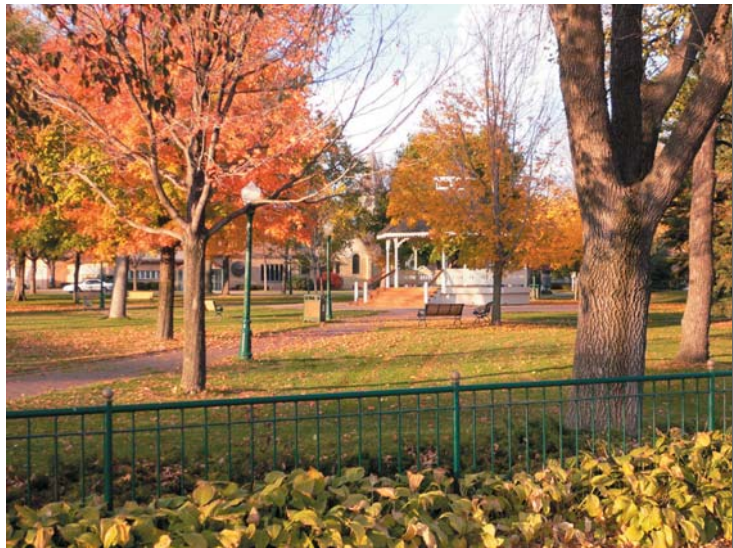


Context 3 – Commerce, Industry and Civic Services Time Span – 1850s to 1950s

A Center for Commerce, Industry, and Civic Pride

Chaska has a modest yet historically significant downtown, filled with historic commercial buildings that are representative of its rich commercial and industrial past. Much of its industry is related to its famous brickyards, as discussed in Context 2, and its important agricultural role, as discussed more thoroughly in Context 4; although these topics are touched upon here, the larger discussion is left for the more detailed contexts. And, even though Chaska had early importance as the county seat, few civic buildings remain today. The bulk of this context, then, will focus on the city's historic downtown core and its early business structures.

The townsite was first platted in 1854. Though some settlers occupied the area in the early 1850s, more significant development, by the Shaska Company, did not occur until the town was designated the Carver County Seat in 1856. At that point, the town was replatted to allow for the construction of roadways, public buildings, and other civic services, and City Square Park was dedicated as a common park in perpetuity. Due to a delay in issuing bonds and litigation thereafter, the establishment of Chaska proper was rather slow, and nearby farmsteads and smaller settlements, such as the short-lived Yorkville, developed congruently. The area became settled by those relocating northeasterners looking for homestead opportunities, and by new immigrants, the vast majority of which were Germanic. Some of the first businessmen recorded in the new town were the blacksmith Frank Mieseler, John Walter the baker, Nick Schoenborn and Julius Wagner who operated saloons, and George Faber and Florian Linenfelser, who opened the first store. Their building on 2nd and Walnut Streets is one of the oldest remaining commercial-industrial structure in the city. Retailers Henry Young and Lucian and Charles Warner followed soon after, and Lucius Howe had the distinction of opening Chaska's first brickyard in 1857.



City Square Park in the fall

By the end of the 1850s, however, “downtown” Chaska still consisted of only a few scattered buildings. The layout was much as it is today, though lowland streets at the river bend, originally named after early settlers Smith, Lee, and Ellsworth (as well as Dakota and Sioux) were eventually abandoned due to flooding. The land was essentially bare, with few trees, fences, or infrastructure.

Though the south part of town (around Levee and 1st) was the first area to become built up, development soon spread along Walnut Street, then 2nd Street, Chestnut, and “up the hill” to Pine. Breweries were generally located at the “back of town.” By the time Chaska was incorporated as a village in 1871, the pattern of development was set.

Chaska’s boom years coincided with its industrial boom, with the peak period from the 1880s to the 1920s. The middle of the twentieth century was a rather sleepy time for development, and unfortunately many resources were lost during that period. The town’s next period of major development did not occur until the 1970s, when due to the expansion of the west metropolitan Twin Cities and the new construction of Jonathan, Chaska became part of the southwest growth pattern of the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

The Downtown Core

In general, downtown Chaska is remarkably similar to other river towns of the era. Buildings are simple, usually two stories high, with storefronts on the first level and offices, meeting halls, or living space above. The first floor held wide display windows, usually accented above by transoms and below by bulkheads.

