



Creston History Walking Tour (2019)

Directions are in *Italics*

Description: A brief introduction into the people and places of the historic Creston neighborhood.

Welcome to Creston



“North End” AKA Creston, 1865. Note the visible train depot in the foreground and early development up Plainfield Ave.
Grand Rapids Public Library

Welcome to the Creston neighborhood, a friendly historic suburb of Grand Rapids. On our adventure, we will explore the traditional Creston neighborhood, the catalyst of development of Grand Rapids’ North End.

On this tour, you’ll have a brief look into the people, places, and events that formed and shaped this diverse community. To gain a better feel for the area (or to take a quick break from walking), feel free to stop in one of the many cozy cafes or bars we will pass on our route. Also included are two optional stops that are suggested, but not required to complete this tour.

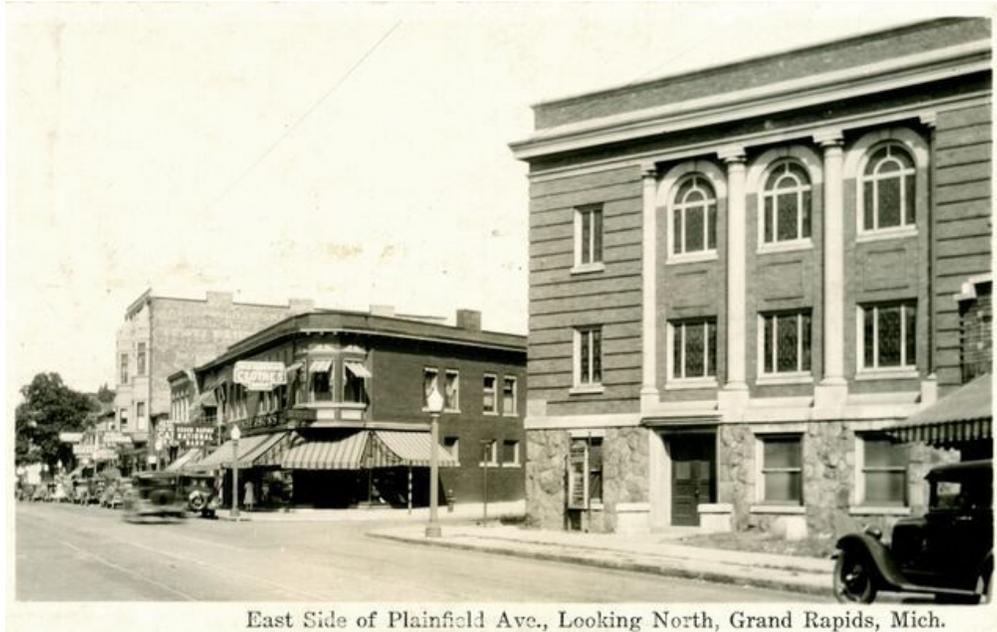
Creston has evolved a lot physically in its 113-year-old history. While the neighborhood has retained much of its original planning’s integrity of a condensed urban grid layout and integrated mix of centralized commercial districts (areas alongside Plainfield Ave.) and residential zones, many current businesses are relatively new to Creston and have overhauled interiors and exteriors to reflect that change. Creston also underwent a period of “skinning” in which buildings were covered with an exterior curtain wall. Thus, many of Creston’s buildings, especially along Plainfield, still retain their original exteriors, just not visibly so. Additionally, Creston’s current physical makeup reflects its socioeconomic change from a factory working class town to a mixed-use suburban

area. While Creston has experienced a lot of change, vestiges of its past are still very real and present in this beautiful neighborhood.

Enjoy the tour!

Walk to the Caledonia street entrance, then turn left and walk towards Plainfield Ave. intersection; cross Plainfield Ave.

Rez Lounge / Creston Origins



Plainfield Looking North, C. 1949 Grand Rapids Public Library

Just to the north of you stands a three-story brick building with the words, “Bono, 1974” on it. It was originally known as The Shanahan Block. Here, in 1906 a naming contest was held, and the name Creston was chosen for this community. But the area’s history stretches much further back than that. A lot of Creston’s previous history can be found in the nicknames it received before then.

