

## Downtown Schuyler Historic District NR Nomination

The Downtown Schuyler Historic District is in the heart of the City of Schuyler, Colfax County, Nebraska. The approximately 17 acre district contains forty-five contributing resources, eighteen non-contributing resources, and 4 resources previously listed in the National Register that form the historic commercial center of the city. The boundaries of the district are roughly Colfax Street (Nebraska Highway 15, west), C and D Street (east), East 12th Street and Railside Drive (north), and East 10th Street (south).

Residential neighborhoods surround the commercial district. **This area developed as Schuyler's primary business and civic district after the town's founding in 1868.** The existing buildings date from circa 1880 to the late 20th century. Two-lane brick-paved streets with concrete curbs and sidewalks form the grid that organizes the town center. Commercial buildings in the center of the district form a unified street wall that abuts the sidewalks. Most of the buildings in the Downtown Schuyler Historic District are vernacular one- and two-part commercial blocks with flat roofs and brick cladding. Ornamental materials such as terra cotta, aluminum, cast iron, and wood provide detailing at cornices and storefronts. The one- and two-part commercial block forms have well-defined ground floor storefronts. Buildings in the district house a variety of businesses that support Schuyler's continued development, including grocery stores, financial institutions, restaurants, specialty stores, and automobile-related businesses. The noncontributing resources include properties that do not retain sufficient integrity due to alterations or those that have not reached the **fifty-year threshold for historic significance.** **Overall, the district retains integrity and communicates the commercial development of Schuyler, Nebraska, throughout the period of significance.**

### LOCATION AND SETTING

The Downtown Schuyler Historic District covers approximately 17 acres in Schuyler, Colfax County, Nebraska. With a population around 6,200, Schuyler lies 70 miles west of the larger metropolitan area of Omaha, Nebraska, between the cities of Fremont, Nebraska, and Columbus, Nebraska. U.S. Highway 30 borders the city on the north, and the Platte River flows south of the area (Figure 1). Agricultural landscapes surround the area outside of the city limits. The Downtown Schuyler Historic District lies near the city center. In the historic district, concrete sidewalks and curbs line the two-lane brick-paved streets that organize the blocks. The roads are wide enough to accommodate diagonal parking spaces on either side of the driving lanes. The blocks within the historic district are relatively flat. Outside the boundary of the commercial center, building types transition to residential uses.

The Downtown Schuyler Historic District includes six properties along A Street between East 10th Street and East 12th Street; twenty properties on B Street between East 10th Street and Railside Drive; six properties along C Street between East 10th Street and East 12th Street; twenty properties along East 11th Street between Colfax Street (Nebraska Highway 15) and D Street; fourteen properties along East 12th Street between Colfax Street (Nebraska Highway 15) and C Street; and the brick-paved streets within the district boundaries (Figure 2).

The buildings lining East 11th Street, B Street, and C Street present a dense cohesive street wall of commercial buildings between one and two stories tall with shared party walls that directly abut concrete sidewalks (Photos 2, 4-6, 9, 11, 15, 17, 19-21, and 24-25). **They form a cohesive streetscape that illustrates the evolution of Schuyler's commercial center.** Portions of A Street and East 12th Street also have dense street walls of commercial buildings, but the street walls are interrupted by freestanding buildings or paved lots connected to auto-related businesses. Some of the freestanding buildings are auto-related, while others are civic buildings such as the Schuyler Post Office, the old Schuyler Public Library, and the Colfax County Courthouse (Photos 1, 12-14, 18, 22).

## RESOURCES

Dating from circa 1880 to the late 20th century, most of the buildings in the Downtown Schuyler Commercial District are simple one- and two-story structures. **The traditional building material is brick.** Of the sixty-six resources in the Downtown Schuyler Commercial District, forty-eight are contributing and eighteen are noncontributing. Several different property types with shared physical or associative characteristics exist with the historic district.