Many buildings were constructed of local Chaska brick, though wood frame structures were not unusual. Usually plain and simple in nature, they were selectively accented by brick corbelling or window hoods, cast iron (almost exclusively from the Ess Foundry), or occasionally limestone sills and ornamentation — again, likely from local quarries. In general, the streetscape as a whole is more impressive than any single building.

Chaska commercial buildings do incorporate some unusual features. One of these is the use of space between and behind the buildings for exterior porches and balconies. Perhaps related to this is the rail ornamentation often seen on the second story of historic Chaska structures.

Commerce

The first commercial establishments in Chaska reflected immediate needs — retailers, bakers, blacksmiths and hotels. An early addition to the scene was a thriving saloon business, often relating to the hotels and breweries. Many people came through Chaska, whether for county services, on their way to somewhere else, or as new settlers, and these early gathering places became a leisure-time focus.

Early licensing attempts by the city created much dissension among saloon keepers, with a twenty-five dollar annual licensing fee established in 1867. Although some saloons closed due to the fee, Chaska still had fifteen saloons (though several were part of hotels or boarding houses). Soon after, licenses became required for everything from general stores to traveling players, becoming a major source of revenue for the town, along with levies.

Some early establishments still thrive today. The *Chaska Herald's* longevity is discussed below, and the Chaska Bakery was first opened in 1871 by Gottlieb Eder. Through the years, the bakery also sold everything from coffee to oysters to Christmas trees. It still exists today, though it has returned to its original sweet emphasis. The Ess Foundry is discussed below.

Retail provided a strong presence. One of the most famous was J.A. Schmidt's Glass Block building, built at the corner of Chestnut and 2nd Streets, in 1903 for \$13,000. Chaskans also have fond memories of Baxter's Store, Gehl's Meat Market, and Cooper's Store (a precursor to the current iteration).

Chaska businessmen were very entrepreneurial. Area merchants demonstrated great flexibility, and many stores changed with times and circumstances. As a result, most buildings became home to any number of stores and businesses during their lifetime. As a result, save for a few examples such as the *Herald* and the bakery, few businesses became integrally associated with their buildings. The diversity of goods, services, and industries offered at any given time was bountiful, though often short-lived. As a result, though Chaska has many historic storefronts, few of them bear particular business associations.

Services

The city was also well-known for its service industry, which ran the gamut from deed recorders to undertakers. In particular, it was known for its hotels (related to its saloons, discussed above). By the late 1870s there were at least 11 hotels and boarding houses in town, and they still could not meet the demand for rooms during court sessions. One of the most prominent was the National Hotel, built in 1886 by Peter Iltis, though it later burned.

There were a large number of doctors serving the area, including prominent early settler E.H. Lewis. Midwives also prevailed. There was, however, no dentist in the city.

Popular local entertainment included music (bands and choral), lectures, balls, lotteries, and croquet, though none of these had enduring related resources. There was a permanent racetrack during the 1880s-90s, but the site later became a hatchery. Fraternal organizations, from the Kiwanis to the Elks to the Oddfellows and the Knights of Columbus were also extremely popular. Since they met in multi-purpose rooms above stores, however, no associated meeting halls remain.

The Opera House was a landmark for many years, but was razed in 1924. Its *de facto* replacement was the Valley Ballroom, the entertainment hub of Chaska from 1933 to 1959.

The Chaska Herald

The *Valley Herald* first published on September 1, 1862 and was actually the fourth newspaper in the area, following the *Minnesota Thalbote* (established 1857), the *Valley Transcript*, and the *Carver County Democrat*. It was the 149th newspaper in the State of Minnesota. However, it soon became one of the longest to endure and continuously publish, a distinction it holds to this day.

First editions were four pages, with two of those pre-printed with national news and inserted into the locally printed edition. For a short period in the 1870s, a section was even printed in German. In 1889, these efforts were replaced by an all-German newspaper, the German (or Chaska) *Thalbote*, which published through 1897.