Prior to European contact, Creston was part of the Ottawa tribe’s extensive transportation network in Michigan. This network was used by early Dutch settlers and remains important today. The main path became the road you are now on (Plainfield Avenue) and included other present-day roads like Coit Avenue, another street that we will visit later in the tour.

This area was once known as the “North End”, as it established the northern boundary of Grand Rapids. Until the 1860s, and was home to dairy farms and rows of fruit trees. But this changed with the onset of the American Civil War. Charles Comstock, a factory owner who owned a large farm in the area, realized the potential profits that the war could offer once Grand Rapids industrialized. He convinced City officials to annex part of the “North End” and helped to bring the City’s first railroad and depot in 1858. The original depot was located at the southeast corner of Plainfield Road and Leonard St.. To get connected to the depot, a streetcar line was established from the depot to downtown and a bridge built across the Grand River to connect businesses on the Westside.

So central was the Railroad, that the Plainfield Ave & Leonard St. area became known as “the Depot”. Hotels and boarding houses for railroad workers and passengers began to pop up around the depot. Factories and lumber yards soon followed to take advantage of proximity to the depot and the Grand River for transporting

lumber and goods. Irish factory workers and railroad employees and French lumbermen were the first to settle in the area; living in temporary working housing. Around the 1880s, they were soon joined by Canadians, Dutch, Germans, New Englanders, and Poles, who added businesses, churches, and permanent family homes to the area. When the city expanded again in 1890, this area became part of the Fifth Ward.

Beginning in the 1890s, the neighborhood started to develop a seedy reputation because of crimes and rumors. In 1894, a local murder case involving a black woman was sensationalized by local papers with racially inflammatory language. Local gangs operating out of the factory housing and nearby boarding houses, most notably the Fifth Ward gang, gave the area a rough and intimidating reputation.

In 1906, a group of 400 neighbors and businesspeople gathered together in the building before you with a desire to change their neighborhood's reputation and work together to make their community a better place. After a series of debates and votes, the name "Creston" was chosen. To one supportive of the name, it was a combination of the words Crest and Town because of the geographic location at the crest of the hill, and the "desire to be on the crest of a wave of permanent prosperity."

This group organized themselves as the Creston Citizen's Association (CCA) and dedicated the organization to raising the local quality of life by working with City Hall and encouraging businesses to grow. The CCA was the first such organization in Grand Rapids and its success prompted other communities in Grand Rapids to follow in their footsteps. Although not directly related to that early organization, the Creston Neighborhood Association continues that same spirit of neighborly care and dedication on to the present day.

Walk south to Spencer St and take a left onto Spencer. Walk about 100ft. to the intersection with Carman St.

St. Alphonsus, St. Johns, Creston CRC – Religion in Creston



Interior of St. Alphonsus Church, circa 1919.
Grand Rapids History and Special Collection, Grand Rapids Public Library

Looking south on Carman street, you will see the tops of the twin belltowers of the beloved St. Alphonsus church, a cornerstone in the Creston neighborhood. Since its founding in 1888, St. Alphonsus Parish, commonly referred to as St. Al's by locals, has a long tradition of fighting for social and community justice.

After the death of John Clancy in April 1884, it was learned that in his will he bequeathed a total of sixty-five thousand dollars for the purpose of building a church and orphanage. Clancy was a local lumber baron that lived on Leonard St. and was a devout Catholic. In the end, the grounds chosen by the Grand Rapids diocese for the new church happened to border Clancy's estate.

The Church was dedicated by Holy Mass in September 1888 in the partly finished orphanage building. Over 700 gathered within the makeshift chapel, complete with open windows and doors and an altar made out of boards on sawhorses, when a massive storm appeared. For three hours, the altar boys did their best to keep the candles burning; having to constantly relight and protect the candles from the wind and rain.

As with most Catholic churches, St. Alphonsus initially served a singular ethnic group: in this case the Irish factory workers. But unlike most Catholic churches, the parish quickly became home to members with a multitude of ethnic backgrounds. The parish also ran a school for over 100 years on the site, which at one time enrolled over 400 students. Also connected to the parish grounds was the aforementioned orphanage. St. John's Home, completed in 1913, was in a 4 story building run by Dominican nuns that cared for thousands of neglected and homeless West Michigan children. Later, the diocese also housed offices for Catholic social services in the building. Unfortunately, the building was razed in 1960 after being damaged by fire. Today, the parish's mission of selflessly serving others lives on in Catherine's Health Center, which provides free and low-cost medical services anyone that needs them.



