. **Big Mama’s Sandwich Shop**

2416 Lake St.

For nearly 20 years this location was home to A & A Music and Variety Store, started in 1951 by Paul and Dorothy Allen. Described as an “ultra-modern” shop, the store featured multi-colored lights inset in cedar valances, spacious booths and “the latest in phonograph records” and gifts. The shop was also an outlet for ticket sales at nearby live music venues. By 1960 sons Alfred and Paul Jr. were helping out with the shop, which had expanded to include repair of stereophonic equipment and jukeboxes. The shop moved to 2508 N. 24th in the late 1960s.

Over the years the 1914-built edifice housed a number of businesses. The Boston West Wash Laundry in 1918 promised “24- to 36-hour service guaranteed.” By 1931, it was the Metz Cigar Store. A number of hardware stores operated there, including Devereaux Hardware in the late 1940s. By the early 1970s, the Urban Housing Foundation of Omaha had moved into this and the adjoining building.

After opening Big Mama’s Kitchen & Catering at the Turning Point campus in 2007, Patricia Barron decided to start her Sandwich Shop here in 2013, with a little persuasion from the Bemis Center’s Theaster Gates. She told the *Omaha World-Herald*, “I will do whatever I can to see 24th Street revisited. I want to be part of the rise again.” Since starting Big Mama’s, Barron and the soul food recipes she learned from her grandmother have been featured on Food Network television shows. The sandwich shop references the neighborhood, with sandwich names like “The Carver” and “The Fair Deal.” It also features a “24th Street Dog” and a “North Omaha Dog.” The décor of the shop pays homage to the music scene but with a family connection. Barron’s father is pictured as a member of The Jungle Rhythm Boys in the 1950s.

7. **Carver Savings & Loan**

2414 Lake St.

In 1946 the state’s first black-owned banking institution was established with the opening of the Carver Savings & Loan Association. Named for pioneering scientist George Washington Carver, original officers were druggist
Milton Johnson as president and attorney Charles F. Davis as secretary-treasurer, Charles C. Galloway III, the 5-year-old grandson of the *Omaha Guide* founder, was an early investor with his $100 stock purchase.

The association gave special assistance to blacks in acquiring home loans and mortgages. Charles Davis later operated his law office in the space. His daughter, Elizabeth Davis Pittman, practiced law with him and in 1961 became an officer of the association. When Pittman was appointed to the Municipal Court in 1971, she became the first woman and the first black appointed as a judge in Nebraska.

Davis died in 1959, and the savings and loan quietly faded from existence in 1965. The significance of the organization was perhaps not realized during its brief 20-year existence. A Legal Aid Society office began operation there in mid-1965. The building became home to the Urban League’s Housing Foundation extension office in 1970. The principal aim was to assist low- and moderate-income families who wished to participate in FHA programs.

The building sat vacant for a number of years before the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts announced in 2012 its plan to start an artist-in-residency program. After $75,000 in renovations, the Bemis Center opened in 2013.

8. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Cornerstone Memorial
   northeast corner, 24th & Lake
   This memorial to the slain civil rights leader broke ground in 2001 and was completed in 2006 when three panels of Zimbabwe granite were affixed to a triangular concrete monolith. In addition to a timeline of King’s life, the panels commemorate local black citizens who have had a positive impact on the city. In dedicating the monument, Dr. William Johnson, president of the sponsoring Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, said its completion was an invitation for people of all backgrounds to make a lasting difference. “We need to move forward and not allow the old paradigm to weigh us down,” Johnson said. “Let’s make a legacy at 24th and Lake so that we don’t forget the battles that have been fought.”

King spoke in Omaha in 1958 at the National Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress at the Civic Auditorium. In 1964, he met briefly with leaders of the Citizens Coordinating Committee for Civil Liberties prior to a speaking engagement in Lincoln. His wife, Coretta Scott King, performed a musical concert at Technical High School in 1959.

9. Love’s Jazz and Arts Center
   2506 N. 24th St.
   Named for alto saxophonist, band-leader, jazz aficionado and author Preston Love, the center opened
in 2005, about a year after Love’s death. A tribute to both Love and the jazz and live music scene that buzzed through the 24th and Lake area for some 50 years, the 8,000-square-foot facility houses Love memorabilia, exhibition space, classrooms, a gift shop and performance areas.