The buildings are predominantly commercial. The resources exhibit three building forms: one-part commercial blocks, two-part commercial blocks, and freestanding buildings. The variety of businesses housed in these buildings reflects the needs of a thriving town. The structures represent functional subcategories such as businesses, specialty stores, financial institutions, restaurants, warehouses, and department stores. Out of the sixty-six resources, only nine were built for non-commercial functions. Four were constructed as civic buildings such as a post office, library, courthouse, and City Hall, two were built as social halls, and two as movie theaters. The remaining non-commercial resource is the brick-paved roads within the historic district. Many of these historic functions align with current building use. Current functions of the commercial buildings include businesses, specialty stores, restaurants, movie theaters, and financial institutions. Some buildings are vacant. The majority of the noncommercial buildings retain their historic function; the library is vacant and one of the movie theaters is now a restaurant.

The majority of commercial building forms represented in the historic district are one-part commercial blocks (38), two-part commercial blocks (18), and freestanding commercial buildings (5). Most of the buildings have a utilitarian architectural style with subtle stylistic influences. Civic buildings within the historic district exhibit more formal architectural styles, such as Tudor Revival, Second Renaissance Revival, and Moderne. The resources were constructed over a period from circa 1880 through the 1990s, with the **majority of the buildings constructed between 1890 and 1925.**

## INTEGRITY

**The Downtown Schuyler Historic District retains sufficient architectural integrity to communicate the evolution of Schuyler’s commercial core during the period of significance.** The buildings within the district and the streetscapes they create define the setting and visual character of the historic district. The commercial and civic buildings were constructed from circa 1880 through the 1990s. The dense street walls in the center of the district illustrate the growth of Schuyler’s commercial core and represent a typical downtown streetscape of early commercial centers. **The automobile-related resources on the edges of the district express the influence of the Lincoln Highway within the city.** The resources in the commercial core form a cohesive downtown business district that retains its original location and setting. The district as a whole communicates feelings about and associations with the continued commercial development in downtown Schuyler from the late nineteenth century to the present day.

Alterations to buildings within the historic district reflect the modernization of first-story display windows, entrances, and façades. Many of these alterations have left the historic openings and spatial relationships of the storefront and upper stories intact. The majority of these changes occurred during the period of significance and have become historic in their own right.

The Downtown Schuyler Historic District (District), in the heart of Schuyler, Colfax County, Nebraska, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places for local significance under **Criterion A** for the areas of **COMMERCE and COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**.

The historic district, roughly bounded by Nebraska Highway 15 (west), D Street (east), Railside Dr. (north), and 10th Street (south), encompasses forty-five contributing resources, eighteen non-contributing resources, and four resources previously listed in the Nation Register built between circa 1880 and the late twentieth century. The nominated buildings and the streetscapes they compose form the historic commercial and civic core of Schuyler. **Businesses in the district supported Schuyler’s agricultural community and, later on, the automobile industry as it developed in direct response to the creation of the Lincoln Highway in 1913,** as described in the context “The Lincoln Highway in Nebraska” outlined in the Multiple Property Documentation Form “Historic and Architectural Resources of the Lincoln Highway in Nebraska.” **The commercial buildings within the district illustrate the evolution of Schuyler from a railroad depot to a thriving agricultural community and highway tourist destination.** The buildings housed a variety of **commercial and civic functions** essential to the development of a growing city, such as groceries, agricultural implement stores, financial institutions, blacksmiths, libraries, and courthouses. Most of the commercial buildings in the Downtown Schuyler Historic District are masonry one- and two- part commercial blocks. These one- and two-story buildings form unified street walls and illustrate the architectural trends common to the commercial centers of small cities.

**The advent of the automobile era and the establishment of the Lincoln Highway in the early twentieth century brought new building forms to Schuyler.** Filling stations, auto garages, and dealerships built along the Lincoln Highway's route illustrate the lasting impact of road-related commerce and tourism on Schuyler's central business district. The District is an excellent example of a compact and cohesive commercial core established in association with the railroad and sustained through the advent of the automobile. The resources in the District represent the evolving commercial and governmental needs of the citizens of Schuyler.