St. John's Orphanage

Dominicans Sisters of Grand Rapids

Walk 200 ft. east on Spencer; stopping in front of Creston CRC (green building on the corner of Buffalo and Spencer).

This green building is home to Creston Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The church, which has been active in Creston since 1915, moved into the building in 1929. It was formed by disgruntled members of Coldbrook CRC after Coldbrook decided to stop offering services in English. Creston CRC continued to offer both Dutch and English services until the 1940s, when it transitioned to English.

Take a left onto Buffalo Ave. Walk north 1 block and take a left on Quimby St. Continue to the intersection with Plainfield.

Plainfield Business District – Heart of Creston



Page Hall, 1888. This original building was demolished in 1922 and replaced with the one story brick structure that exists today.
Grand Rapids Public Library



Plainfield Business District, C. 1950

Grand Rapids Public Library

You are currently in the center of the historic Plainfield Business District, the commercial heart of Creston. Many of the storefronts on this street are over one-hundred years old and housed many types of businesses.

The Business District developed as more families settled into the Creston area. Aside from the factories and railroad depot, the area was desirable for those wanting property away from downtown and elevated on hills. In 1880, our neighborhood had approximately 1,000 residents in 300 homes, about half employed in lumber-related industries. This working-class character meant that Creston's early businesses included a few saloons, boarding houses and brewery, in addition to 6 grocers, and 4 meat markets. Most of the development began around the train depot and spread north on Plainfield Avenue – which was converted into a nice plank road sometime in the 1870s - as the rest of the neighborhood developed.

In the 1890s, Creston became a middle-class neighborhood as factory foremen and business owners moved from downtown Grand Rapids to the affordable and desirable Creston heights area. Many of these new

residents were New Englanders and Dutch. With this new wave of migration came a new wave of institutions – private schools and churches as well as businesses – dry goods stores, hardware stores, and drug stores and pharmacies. The first pharmacy in the area began in 1880 when the three-story Page Block was constructed on the triangular property, now occupied by the 1922 red brick building in front of you. This location has served many purposes in Creston’s history. Not only a pharmacy, this site also housed doctor’s offices, a communal dance hall, a temporary church meeting place, a medical device manufacturer, a restaurant, bank branch, and library.

Ever since those first early businesses, the Plainfield Business District has been constantly evolving to fit the current needs of its community. This is true for a business included on our next stop. As Creston developed, the district expanded north on Plainfield Avenue from the old train depot.

Dekorne’s, Creston Theater – Transitioning Creston



Left: Dekorne’s Furniture, 1949



Right: Creston Theater, 1940s

Creston Brewery

Grand Rapids Historical Society

Standing in front of you is the Creston Brewery, part of the new rebirth of the Creston Business District. Today, the Brewery offers a variety of ales brewed onsite along with locally sourced food options. Inside the Brewery you can see pieces of the buildings past - a tin ceiling tiles and a hand carved handrail on the stairs that lead to the second floor. Both of these are original from the Art Deco building’s beginning in 1929 as a furniture store called Dekorne’s Furniture. The business was started by Boudewyn Dekorne, a Dutch immigrant well known in the Grand Rapids area for his wood-carving abilities. Today, his work lives on in several buildings in the area today - including the handrail in the Brewery - and also nationwide in thousands of pantries as the design for the Lora Doone shortbread cookie. Although Dekorne lived in the neighborhood, his workshop was downtown. It was not until 1929 that his son Jack built the current location. For 66 years, this was the flagship store for Dekorne’s Furniture, who expanded throughout the area and was one of the most profitable Ethan Allen franchises in the country.

In 1995, the building was sold to Optical Supply, a light manufacturing operation that bought this entire block along Plainfield, including our next location.

Adjacent to the Brewery is the old Creston Theater, which operated from 1924 to 1976. In its early days, the theater operated as a venue for vaudeville acts and traveling shows. During the 1950s, it was the neighborhood’s discount theater and a popular place for children to spend time. The popularity of TV and decline as a popular children’s spot forced the theater to try odd ways to stay financially afloat - including

showing X-rated films and turning into a bingo hall. Eventually, the theater closed in 1976 and was sold to Optical Supply in 1996.