A graduate of Omaha North High, Love was the youngest of nine children and grew up just a few blocks from the jazz clubs of the Near North Side. In his teens he developed a near obsession with the Count Basie Band and was a fanatical fan of lead alto player Earle Warren. By the time his storied music career ended, Love had won a seat in the Basie band, fronted his own orchestra, and directed the Motown Records west coast orchestra, accompanying acts such as Diana Ross, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder at live performances.

Love wrote for both the Omaha Star and the Omaha World-Herald, and in 1997 penned his autobiography. Entitled A Thousand Honey Creeks Later: My Life in Music from Basie to Motown — And Beyond, the book garnered critical acclaim and won praise for its portrayal of a working band’s daily travails in the face of institutional racism. The title refers to Preston’s first gig—in Honey Creek, Iowa—where he played drums for his brother’s band.

Love’s Jazz and Arts Center occupies three bays along North 24th Street. Alfred Peterson ran his bakery here for about 40 years. Though music clubs are not listed at the address, Florentine Pinkston located her music studio here around 1940. A graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, Pinkston taught piano and voice in Omaha for more than 50 years. The middle bay was home to A & A Music Shop in the 1970s, while Lucy Carter served sweet potato pie and other delicacies at Carter’s Café at 2510 N. 24th St. for about 30 years.

The “Love” mural was created by Cey Adams, a nationally regarded visual artist, with help from local teens. Adams is best known as the creative director of Def Jam Recordings, the record label of hip hop mogul Russell Simmons.

10. To the north, 2514 North 24th Street was first occupied by cigar dealer A.E. Kulp. Louis Nesselson operated a grocery store there for about 40 years. The most recent business in the 1910-built structure is North Omaha Barbers.

Hair care has been the business at 2518 N. 24th for a number of years. Cookie’s Takin’ Pride Beauty Salon is located there now. In the 1930s, Eurette Smith had a
Don and Yolanda McPherson started Styles of Evolution at 2524 N. 24th St. in 2006, after Don had worked for large retailers for about 30 years. The north bay was a U.S. Post Office from 1914 to 1948. The building was home to Ideal Furniture and Hardware for about 20 years after that.

Styles of Evolution offers both men’s and women’s clothing and hats, as well as alterations, at 2522 Lake St.

11. Mount Moriah Baptist Church 24th & Ohio
Mount Moriah Baptist Church moved into the former Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints building in 1920. It was substantially rebuilt after a fire in 1925. A new church building was erected in 1934 and completed in 1943. The church organized in 1887 at 12th and Jackson Streets.

The Rev. Foster Goodlett in 1967 initiated the Omaha Opportunities Industrialization Center, a job training center.

A new OOIC building was erected just north of the church in 1976. The Rev. Larry Menyweather-Woods was a pastor at Mount Moriah from 1989 until 2002. He was an associate professor in the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Black Studies department and was known throughout the community as a powerful and passionate speaker.

12. Carnation Ballroom 24th & Miami
What the Dreamland Ballroom was to jazz in the 1930s and 40s, the Carnation Ballroom was to soul and rhythm-and-blues in the 1950s. Formerly home to Forbes Bakery, the AmVets Club and The Savoy nightclub, the Carnation Ballroom booked little-known artists who later became household names.

Omaha Star publisher Mildred Brown purchased the club in 1948 and named it for her favorite, always-present accessory. In the Carnation’s early years, Brown hosted events such as style revues, healthy baby contests, talent shows and record hops, along with an occasional performance by local hero Preston Love. Between 1955 and its close in 1959, the ballroom featured acts such as Fats Domino, B.B. King, Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, Charles Brown and Little Richard. James Brown played the club twice in 1957. Emerging R&B stars such as Faye Adams, Ursula Reed, Joe Morris, The Orioles and Al Savage also appeared. As noted on the Omaha Star ad for Ray Charles’ show, ticket prices were generally $1.75 per show.
The location served as a boxing club during the 1960s. It was later an after-hours bar known as Afro Delivery.

Farther north on 24th Street: band leader Nat Towles lived about a block away for several years, and the Spencer Street Barber Shop has been a fixture for half a century—Ernie Chambers manned a chair at the shop in the 1960s and ’70s.