**The period of significance for Criterion A: Commerce begins c.1880 with the estimated date of construction of the earliest extant resource in the District and ends in 1965,** the fifty year closing date for periods of significance where activities begun historically continue to have importance but no more specific date can be determined. This encompasses the period that commerce was most active in downtown Schuyler. **The period of significance for Criterion A: Community Planning and Development begins in 1913 with the designation of the Lincoln Highway along 11th and B streets and ends in 1928 when the highway was realigned with the newly established U.S. 30 north of the town.** This is the period when direct association with the Lincoln Highway spurred the construction along the route of buildings designed to house auto-related services and businesses, specifically filling stations, repair shops, and automobile dealerships. All of the resources built for providing an auto-related service were constructed during this period of significance.

#### **CRITERION A: COMMERCE: COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHUYLER**

Schuyler was founded in 1868 when the Union Pacific Railroad established a depot near Shell Creek, a tributary of the Platte River in eastern Platte County. **Railroad officials named the depot and surrounding town Shell Creek Station.** Historically, the area surrounding the Platte River Valley near Schuyler was used for transportation through the Nebraska Territory. Moses Shinn's ferry near the mouth of Shell Creek was a reliable passage south across the Platte River for westward travelers. The Mormon trail, founded in 1847 and the Military Road, founded in 1859, passed through the site of present-day Schuyler. The earliest residents of Schuyler settled near the mouth of Shell Creek beginning in 1856. Nebraska was a territory until 1867, when it was admitted as a state. **In 1869, the Nebraska state legislature divided Platte County into three smaller counties. In honor of then-Vice President Schuyler Colfax, the bill renamed the eastern part of Platte County as Colfax County and designated Shell Creek Station as the county seat, renaming the town Schuyler. Union Pacific Railroad officials platted Schuyler in 1869, arranging the town around the railroad depot (Figure 5).** The town consisted of 88 blocks with long, narrow lots laid out in a grid divided by streets that ran north to south and east to west. North-south streets were named after states and territories, with Pacific Street marking the western boundary and Atlantic Street marking the eastern boundary. East-west streets in the original town were named after trees. The Downtown Schuyler Historic District lies within the original town center next to the Union Pacific Railroad Depot.

Close proximity to the Union Pacific Railroad trunk line spurred the town's growth. The railroad enabled grain, livestock, and dry goods to be easily exported and imported, which supported the town's agricultural community. Schuyler had the only railroad station in the area and profited as the trade center for Butler, Colfax, and Stanton counties. **Grain and livestock became Schuyler's main exports.**

Herds of cattle from Texas passed through the stockyards in Schuyler and onto trains headed to western territories or Chicago. L.C. Smith opened the first general store in the spring of 1869, selling goods imported to Schuyler from Omaha. A blacksmith shop owned by Thomas Shaw and the Banking House of Folda, established by Frank Folda, opened soon after. Several other businesses opened in subsequent years. J.C. McBride established the county's first newspaper, The Schuyler Register, now called The Schuyler Sun, in 1871. The county courthouse, built in 1871, held a courtroom, county offices, and prison cells.

Schuyler's estimated population in 1869 was 200. In 1870, Schuyler incorporated as a village. County commissioners appointed five trustees to govern the village. Schuyler continued to develop and by 1873, the village had grown large enough to become a second-class city. **Czech, Irish, and German immigrants migrated west to Schuyler from 1870 to 1890.** The settlers were primarily farmers and grew mainly wheat. Their crops supplied the grain elevators and flourmills built next to the railroad, transforming Schuyler into a thriving agricultural community.

