

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

Name of Building or Site	
Common Thompson's Block	Historic (if applicable) Thompson's Block
Location	
Street Address 119 E. Main Street	Aldermanic District Sixth
Classification	
Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.) building	
Zoning District C4	Present Use law offices
Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's office)	
Name (s) Robert C. Voss	
Street Address 119 E. Main Street P.O. Box 1348 Madison, WI 53701	Telephone Number
Legal Description (available at City Assessor's office)	
Parcel Number 0709-133-2727-1	Legal Description Original Plat, SW 23' of NE 71' of NW 58' of Lot 1, Block 103
Condition of Property	
Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins) excellent	
Altered or Unaltered? altered	Moved or Original Site? original site
Wall Construction brick load-bearing	

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Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance.

Built in 1868, Thompson's Block is a three-story Italianate brick and sandstone commercial building.¹ The side bearing walls are built with Madison red brick; the rear wall is built of Madison sandstone on the ground floor and Madison red brick on the upper two stories. The street facade is cream brick on the upper two stories, and the ground floor consists of structural and decorative iron, Madison sandstone, glazing and wood doors, sashes and panels.

The architectural style is basically Italianate, and the detailing of the brickwork suggests the builder's intent to introduce classical references. The upper stories have four recessed bays strongly defined by brick pilasters. The segmental-arched windows have shallow hoods with brick molds, dentils and limestone keystones. Sandstone sills rest on sandstone modillions. Recessed panels dress the areas between the windows of the second and third floor. The brick base of the cornice is denticulated: a series of small dentils are recessed between larger ones. A plain tan brick parapet with limestone coping was built in 1947--at the time the original bracketed cornice with center pediment (shown in 1890 photo) was removed.²

The windows of the second and third floor, originally two-over-two double-hung sashes, were reglazed (probably in 1947), the vertical muntins were removed, three horizontal panes installed in each sash, and the arches eliminated.

The ground floor storefront was recently rebuilt, eliminating a 1947 Tudor-inspired remodeling with small windows. The design for the recent renovation was based upon documentation of remnants of structural materials and upon historical research. A c. 1900 single wide door set back three feet from the sidewalk was built based on similar period remodelings of older storefronts in Madison.³ The need for a code-required door width precluded reconstruction of a double-door entry similar to the original one.

Many original materials covered over in the 1947 remodeling were restored in the storefront renovation undertaken in 1983. Ornate cast-iron posts with roping, moldings and panels flank the main entrance. Stone piers support the bearing walls at either side of the storefront and frame the side entrance to the upper floor. All of these support a cast-iron beam faced with a classically-proportioned cast-iron entablature. Of these features, only the cast-iron columns and beam remained intact. The stone piers were damaged from the 1947 remodeling when half of one was removed to widen the side door to comply with code, and the projecting details--moldings, dentils and floral reliefs--were chiseled off to mount the framework for the new facade. Remnants of the ornate carved stone capitals served to provide a pattern used to carve sandstone replacements. New stone bases were also cut to replace the damaged originals of the piece. The balance of the damaged piers were then covered over with a sandstone slurry to give a uniform appearance. The cast-iron entablature, badly damaged when covered in 1947, was repaired. Missing and damaged sections were replaced to match details of the original.

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New insulated glass storefront windows including transom panes are set in wood frames resembling sashes. The transom above the main door is divided horizontally--the upper half louvered for air-conditioning intake ducts. Panels below the storefront windows are of simple design and built of wood.

The building's interior is quite plain. The construction is free span and it appears that there were no partitions in the original structure.⁴ On the ground floor no significant historical features remained. The recent renovation preserved the openness near the storefront windows and the ceiling height was stopped down from 12 to 8 feet at progressive distances from the entrance. Wallboard and new wood trim finish the contemporary interior.

The second and third floors are used as offices. Their floor plan and the finishes appear to date from the 1960s. Most partitions on these stories are wood-framed and paneled.

Notes

1. Building date from City of Madison tax rolls and Madison Past & Present, (Madison: The Wisconsin State Journal, 1902), pp. 206-207.
2. Remodeling dated from City of Madison. Building permits dated January 16, January 27, and June 7, 1947.
3. Review of comparable commercial buildings in Madison from photo collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
4. Interior view of ground floor store. Madison Past and Present, Wisconsin State Journal, Madison, 1902, p. 206.
5. Of architectural interest is the cast-iron work of the facade which was produced by the Madison foundry Skinner & Co.

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Original Owner Ole Thompson	Original Use grocery store
Architect or Builder unknown	Architectural Style Italianate
Date of Construction 1868	Indigenous Materials Used Madison sandstone

List of Bibliographical References Used

Advertisement, Wisconsin State Journal, August 4, 1871.

Madison Past and Present, (Madison: The Wisconsin State Journal, 1902), pp. 206-207.

Capital Times, January 9, 1947.

Wisconsin State Journal, January 9, 1947.

Form Prepared By:

Name and Title

Gary Tipler, John D. Rolling and Katherine Rankin

Organization Represented (if any)

City of Madison

Address

P. O. Box 2985
Madison, WI 53701-2985

Telephone Number

266-6552

Date Nomination Form Was Prepared

August 9, 1993

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Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria:

Thompson's Block is significant as being a good representative of mid-19th century commercial architecture in Madison boasting many of its original exterior design elements.