Continue north on Plainfield for 1/3 mile. Stop at the intersection of Sweet and Plainfield

Creston High (with optional stop at Sweet St. Park and Kent Country Club) – 2 Different Parks



Creston High School, 1930s

On this block stands City High Middle School, a public magnet school for academically talented students. But from 1923 to 2012, this building housed Creston High, the single high school in the district for the North End.

Upon its founding in 1906, the Creston Citizen's Association made obtaining a school from City Hall one of their key goals. It is thanks to their efforts that the current building before you stands. At its peak in the 1960s, over local 1,200 students attended Creston High. Less than one percent of these students were minorities. In the 1968-69 school year, the Grand Rapids Public Schools' board adopted a new policy of busing, which sent students from South High, a poorer, more diverse area, to others schools including Creston High.

This created tensions between students. In May 1970, tensions erupted into an event that included the proliferation of KKK notes, fights between black and white students, and a walkout of black students. The following school year, busing was ended in the school district.

OPTIONAL – *The next stop is optional due to the sharp incline of the hill in front of you. The distance is approximately 2/5 of a mile in total. Feel free to stay and simply read along. However, if you'd like to physically join us, take a right on Sweet St. Continue up the hill to Sweet St. Park. Take a quick break at one of the picnic tables or benches.*

The Sweet Street Park was built in 1972 as part of the expansion of Creston High School in the 1970s. The Park was not improved or upgraded during that time. By the mid 2000's the Park was in disrepair; leading to a proposed removal of playground equipment and closure of the park in 2006. Upon notice, the Creston Neighborhood Association circulated the news in the local community. In 2009, they successfully worked together with local community members, KaBOOM!, and the Amway Corporation to build a new community playground. Locals know the park as an excellent place to watch the sunset over the Grand River Valley.



Sweet Street Park Dedication, 2009
KaBOOM!

Just around the corner is the entrance to the Kent Country Club. Michigan's first country club, founded in 1906, sits on over 120 acres in the middle of Creston. Its proximity to the Plainfield Business District not only assisted economic growth, but also the development of the Creston Citizen's Association. Until the 1920s, the club functioned as a community forum that welcomed prestigious guests and conferences to the community as well as a place for public golf lessons. Since its founding, the club course has welcomed such distinguished guests like Presidents Taft, Ford, and Bush, Booker T. Washington, and Bing Crosby.



Betty Ford on Kent Country Club Grounds, 1935
Huffington Post

*If you decided to follow the optional route, return to the corner of Sweet and Plainfield.
Walk north on Plainfield about 1/2 a mile to the corner of Palmer and Plainfield and cross onto Palmer.*

Palmer Elementary School

Before we continue, feel free to stop in the middle of our tour to enjoy a cold and creamy ice cream at Frosty Boy. You've earned it!

Continue West on Palmer to the entrance of Palmer Elementary School on your right.



Original Palmer School

Grand Rapids Public Library

This site previously was home to an eight room school that taught up to 350 students. But as Creston expanded, a larger, more modern facility was needed for its elementary students. In order to create the best place for students to learn, the ideas of teachers and staff were accommodated in the plans for the new school building. The result was the building before you constructed in the 1950s. Those original plans called for multiple skylight angled windows to flood the rooms with natural light.

As of 2019, the school offers a refugee language center for children from over 13 countries and 12 language groups. Palmer Elementary remains well connected to the community and dedicated to the success of their students.

Turn right on Lafayette St. Continue to the entrance to Briggs Park, two blocks north at the corner of Dean and Lafayette.

Briggs Park – A Park For The People!



Briggs Park Pool, 1927

Grand Rapids Public Library

As we'll be in Briggs Park for the next two stops, sit down on one of the park benches.

Briggs Park is one of the oldest parks in Creston, tied with Riverside Park along the Grand River as both parks were established in 1914. Its namesake was Charles Briggs, son of one of the first settlers in the area, who donated the land to the city to be used as a public park. The highlight of the park is the neighborhood pool, one of only three in Grand Rapids.