A drought between 1874 and 1877 brought Schuyler's population growth to a standstill. Economic growth and building construction stalled due to the poor agricultural conditions. The weather improved in 1878 and Schuyler prospered, growing to a population of approximately 2,000 by 1883. **Buildings "of a more permanent and substantial character" continued to develop around the railroad depot in order to support the agricultural community.** Early buildings in Schuyler were usually small one-story wood framed structures with wood shingle roofs. An 1885 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map of downtown Schuyler illustrates the growth of commercial buildings along **Idaho (A), Montana (B), Oregon (C), Vine (11th), and Willow (12th) Streets** (Figure 6). While some small wood structures remain, the majority of buildings are multi-story brick structures with metal or composition roofs and have a larger footprint than the older wood-framed buildings. They housed a variety of stores and entertainment venues such as agricultural implement stores, groceries, banks, saloons and hotels, barbers, drugstores, milliners, hardware stores, social halls, and churches. Some of the buildings constructed during this period are still extant, such as the commercial buildings at 1107-1111, 1112, and 1122 B Street. These buildings had long, narrow storefronts on the first story. **If the building contained more than one storefront, walls would often divide only the first story spaces; upper floors were large open halls where social gatherings were held.**

Continued population and economic growth through the late 19th and early 20th century supported the construction of new civic and commercial buildings in downtown Schuyler. Schuyler City Hall (1020 A St.), built in 1908, housed offices for running the city government as well as the fire department, jail, and public library. **In 1911, the Schuyler Public Library moved to its new location in a Tudor Revival building constructed with grant money from Andrew Carnegie (1003 B St.).** County commissioners hired architect George A. Berlinghof to design a new county courthouse in 1920, citing that the former courthouse's location outside Schuyler's commercial district was inconvenient. The commissioners chose a new location for the courthouse on the eastern edge of the commercial district, and building commenced in 1921. The Second Renaissance Revival style building occupies the north half of the block at 411 E. 11th St. and historically housed courtrooms, offices, an auditorium, and a jail.

While businesses that supported the needs of a small town such as agricultural implement stores, drugstores, and general stores were established during this time, buildings associated with the social life of Schuyler's citizens opened as well. By 1909, Schuyler had two movie theaters, one at 213 Vine (322 E. 11th) Street and the other at 506 Montana (1015 B) Street. The building at 213 Vine Street is no longer extant; the building at 506 Montana Street is extant but no longer houses a movie theater. Many social clubs had charters in Schuyler; some social clubs rented spaces for meetings and others built their own buildings. **The Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.) lodge 28 was chartered in Schuyler in 1871.** The I.O.O.F. grew to 120 members by 1902. The organization began searching for a new meeting hall to accommodate their large membership. In 1906, the I.O.O.F. hired Albert Henry Dyer to design a second story addition for the existing building at the northeast corner of Montana (B) and Vine (11th) Streets. The building at 302-306 E. 11th St. occupied a prominent location in the middle of Schuyler's commercial district (Photo 15). The I.O.O.F. lodge addition opened in January 1907. In addition to social clubs, the commercial district was often the site of parades. Schuyler's citizens would gather along the streets of the parade routes through the commercial center, celebrating holidays and civic events (Fig.7).

**The development of the Lincoln Highway from 1913 to 1915 generated the need for new automobile related businesses within downtown Schuyler. The highway passed through the business district on Montana (B) Street, then turned west at Vine (11th) Street before heading southwest out of the city.** The convenience associated with automobile travel influenced the construction and location of automobile-related services in Schuyler. The growing popularity of the automobile in the 1920s influenced the type of commercial buildings constructed in downtown Schuyler. New commercial buildings such as garages, filling stations, and automobile dealerships took advantage of their location on the Lincoln Highway's route through downtown Schuyler. Two garages, the Kopac Garage and the Dlouhy Motor Company opened c. 1915 on the corner of Vine (11th) and Idaho (A) Streets (Figures 8, 9). The garages sold and serviced automobiles. Filling stations opened c. 1915 along Vine (11th)

Street at Montana (B) and Idaho (A) Streets. The location of these buildings along the Lincoln Highway allowed travelers passing through Schuyler via the Lincoln Highway to stay on their route and locals to stay within the city's commercial center while refueling or repairing their vehicles. By 1928, the northeast corner of Montana (B) and Mulberry (10th) Streets had an entire block of auto sales and service businesses. The storefronts of these buildings were much larger than those first built in Schuyler, as they had to accommodate automobiles entering and exiting the buildings (Figures 10, 11).