By 1892, the *Herald* had expanded to eight pages, with about half news content and half advertisements. After 1863, the paper also often held the contract for legal notices, particularly important due to county land transactions, etc. It boasted over a thousand subscribers at \$1.50/year (or an equivalent trade for wood).

Though it had several different offices early on, the *Herald* has been based in the same 2nd Street building since 1871. Its archives, located in the Chaska History Center, are impressive, and the paper remains a major source of historic and current information on the City of Chaska.

Industry

Though commerce and services were important to the quality of life of area residents, it was really Chaska's industrial base — namely the brickyards and agricultural services that made the town such a vital economic center. A network of support services and other industries grew up among these two main pillars.

Chaska's main industrial focus was its famous brickyards, with four yards distributing 3,500,000 bricks annually by the 1860s. The brickyards were the largest employers in town, and were even more influential if one includes directly related services such as masons or transport. As for the economic effect, *Chaska Volume I* quotes the *Chaska Herald* in saying:

“Pay day at the brickyards is equal to one of our holidays for our merchants and saloon keepers. It makes things lively in town.”

Agricultural industries, including mills, breweries, creameries, and the later sugar and pickling plants were equally influential to the local economy. Though wheat was the main crop, smaller alternatives ranged from

cranberries to gingers to a few small orchards. Wood, cut from the forested Big Woods, was also an important export.

Soon, livestock became a major business, and Chaska hosted a monthly livestock and farmer's market through the 1950s, which became an important event for the town. The market days became as much-anticipated by the saloons and stores of the town as brickyard paydays.

Chaska also housed many innovative industries, such as a butter repackaging company and one that prepared feathers for re-use in pillows and other down materials.

Ess Foundry

A particular Chaska success story is that of the Ess Foundry. Their metalworks can be seen throughout the city, including the manholes cast for the centennial celebrations. Up until the time the foundry moved out of Chaska, it was the oldest Chaska business to remain in one family, though the Esses were prominent in other local matters, such as the fire department. They also built several houses near the Foundry.

Joseph Ess began as a blacksmith and wagon maker. However, with the advent of the brickyards, he saw a need for a reliable foundry and began the business with his sons Frank, who became a molder, and Fred, who took over the wagon industry.

Early products included everything from kettles to sleigh runners and wagon parts. As brick production became more sophisticated, the Ess' began to construct machinery for them, including the "slop machine" and the "nameless machine." They also produced fencing, iron building trim, and crosses for the cemeteries. The Ess Foundry still produces ironwork, though it is no longer located in Chaska.

Civic Structures

Chaska's position as County Seat required a particular emphasis on civic buildings, as allowed for by the Shaska Company as the land was platted. Civic structures were generally located on City Square, with the park serving as a sort of campus between them. None of these resources, save the square, remain today.

The square has long been a source of pride for the City of Chaska. Native mounds remain from prehistory. Later additions include an early iron fence by Ess Foundry in 1887 (later removed), and the bandstand, whose first iteration was constructed in 1890. Throughout Chaska's history, the square has served as an important gathering spot and the literal heart of the city.

Though Chaska was contested as the county seat periodically (in 1865, 1870, 1872, and 1920), these disputes never got far enough to relocate or diminish any of the civic buildings.

The Courthouse was the first structure completed, in 1857, and was expanded upon in 1864. Jail cells were added in 1866, to replace those in a crude log building that served as the first jail. The original courthouse was torn down in 1966.

With the incorporation of the town as a village in 1871 came a new focus on infrastructure, including gas lights, sidewalks (originally plank boardwalks) and better street surfacing. Public utilities followed slowly, with telephone lines in 1893 and electricity at the turn of the century.

The Fire Department has always been a volunteer force. The first fire truck was acquired in 1876, with an engine house finally built in 1878, followed by a larger headquarters in 1883. This station was soon known for its annual balls, often to raise funds for things such as uniforms. On a more practical matter, several large fires and lobbying by the fire department inspired a cistern and waterworks system throughout the town.