13. Safeway Building 2505 N. 24th St.
Jacob Bernstein’s grocery store held the corner spot on the block from 1914 to the mid-1920s. Other businesses on the block included a tailor shop run by A.J. Kovitz and Arthur Dorn’s blacksmith shop.

Thirty-nine businesses were demolished in 1964 to make way for the new Safeway Store and Super-S Drug Store. Neighbors and residents welcomed it, and Safeway officials proclaimed it the largest grocery store in the city and a “private urban renewal project.” Within four years, the store had closed.

Components Concepts manufactured electrical parts there for a time in the 1970s, followed by Canar Manufacturing, which produced upholstered furniture. The Omaha Small Business Network established its Business and Technology Center in 1984, expanding in 1990. It also owns several of the businesses across 24th Street.

Constructed in the 1930s, this building was first the home to a tavern owned by Carl Rabes. In 1950 Paul Allen and his wife, Dorothy—a pianist who played with many local bands—bought the tavern. By the mid-1960s it was known as Allen’s Showcase Lounge, where many nationally known black musicians performed, including Dionne Warwick, Billy Eckstine, Sam Cooke, T-Bone Walker and the Ink Spots. Comedian Redd Foxx also performed here. It was also a club where one could spot celebrities in the audience.

George “Buddy” Miles got his start here, performing as a 12-year-old drummer in his father’s band. Miles later joined Jimi Hendrix in the short-lived Band of Gypsies. He included a song on his 1970 album Them Changes as a tribute to the Showcase owner, who helped launch his music career. The instrumental song was entitled “Paul B. Allen, Omaha, Nebraska.”

Other local musicians who got their start at the Showcase before going on to national prominence include Calvin Keyes, a guitarist for Ray Charles, and Lester Abrams, a drummer and pianist who wrote the hit song “Minute by Minute” for the Doobie Brothers. Abrams’ 1970s funk-rock band, “L. A. Carnival,” has
been called the missing link between Sly and the Family Stone and hip-hop.

Allen worked in a number of civic positions, and he and his wife were active throughout the north Omaha community. The nightclub closed in 1992, and Allen died in 1997. It reopened briefly as Papa G’s Showcase in 1999. Chi-Town Chicken Restaurant now shares the building with a tavern.

15. Webster Telephone Exchange
2213 Lake St.
Designed by architect Thomas Kimball in 1908, the Webster Telephone Exchange survived the 1913 Easter Sunday tornado. While other buildings in the area suffered severe damage, the Webster Telephone Exchange became a makeshift hospital and morgue. Telephone operators were hailed as heroes for keeping telephone communication plugged in during the aftermath of the storm.

When the telephone company moved out, they offered the building to the city. The Mid-City Community Center moved in, setting up a nursery, library, gymnasium, and medical and dental clinics. Meanwhile, a branch of the Urban League opened in Omaha in 1928. The two agencies merged in 1934.

The Urban League moved out in 1948, and the Near North Side YMCA moved into the building. After a new YMCA home was built nearby in 1951, the former telephone exchange was converted to apartments.

The building sat vacant for a time in the early 1970s. After collecting documents and artifacts for about 15 years, Bertha Calloway opened the Great Plains Black History Museum there in 1976. She developed the museum as a repository of materials documenting the history of blacks in Omaha and the Midwest. The museum moved out of the building in 2001 and has relocated.

The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. White Lotus Development purchased it in 2014.

16. Myers Funeral Home
2416 N. 22nd St.
William Myers opened Myers Funeral Home in 1922 at 2518 Lake St. and moved to this location by 1927. It was Nebraska’s oldest black-owned business when it closed in 2011. L. Kenneth Myers, who took over from his father as funeral director, retired in 1985. The business remained in the family as son Larry Myers took over the business. His sister, Sibyl Myers, handled administrative duties for a time.

The structure was built in 1910.
17. Fire Station No. 14
2032 Lake St.
Fire Station No. 14, constructed in 1940, became home to the Omaha Association of Black Professional Firefighters in 1999. It was the last all-black fire station in Omaha; the citywide integration of fire stations began in 1957. The firefighters’ association houses photographs and memorabilia. The building is also used for recruitment and training.

Matthew Ricketts, Nebraska’s first black legislator and one of its earliest physicians, was instrumental in the hiring of Omaha’s first five black firefighters in 1895 at 27th and Jones Streets. In 1914, there were seven black firefighters at Hose Station No. 11 at 30th and Spaulding, including drivers Harry Lewis and Woodson Porter.