**Schuyler supported the growth of road-related commerce and tourism by paving the streets with brick in 1923 and strengthened the city's infrastructure by laying new sewer lines in preparation for the brick pavers.** Other improvements to the district include **street name changes in 1928.** The north-south streets starting at Idaho Street (now A Street) became letter streets, heading east through Atlantic Street (now G Street). The east-west streets, originally a mix of number and name streets, were renumbered to include the entire city. In Schuyler's commercial center, Mulberry Street became 10th Street. The numbers ascended going north (Vine St. became 11th St., Willow St. became 12th St.) and descended going south (Main St. became 9th St., 2nd St. became 8th St.). Commercial development in downtown Schuyler continued steadily through the 1930s. Many of the new businesses were auto related, such as garages, filling stations, and automobile dealerships. By 1944, there were five auto related businesses within the Downtown Historic District: a filling station and auto-repair shop at 221 E. 11th Street, a garage at 124 E. 11th Street, and three automobile dealerships and repair shops at 204 E. 11th Street, 1004 B Street, and 1012 B Street (Figure 12). These buildings are all extant.

**A new post office, constructed in 1938-1939 at 119 E. 11th Street, was the first Moderne building in Schuyler.** As the city progressed into the 1940s, 50s, and 60s the façades of historic buildings were remodeled to keep up with current architectural styles. Enameled paneling was a popular cladding material. The Colfax Theater at 314 E. 11th Street, remodeled c.1940, was the first building in downtown Schuyler to use the paneling (Figure 13). Other businesses along B and 12th streets remodeled their façades with enameled panels in the 1950s and 60s; some façades are still extant, such as 1111 B Street, 1120 B Street, and 220 E. 12th Street. **The renovations, along with new electric streetlights installed in 1953,** helped draw more tourists into Schuyler’s central business district (Figure 14).<sup>22</sup>

#### CRITERION A: COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT: **THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY**

The Downtown Schuyler Historic District is locally significant under Criterion A for COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT due to the District’s associated historic context of “The Lincoln Highway in Nebraska, 1913-1974” under the “Historic and Architectural Resources of the Lincoln Highway in Nebraska” Multiple Property Listing. The District is a related property type and **clearly illustrates the Lincoln Highway’s influence on Schuyler’s commercial development.** Specific types of commercial entities, such as filling stations, repair shops, and automobile dealerships, established businesses on or near the new highway in direct response to the availability of this new transportation corridor and access to new customers.

Transportation routes in the early 20th century were unorganized and mostly unpaved. As the popularity of the automobile grew, so did the need for more safe and direct routes across the country. Private organizations were responsible for much of the early road development. These groups promoted the designation and improvement of regional and cross-country highways. They lobbied federal, state, and local governments to construct roads, and played a role in the development of a national highway system. With improved road conditions and the growing popularity and accessibility of the automobile, highways became more than just a means of transportation, but a tourist destination in itself. Road organizations published guidebooks, which gave directions and promoted businesses along the highway. Increased enthusiasm for highway tourism supported a growing auto-related industry such as garages, dealerships, service stations, diners, hotels, and motor courts.

Carl Graham Fisher, owner of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, promoted the Lincoln Highway as a paved, toll-free route connecting the east and west coasts. Fisher gained the support of Henry B. Joy, president of the Packard Motor Car Company, and in 1913, they organized the Lincoln Highway Association. The highway, named to commemorate Abraham Lincoln’s centennial birthday, started in New York City and ended in San Francisco. The Lincoln Highway Association wanted to complete the highway in time for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. They promoted the construction of the highway through “seedling miles,” a stretch of paved road donated by concrete manufacturers outside of a town center. The paved roads attracted tourists and encouraged towns to finish paving the road through their main street. While only a small portion of the highway remained a dirt road by the mid-1920s, most of the Lincoln Highway was gravel with a few stretches of concrete or brick. Schuyler used bricks to pave the section of the Lincoln Highway that traveled through town.