The first pool, built in 1926, was very modern for the time and included a bathhouse with showers. It did not take long for it to become a favorite summer pastime of many neighborhood children. But in the late 1970s, that amusement was threatened with rumors of the park being sold to the City Board of Education. Motivated by this news, local community members – stay-at-home moms, local businesses, park supporters, and others – banded together to save their park. One group who made the Briggs Park controversy their main activism issue was a community group of concerned citizens called the Creston Neighborhood Association. Through its successful neighborhood activism and advocacy, the Creston Neighborhood Association cemented itself into the community and became well known in the area.

But less than ten years after that initial fight, a new issue arose concerning the pool in the park. The original 1926 pool had not been renovated and was chipping and falling apart by the 1980s. In 1986, the city planned on permanently closing the pool. Once again, many of the same members of the original coalition worked together to save their neighborhood pool. Thanks to those people and organizations like the Creston Neighborhood Association, the Briggs Park Pool remains a popular summer destination for neighborhood kids.

Leave Briggs Park on Lafayette Avenue. Walk south to Dean St. Turn right onto Dean, and turn left when you get to Coit Avenue.

Claytors – Leadership and Activism



Helen Claytor Receiving Award

Grand Rapids Public Library

This stop is a private residence and will not be physically included in the tour out of respect.

About three blocks to north of you sits the residence of Robert and Helen Claytor, both influential African-American civil rights activists. Helen Claytor was one of the first African-American female graduates

from the University of Minnesota, graduating cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, and the first black President of the National YWCA. Helen fought for female and civil rights her entire life in the local and national arenas. Robert Claytor was the son of former Virginian slaves. Robert obtained his medical license only under intense scrutiny and pressure; being forced during his studies to abstain from physical contact with patients.

The Claytors were one of the first black families in Creston when they moved in 1943. At that time, it was difficult for African-Americans to buy homes in urban areas because of mortgage laws and racially motivated, bigoted attitudes. However, Robert Claytor was able to initially bypass these barriers due to his lighter skin tone, although he had trouble obtaining a mortgage. Nevertheless, the community grew to embrace the Claytors.

Helen's son, Roger Wilkins, was a nationally known civil rights activist, journalist and historian. He worked as Assistant Attorney General in the Johnson administration, contributed to a Pulitzer Prize at the Washington Post for their role in uncovering the Watergate scandal, and worked for the Ford Foundation, the New York Times and George Mason University.

Architecture!

Continue south on Coit Avenue as you learn about the local architecture. Try to identify the different styles of housing highlighted during the tour. Maybe you even live in one of these houses! Continue on Coit for five blocks; stopping at the intersection of Sweet Street and Coit.

Folk National, or National style architecture is one of the most prevalent architecture styles in the Creston Neighborhood. This New England based-style, with its narrow profile and sharply angled roofing, was designed to withstand harsh winters. Featuring a simple narrow, rectangular plan of two stories with a steeply pitched roof, these houses often have a small front porch. Folk National houses gained popularity as the railroad expanded, allowing owners to build their own dwellings cheaply with readily available materials. Folk National dominated domestic architecture from the late 1870s through 1910.

The Craftsman style focuses on simplicity, show of fine handiwork, and use of nearby natural resources. This "working-man" style's hallmarks include an emphasis on horizontality, with an integrated front porch supported by square, tapered columns, a low-pitched roof with overhanging eaves, and windows with divided lights. Creston has many Craftsman homes, most dating from 1905-1930.

The Colonial Revival style is inspired by American colonial architecture. It became popular during the late 1800s and has been common ever since. The style is characterized by a symmetrical front of the house, these houses usually have a central entry flanked by columns or pilasters. Common variants in Creston include the Garrison house, Dutch Colonial, and Adam- and Georgian-inspired side-gabled dwellings. Many Colonial Revivals can be found in Riverside Gardens and North Park.

The Queen Anne style includes expansive, wrap-around porches, decorative corner towners, shaped and curved gables, and an asymmetric front facade. Exterior walls are often covered in a variety of mixed sheathing, with clapboard and scalloped shingles being the most common duo. Queen Annes are also famous for "gingerbread" ornamentation at porch corners and around doorways. Most of these homes in the Creston area date to around the turn of the twentieth century.