The black firefighters association formed in 1974 to challenge discrimination within the fire department and engage in community outreach programs.

18. St. John AME Church
2402 N. 22nd St.
Designed by Omaha architect Frederick Stott, St. John’s African Methodist Episcopal Church is one of the few Prairie-School-style churches in the city. The Prairie-School-style—pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright in the early 20th century—emphasizes the flatness of the prairie, with low horizontal lines, flat or hipped roofs and overhanging eaves. This, the third home for the church, was constructed beginning in 1921 but not fully completed until 1956, as funding was tight. Worship services were held in the basement until 1947.

The church organized in Omaha in 1865. Its first building was at 617 N. 18th St. Rev. W.C. Williams became pastor in 1917 and grew the membership from under 400 to over a thousand in five years. Active in helping blacks secure employment in the private sector, as city workers, and in the police department, Williams also organized the Ministerial Alliance.

A commemorative street marker designates the section of 22nd Street along St. John’s as Richard Allen Court, named for the minister who founded the African Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia in 1787.
19. Jesuit Academy
2311 N. 22nd St.
The Jesuit Middle School of Omaha got its start in 1995 with the purchase of the former Butler-Gast YMCA building. Members of the Jesuit order, seeking ways to best serve the North Omaha community, conducted interviews with ministers, community leaders, and residents. After more than 100 interviews, the group found that community members desired a school for their young men—one that prepared them for a college preparatory curriculum, instilled discipline, and deepened their faith. Classes started in 1996 with Fr. Jim Michalski, S.J. as president and Kathy Trotter as principal. The grades four-to-eight middle school graduated its first class in 2001. The school is now known as the Jesuit Academy.

The YMCA building opened in 1951. The $90,000 building was furnished with an auditorium, gymnasium, office space, club room, game room and kitchen. John Butler was the first director. The Near North Side YMCA began in 1945 in rented quarters.

20. Zion Baptist Church
2215 Grant St.
Founded in 1884, Zion Baptist Church was Omaha’s largest African-American church by the early 1900s. In August of 1913, members of Zion Baptist laid the cornerstone for a magnificent new church that was designed by Clarence “Cap” Wigington. Their previous brick structure was so frail it was in danger of falling down. The 1913 tornado obliged and leveled the church. The congregation rented an old Episcopal church at 26th and Franklin during construction.

Zion was an integral part of Omaha’s African-American community in the aftermath of the 1919 courthouse lynching and riot as an NAACP meeting spot. In the 1960s, Zion Baptist Pastor Rudolph McNair and Rev. Kelsey Jones formed the 4CL, the Citizens Coordinating Committee for Civil Liberties. The group demonstrated to raise awareness of minority viewpoints and against discriminatory hiring practices.

2221 N. 24th St.
James G. Jewell built the building that bears his name in 1923. Its second-floor dance hall started out as a place to host church meetings, rallies and dances featuring local bands. Dreamland Ballroom didn’t really hit its stride until about 1932. By then, Jewell’s son, James C. “Jimmy” Jewell, was running the club and beginning to book national jazz acts.

The Omaha World-Herald noted in its Aug. 31, 1932 edition that “big time” had come to North 24th Street. “Big time hot from Harlem and the folks were out to shake that thang as the Grand Duke of Ellington—Duke Ellington and his orchestra, ‘the hottest
band on earth’—made the warm and humid air cool by comparison.” Some 500 people—black and white—jammed the hall at 24th and Grant Streets.

Jimmy Jewell went on to book other giants of jazz at the famed Dreamland, including Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie and Dizzy Gillespie. Preston Love noted that Jewell was an accomplished pianist with an eye for talent. As a teen, he played piano for silent movies at a theater in north Omaha. In 1943, Preston Love made his first appearance with the Count Basie Orchestra in front of the hometown crowd at the Dreamland.

The hall was not especially opulent, but it was a place to be “dolled up in glad rags.” Women wore their finest satin dresses there. The latest dance moves were practiced on the floor of the Dreamland.

The Bobby Bland Revue was perhaps the last act to play the Dreamland in December of 1965. The Tuxedo Billiards and a barbershop on the first floor remained open until 1975. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, the same year that the Omaha Economic Development Corporation purchased it. OEDC and the local chapter of the NAACP have offices in the building. Also housed in the building is Herb Rhodes, a long-time cattle breeder and commodities trader.