The Lincoln Highway traveled west from New York, passing through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. It then turned southwest, crossing the Missouri River into Nebraska and continuing through Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada before ending in California. The highway's route through Nebraska followed the Platte River route of the California, Oregon, and Mormon trails, transcontinental railroad, and other westward settlers, passing directly through Schuyler, which generated the growth of auto-related businesses in the city's commercial center. The 1935 Founder's Day Sixty-Fifth Anniversary Business Directory lists five garages and nine service stations in Schuyler, five of which were in the district at 124 E. 11th Street, 204 E. 11th Street, 221 E. 11th Street, 1004 B Street, and 1012 B Street. These buildings are all extant.

In 1925, the Federal Department of Agriculture announced a new system of numbered highways that would unify route markers. The Lincoln Highway's route through Nebraska became part of U.S. 30, which stretched from New Jersey to Oregon following the original alignment of the Lincoln Highway with a few deviations, including the alignment in Schuyler. Although the legislation establishing the highway system passed in 1926, the realignment of the Lincoln Highway in Schuyler did not occur until 1928. The Lincoln Highway/U.S. 30 traversed Schuyler just north of the city limits, eliminating the portion of the route through downtown Schuyler. **A steady increase in the number of cars and trucks registered in Schuyler from 1921 to 1933 illustrates the influence of the Lincoln Highway on Schuyler's commercial development.** The number of automobiles in Schuyler peaked at 3,567 in 1928 and slightly decreased in the following years, perhaps as a result of the Lincoln Highway's relocation to U.S. 30. The popularity of the Lincoln Highway and U.S. 30 diminished after the construction of Interstate 80 in the 1960s and 1970s. The interstate runs 50 miles south of Schuyler parallel to U.S. 30. Interstate 80 attracted tourists with more lanes and roadside amenities, causing a further decrease in highway tourism for small towns such as Schuyler.

## CONCLUSION

The Downtown Schuyler Historic District illustrates the commercial development of Schuyler from a small town in the late nineteenth century into a thriving rural city in the late twentieth century. The district contains the largest extant group of Schuyler's historic commercial and civic buildings, **which communicate the city's pattern of development as a whole. The buildings express the commercial history of the city and provide connections to the past, creating a unique sense of place.** The diversity of functions, architectural styles, and property types enhances the visual character of the District. **The District's continued development, reflected in the evolution of building styles, expresses the commercial improvements or updates and highlights its importance to the social and economic strength of the city during the period of significance.**

## **GLOSSARY & DEFINITIONS**

**c.** : circa date (estimated date based on architectural style, Sanborn maps, and city histories)

**circa:** (often preceding a date) approximately

**cornice:** horizontal decorative molding / ledge that crowns a building, door or window

**extant:** still in existence, not lost or destroyed

**Moderne:** Moderne architecture is a term applied to an overarching movement, with its exact definition and scope varying widely. Modern architecture is more about a change in the way humans looked at life and the technological innovations. The term is often applied to modernist movements at the turn of the 20th century, with efforts to reconcile the principles underlying architectural design with rapid technological advancement and the modernization of society. It would take the form of numerous movements, schools of design, and architectural styles, some in tension with one another, and often equally defying such classification.

**Second Renaissance Revival:** Revival of Renaissance-inspired architectural style in American from about 1890-1930 and was the purest in its resemblance to the Italian originals. The period benefited from first hand familiarity with original models, improved printing technology for photographic documentation, and perfected masonry veneering techniques after World War I. By about 1920, the technique of veneering a single layer of brick or stone onto the outside of wood framed walls had been perfected leading to smaller and less costly Italian Renaissance designs.

**terra cotta:** Ceramic masonry building material used as a decorative skin (e.g., brick). Popular in the U.S. from the late 19th century until the 1930s. Earth colored material both glazed and unglazed, sturdy and relatively inexpensive.

**Tudor Revival:** Emphasis on the simple, rustic, and the less impressive aspects of Tudor architecture.

**vernacular:** Architecture based on local needs, construction materials and reflecting local traditions. At least originally, vernacular architecture did not use formally-schooled architects, but relied on the design skills and tradition of local builders.