Although more common outside the walking-tour area, Ranch houses are among the newest and more prevalent in Creston. First made popular in 1930s California, Ranch style homes took advantage of wide, open spaces to build out horizontally. Ranch homes really took off in the Midwest in the decade after World War II, when bare suburban lots created potential to build out, not up. Large, plate-glass windows offer expansive

views, and overhanging eaves provide protection from the elements. Ranches almost always have an integrated garage, and remain popular because of their one-story, rambling floor plan, straight and wide passage ways, and (often) zero-step entries.

Arrive at 1610 Coit Ave, NE.

Petersen Plumbing / Berean Baptist – Community Cornerstones

On the left is Petersen Plumbing, which has been in business at this location since 1919. The original Petersen home and carriage house are over 120 years old and remain one of the area's best examples of Queen Anne style architecture. Today, Petersen's Plumbing is known for doing excellent plumbing repair and refurbish work on historic homes.

Across Sweet Street is Berean Baptist, a congregation that has been present in Creston since 1892 and housed in the current location since 1929. Berean started as an evangelical mission of Fountain St. Baptist (now Fountain St. Church) in the early 1880s when Creston was an emerging Grand Rapids suburb of factoryworkers, lumbermen, and railroad depot workers. However, as an ideological shift occurred between Berean and Fountain Street, the congregations split their affiliation with one another. Berean's mission of creating positive change in their community has since grown into supporting international missions work.

The next 2 stops are optional and makeup a 5 block walk from the current location. If you're interested in seeing these parts of Creston's past, take a right on Matthews Court and proceed to the end of the street to the intersection of Taylor Avenue and Matthews Court.

Walk south along Coit for two blocks to the intersection of Coit and Matthews Court.

(Optional) Matthews Court / Monroe Water Filtration Plant – Grand Rapids' Story

This block of Matthew's Court had employee housing for the Edge Lumber Company, which operated nearby. The four interconnected houses at the end of the street are some of the best surviving representations of factory housing in Grand Rapids. The four identical houses were built as temporary housing around 1890. Many of the other houses on the surrounding blocks are also remnants of Creston's factory past.

At its industrial height in the early twentieth century, factories and lumber yards lined the river from Taylor Avenue to the banks of the Grand River for a mile. All together, these factories, which included furniture makers, an icebox and showcase manufacturer, a door manufacturer, and potash* factory, employed around 1,500 people. (*Potash is a mined salt containing potassium which is used as a fertilizer.)

If you chose the optional alternative, turn left on Taylor and continue for one block to the intersection of Taylor and Quimby.

Creston's livelihood has always been closely related to the Grand River. Two major factors in Creston's development, factories and the railroad might have gone elsewhere had it not been for the Grand River. As Creston and Grand Rapids expanded, diseases like typhoid, dysentery, and cholera spread, creating the need for clean public water. To serve these needs, in 1912, the city of Grand Rapids built a water filtration plant to provide the city with clean water. By the time the facilities were expanded in 1924, the plant was state of the art. In 1945, the Monroe Water Filtration Plant became the first place *in the world* to introduce fluoride into the water supply. Thanks to the successful ten-year pilot program, millions of people have access to fluoridated water.



Monroe Water Filter Plant Testing Laboratory, 1937

Grand Rapids Public Library

If you're on the alternative route, please take a left on Quimby St and continue for one and a half blocks. If you did not continue on the alternative route, continue for one block south on Coit and take a right on Quimby. This returns you to the parking lot where we began the tour.

Conclusion

The name Creston was chosen by this community because residents wanted Creston to “be on the permanent wave of prosperity”. To meet this namesake goal, thousands of community members and neighbors have strived to make this community a better place to live. Hopefully, through touring this vibrant gem of a neighborhood, and learning about its rich history, you have been able to see the over-century-long tradition of neighbors helping neighbors.

Thank you for joining us!

Credits



This tour was made possible through the efforts of the Creston Neighborhood Association. It was created, authored, and researched by Gabe Savercool, Jessie Brink, and Eleanor VanderArk.

Sources were drawn from interviews with local community members, and archival collections of the Creston Neighborhood Association, Grand Rapids Public Library, and Grand Rapids City Archives.

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