The Lucky Millinder Orchestra played the Dreamland Ballroom in 1948. Omaha natives Preston Love and Wynonie Harris were once members of Lucky’s band. Photo courtesy University of Nebraska at Lincoln History Harvest.

Just to the south, the Salem Food Pantry moved to its new location at 2205 N. 24th St. in 2003. The building previously served as a post office; a beauty salon was also located there. Skeet’s Barbecue has been serving up ribs and chicken in its small building since 1953. Harold “Skeets” Whiteside started the business. Wilson Custom Tile Co. is located in a building previously owned by Micklin Lumber.

A mural created by the Bemis Urban Mural Project in 1999 adds color to the side of the Salem Food Pantry.
Barbecue lovers come from all points of town for chicken and ribs at Skeets.

22. Fair Deal Café 2118 N. 24th St.
It was a place to talk over problems and discuss things as much as it was a spot to grab an order of eggs, a side of grits and a mug of coffee. Politics mixed with soul food at the Fair Deal Café, an institution on 24th Street for more than 50 years. Started around 1950, Charles Hall took over the grill in 1953 and ran it with help from his wife, Audentria. He turned out the lights for the last time in 2003.

Community leaders, retirees, business owners, and politicians ate, listened, argued and planned at the tiny eating space. Hall served up big portions of chitterlings, mustard greens, spare ribs, corn bread, ham hocks and cranberry sauce; prices were $2 to $3 a plate in the mid-1970s. He also hired plenty of the neighborhood youth as busboys and dishwashers. A local pastor claims that Hall kept him from a habitual life of crime and mayhem and pointed him to a more productive future.

Now a project by the Omaha Economic Development Corporation will bring the Fair Deal back, or at least parts of it. A grocery store along with micro-retail outlets will anchor the project, with support from the façade and artifacts from the Fair Deal Café.

23. St. Benedict the Moor Church 2423 Grant St.
Jesuit priest Francis Cassilly organized St. Benedict the Moor Church in 1918. In 1923, parishioners purchased a church building from an African Methodist Episcopal congregation. It started as the only Nebraska Catholic church serving black parishioners but has since been integrated. St. Benedict’s Catholic Church, which had been housed in an old 1890s brick factory building, erected a new church at 2423 Grant in 1958.

The parish built a new school in 1929 and operated it for about 40 years. After sitting vacant since 1968, the school building reopened as the Bryant Resource Center in 1989. The center operates a Head Start preschool program and a senior citizens center.

The basketball courts behind the church opened in 1966 and were named for George Bryant, a long-time church member and the director of the Dan Desdunes band for nearly 30 years. Attending the basketball center’s opening program were Bob
Boozer and Gale Sayers, two of Omaha’s premier athletes who ascended to professional careers.

A pickup basketball game at the George Bryant Basketball Center during Native Omahan Days.

24. Omaha Star 2216 N. 24th St.
The Omaha Star is one of at least nine black-owned newspapers published in Omaha, starting with The Progress in 1889. Mildred Brown and her then-husband, S. Edward Gilbert, started The Star in 1938, after working at another local weekly, the Omaha Guide. After they divorced in 1943, Brown became the sole publisher. The newspaper was to become the longest-operating, black-owned newspaper run by a woman. It is still run by a black woman: its editor now is Brown’s niece, Marguerita Washington.

The Star’s motto was published in the first edition: “Dedicated to the service of the people that no good cause shall lack a champion and that evil shall not go unopposed.” It continues to appear on the masthead of each edition. Brown was perhaps inspired by the Rev. John Albert Williams, an Episcopal minister who published the Omaha Monitor from 1915 to 1929. He advocated for greater employment of blacks and worked to bolster the spirits of black Omahans.

Civil rights activists Charles Washington, Ernie Chambers and Matthew Stelly have worked as reporters or columnists for the weekly. Catherine Hughes sold ads for The Star in the 1960s before moving on to start her Radio One empire.

Brown was a member of the groundbreaking DePorres Club, a civil rights organization that protested against discriminatory hiring practices. Creighton professor Fr. John Markoe and student Denny Holland formed the group in 1947; it met for a time at the Star office.