Architectural Significance

Built in 1868, the Thompson Block is significant as a good local example of a commercial building in the Italianate style and for the method of construction employing cast-iron storefront construction. A review of extant commercial buildings built between 1860 and 1880 indicates that it is also stylistically unique.

Many commercial buildings built in the late 1860s in Madison's business district, which included Pinckney, Main, King and Webster Streets, employed cast-iron storefronts. In contrast to earlier buildings with masonry bearing facades, cast-iron systems opened up interiors creating larger display areas and increasing natural lighting. Cast-iron and glazing predominated in the new storefronts of the 1860s, while the use of traditional stone and brick masonry gave stylistic distinction to upper stories of facades.

The Thompson Block, like many commercial buildings of the period, was built of cream-colored brick. This material could be easily stacked, shipped and used in construction by one person whereas the use of stone required crews simply to move the individual units. First used in Madison about 1857, cream brick increased in popularity for use in commercial buildings in the 1860s, particularly following completion of the railroad connection between Madison and Watertown in 1868 where brick yards supplied the material formerly shipped from Milwaukee. Cream brick was increasingly favored over the locally-quarried buff sandstone, although sandstone continued to be used in conjunction with brick, especially as a foundation material and when carved for ornamental lintels and sills and belt courses. The Thompson Block represents an early variation from the common use of stone, in that brick was used in detailing the window lintels. The stone was used, however, in the storefront piers, window sills and modillions.

The brick masonry details on the upper stories of Thompson's Block are more articulated than those found on other remaining brick commercial facades of the period. The brick pilasters, the hood molds and dentils suggest restraint and classical severity--this in contrast to the more flamboyant details common to Italianate vocabulary used in Madison. There are no comparables in this regard to the Thompson Block.

The building retains many original design elements, notably the structural components of the storefront: cast-iron columns and entablature, and sandstone piers. In contrast, Madison's remaining 19th-century storefronts have been considerably altered and similar features covered, obliterated or removed while the vast majority of the buildings of the period were demolished. Thus the Thompson Block shares this distinction with very few buildings which remain.

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Historical Background

Thompson's Block is among the few buildings remaining of Madison's early commercial district. The area, including the city block upon which Thompson's Block is located along with the other city blocks adjacent to it, comprised Madison's earliest business center, from settlement in the late 1830s well into the 20th century.¹ By the 1860s, this area showed signs of specialization as a retailing center for food and dry goods. In 1868 alone, 12 of 28 local dealers in "groceries and provisions" were concentrated in the Main and King Street area.² This pattern continued into the 1920s.³

Thompson's Block remained in retail grocery store use from the time of its construction until the early 1930s when it was converted to a tavern on the ground floor and offices on the upper floors. From 1969 until December 1982, the ground floor housed The Dangle Lounge, an entertainment establishment of great local notoriety.⁴

The building was built for Ole Thompson, one of Madison's early Norwegian entrepreneurs. Thompson had operated a hotel catering to Norwegians nearby on Butler Street for some years before entering retail trade. He acquired the East Main Street site in 1867, cleared it of an older frame structure and built the new Thompson's Block in 1868.⁵ With his partner John R. Regan, Thompson sold common grocery items along with "drugs, medicines, wines, liquors, paints, oils, chemicals, & c."⁶ The Thompson-Regan partnership dissolved in March 1871, and Thompson continued alone until his death in August 1871.⁷

Thompson's business was operated for a short time (1872-74) by his competitors (John H.) Clark and (Arthur C.) Mills. In 1874 the business was acquired by Louis (Lars) Nelson. Louis Nelson was succeeded by his son, Moses ("Mose") L. Nelson, who remained in the grocery business at this location through 1929 and owned the building until 1946, shortly before his death.⁸

Nelson's grocery was known as not only one of the better groceries but also as somewhat of a neighborhood meeting place. At the turn of the century, the building was described as being "packed from cellar to roof with staple and fancy groceries and everything useful to good living."⁹ The grocery was noted for its fish market--Nelson made frequent buying trips to Chicago to handpick his purchases. The store was patronized by many of Madison's oldest and most prominent families. A news reporter reminisced in 1946, "In the earlier day, Nelson's grocery was a veritable community center for the exchange of neighborhood news and was a favorite meeting place for many whose homes were east of the Capitol square."¹⁰

Notes

1. See David V. Mollenhoff, Madison: A History of the Formative Years (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1982), p. 37, and Elisha W. Keyes, ed., History of Dane County (Madison: Western Historical Association, 1906), pp. 265-271.

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2. Madison City Directory, 1868 edition, p. 116.
3. Madison City Directory, 1925 edition, p. 858.
4. Madison City Directory, editions for 1870-1982.
5. City of Madison, Treasurer, Tax Rolls, 1856-1879.
6. Advertisement in the Wisconsin State Journal, August 4, 1871.
7. Notice of partnership dissolution in the Madison Daily Democrat, March 31, 1871. Thompson's will, dated August 9, 1871 was filed August 25, 1871. See Dane County Courts, Wills, Box 36, Volume I, p. 431.
8. For successive ownership of the business through 1920 see Madison Past and Present (Madison: The Wisconsin State Journal, 1902), pp. 206-207. Moses Nelson still appears as proprietor of the grocery in Madison City Directory, 1927 edition, p. 995.
9. Madison Past and Present, p. 207.
10. Wisconsin State Journal, January 9, 1947.
11. Capital Times, January 9, 1947.