The building was designed by architect George Prinz in 1923 for undertaker Allen Jones. His name is spelled out in the tiled entry. It was renovated in 2007, thanks to a federal grant, and added to the National Register of Historic Places. The content of the Omaha Star is also preserved; the newspaper was digitized and can be accessed through an online subscription.

A park that honors Brown’s legacy was dedicated in 2008 just north of the Star building. It features a bronze bust by artist Littleton Alston.

25. Jesse’s Place 2311 N. 24th St.
The location that has housed Jesse’s Place since 2007 was originally the
Dining Car Waiters Key Club in 1956. Victor Metoyer started Goode & Metoyer’s Bar-B-Que next door about two years later. A popular spot for ribs and chicken, Metoyer’s was later located at 2307 N. 24th St. This was the site of the Idlewild Pool Hall, the business that suffered the greatest loss of life during the devastating tornado of 1913.

Jesse’s Place, owned by Jesse and Juanita Shields, caters to an “over-30” crowd and features “old school” music such as blues and jazz through occasional live bands and karaoke. Family friend James Glass has assembled a history collection in the tavern; the photos and newspaper articles recall the storied history of North 24th Street.

26. **Blue Lion Center** 2421-2425 N. 24th St.

The two buildings that comprise the former Blue Lion Center were both built around 1918. The complex was named in 1981 for the most famous—or at least the most recent—occupants of the buildings: McGill’s Blue Room, a tavern in the corner building, and Lion Products, in the building to the south with the stepped front wall. A business incubator project, the Blue Lion brought new hope for revitalizing the area but was dormant in its last years.

From 1939 until his death in 1960, Eugene McGill operated his Blue Room, which featured name jazz acts and jam sessions. Lion Products, an agricultural implement dealer, occupied its location from the 1940s to about 1970. The earliest tenant may have been Crosby & Smith, an auto repair garage.

The two-story corner building was first occupied by a tire store, Gate City Printing and Chris Nielsen, a seller of soft drinks. (Prohibition in Nebraska began in 1917.) By 1930 two black professionals had offices in the building: Craig Morris, a dentist, and John Pegg, an attorney who was active in the Urban League and the NAACP.

RH Land Management—affiliated with the Sherwood Foundation—bought the buildings in 2014 with the intention of bringing in small businesses and non-profits. One of the first to settle in is the Union for Contemporary Arts, which set up shop at the former DePorres Center in 2011.
Other buildings of note in the area:

Beth Hamedrosh Adas
Jeshuran Synagogue
25th & Seward
Russian Jews built their first synagogue near 18th and Chicago. Some members of this congregation wanted a place of worship closer to their homes in north Omaha, so they built a synagogue at 25th and Seward in 1922. Maurice Micklin, who owned a lumber yard near 24th and Burdette, helped build the synagogue. In the early 1960s, the congregation merged with another synagogue and located near 31st and Cuming. This synagogue was later converted to a church and has been vacant in recent years.

Another Jewish congregation converted an old church at 24th and Nicholas into B’nai Jacob Anshe Sholom synagogue in the early 1900s. The Jewish Old People’s Home and an adjacent bath house were located near 24th and Charles.

Pilgrim Baptist 2501 Hamilton St.
Pilgrim Baptist Church was established in 1918 by a group of people who migrated to Omaha from Brewton, Alabama. They purchased a building from Calvary Baptist Church and moved there in 1920. The congregation has remained there ever since, despite a severe fire in 1948. The four walls and bell tower were left standing—and a Bible left on the pulpit was merely charred around the edges; the congregation rebuilt.

Salem Baptist Church 3131 Lake St.
Salem Baptist Church got its start in 1922 at 26th and Franklin and has since grown to become the largest predominantly black church in Omaha. In 1995 Salem embarked on a campaign to fund a new worship center and educational facility. In early 2000, the Salem family marched from 3336 Lake St. to their new church home, on the site of the former Hilltop Housing Complex. The new church sanctuary has a seating capacity of 1,300. In addition, Salem has classrooms that can accommodate 375 people, a nursery, a multi-purpose fellowship hall, an administrative wing and ample parking. The Rev. J.C. Wade served as Salem’s pastor for more than 40 years.
Nearby sites on the National Register of Historic Properties:

**The Sherman**
2501 N. 16th St.
The Sherman, built in 1897, is one of the first three apartment buildings constructed in Omaha and the oldest apartment building that remains today. George H. Payne, the developer of the Sherman, was also one of the directors of Omaha’s 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, which undoubtedly influenced the Neo-Classical Revival architectural style of the Sherman.

**The Margaret**
2103 N. 16th St.
An outstanding example of the Jacobean Revival style popular in the early 20th century, The Margaret was built in 1916. The success of the building’s architecture can be seen through its longevity as a living space; The Margaret has recently been developed to serve as low-income housing.

**Strehlow Terrace**
2024 & 2107 N. 16th St.
Strehlow Terrace consists of six apartment buildings built between 1905 and 1916. Aside from its architectural significance as an early adaptation of the Prairie-School style, Strehlow Terrace is also the earliest documented multiple-building housing development in Omaha. The builder and namesake, Robert Strehlow, was a national figure for his work in constructing world’s fairs in Omaha, Buffalo, St. Louis, Seattle, and San Francisco.

**Memmen Apartments**
2214–2222 Florence Blvd.
The Memmen Apartments, built in 1889, consist of four Queen-Anne-style row houses along Florence Boulevard. The defining features of the residences are the large Neo-classically influenced front porches.
Calvin Memorial Presbyterian Church 3105 N. 24th St.
The 1910-built church welcomed two merged congregations in 1954, after its original occupants had moved to a location in northwest Omaha. The predominantly black Hillside Church and the mostly white Bethany congregation successfully integrated the church, which was renamed Calvin Memorial Presbyterian Church. It was designed in the Neo-Classical Revival style by Frederick Henninger.

Lizzie Robinson House 2864 Corby St.
Edward and Lizzie Robinson, founders of the first Church of God in Christ in the state of Nebraska, resided at this house with their daughter from 1916 to 1924. Many of the denomination’s early pioneers stayed at this house when they visited Omaha. Lizzie Robinson is significant historically for her role as organizer of the women’s ministry of the church.

Sacred Heart Catholic Church 2206 Binney St.
Parishioners at Sacred Heart Church, designed by George Fisher and Harry Lawrie in the Gothic Revival style, celebrated the first mass in the structure in 1902. Father Patrick Judge, the first editor of The True Voice, was the driving force behind the church. Real estate titan Herman Kountze donated land for the church and school.

Malcolm X Home Site 3448 Pinkney St.
Malcolm Little, later Malcolm X, and finally El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, was born in Omaha in 1925. He rose to prominence in the Nation of Islam and became an outspoken proponent of black activism. He was assassinated in 1965 while delivering a speech in New York. Rowena Moore worked for years to develop the site.

Fort Omaha 30th & Fort
General William Tecumseh Sherman called for the establishment of Fort Omaha in 1868. Most of the buildings on the fort date to around 1905, when a Signal Corps school was established there. The General Crook House, built in 1878, is also on the National Register. Metropolitan Community College took possession of most of the fort property in 1975.

Local landmarks in the area include:

Bay House 2024 Binney St.
A Queen Anne home designed by Omaha architect George Fischer and first owned by John Bay, co-owner of the Crystal Ice Company.

Buford House 1804 N. 30th St.
Built in 1929 in the Period Revival style, the Buford House was the residence of Harry Buford, a well-to-do member of the black community and known associate of city boss Tom Dennison.
Charles Storz House 1901 Wirt St.
Designed by architects Fisher and Lawrie in the Arts and Crafts style, this house was built in 1909 for Charles Storz, saloon owner and brother of brewery magnate Gotlieb Storz. Landmarks, Inc., the predecessor of Restoration Exchange Omaha, was heavily involved in its 1983 renovation.

George F. Shepard House 1802 Wirt St.
Designed by stonemason and artist George F. Shepard in 1903, the house reflects the influence of classical architecture. A marble cutter for many years, Shepard added his artistic skill to personalize his property, carving his name into the front steps.

For further reading:


Patterns on the Landscape, Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, 1984


Rock Mr. Blues: The Life and Music of Wynonie Harris by Tony Collins, 1995

Ahead of Their Time: The Story of the Omaha DePorres Club by Matt Holland, 2014

Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone by David Vassar Taylor, 2001

Jewish Life in Omaha and Lincoln: A Photographic History by Oliver B. Pollak, 2001

Memories of the Jewish Midwest: Mom and Pop Grocery Stores, Nebraska Jewish Historical Society, 2011
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