Chaska began public education in 1858, with fairly short, erratic sessions. These schools were supplanted by the parochial schools at Guardian Angels, St. John's, and the Moravian Academy. School buildings were constructed as needed, including in the surrounding rural areas; one building for District 15 remains in the north part of town, at Hundertmark and Bavaria Roads. Other buildings included a building at 4th and Chestnut, which served as a prominent and well-loved City Hall for some time before it was lost, and a new school, which eventually became the high school, was built in 1900. From a small initial start, the Chaska school system became very active, with a wide roster of classes and extracurricular activities. Chaska's public school system has long been a backbone of the community.

Postal service had begun in 1855, within the Fuller Store. It was housed in several other stores and commercial entities for a number of years. It had at least three other locations just by the turn of the century, so Chaskans never had a strong identification with one post office location.

The library was located in the City Hall for many years, and for a time in the Klein Mansion, before the new facility was constructed.

Floods

Chaska's riverside location was beneficial to the town for natural resources and as a transportation hub, but the lowland location had one extreme disadvantage — flooding. Springtime snow-melt flooding was a particular threat, causing annual danger especially to the south end of town, below 1st Street. The first major

flood recorded was in 1862, and in 1867 a major flood caused much damage, with the area below 1st Street being completely submerged. The *Herald*, then located at Walnut and Levee Streets, reported “from a foot to fifteen inches of water on the floor” on April 27, 1867.

One of the most devastating floods was that of 1881, when waters covered much of the town. Obviously the lower portions of the city were immersed, but even the Linenfelsner and Faber store was flooded, with clerks walking on the countertops.

The 1893 flood was remarkable in that not only did the river overflow, but also the creek, affecting the “back part” of town. Though floods generally occurred annually to some extent, the next big flood was recorded in 1908, which had particular damage to area crops and fields.

Large floods are recorded periodically throughout the century, especially in 1943, 1944, 1951 and 1952. These were spelled by periods of drought, an equal problem for Minnesota Valley farmers. By this point the low-lying areas of downtown Chaska had been so often flooded that they were no longer deemed habitable.

The levee was finally built following the flood of 1952, and had a major effect on controlling flooding in Chaska. The flood of 1965 breached the levee but caused minimal damage. In 1969, the levee held during similarly high waters. Chaska’s legacy of flooding appears to be a thing of the past.

Property Types

Note: In most of these property types, I have given examples of some specific kinds of businesses. This is not meant to be a comprehensive listing, but rather a representative one demonstrating the development of Chaska’s commercial and industrial base. In many of these cases, the businesses and buildings no longer exist.

Please see the matrix in Appendix A for a list of buildings in the historic core of the city.

Commerce

- Appliances
- Automobile
- Bakeries
- Confectionery
- Dry Goods
- Department Stores
- Drugstores
- Clothing and Shoes
- Farm Implements/Feed/Seed
- Furniture and Cabinetry

Gas Stations
Grocers/Food Markets/Butchers
Hardware
Harness Shops
Ice Cream Parlors
Ice Houses
Jewelers/Watchmakers
Millinery
Music Stores
Shoemakers

Services

Attorneys
Banks
Barbers
Boarding Houses
Bowling Alleys
Builders and Contractors
Deed Registrars
Doctors
Dentists
Funeral Homes
Gas Stations
Hotels
Insurance
Land Agents
Laundries
Lawyers
Liveries
Machine Shops
Movie Theaters
Newspapers
Notaries
Painters
Photographers
Plumbers
Printers
Realtors
Repair Shops
 Auto
 Blacksmith
Farm Implements
 Railroad
Restaurants and Cafes
Saloons
Shooting Galleries
Tailors

Industry

Agricultural
 Breweries
 Canning/Bottling/Pickling/Preserving Factories
 Nurseries
 Produce
 Grain Elevators
Livestock/Game/Animals
 Dray Lines

Dairies and Creameries
Fishing/ Hunting/ Trapping
Livestock/ Farmer's Market
Slaughterhouses
Stockyards
Veterinarians
Cigars
Coopers
Glass
Brickyards
Lumberyards
Factories
Foundries
Ice Plants
Mills
Sawmills
Flour Mills
Quarries

Civic

Parks and Monuments
Civic Buildings
City Hall
Jails
Libraries
Fire Halls
Police Stations
Meeting Halls and Social Halls
Nursing Homes
Post Office
Poor Houses
Social Services
Public Services
Electricity
Sewer
Telephone
Telegraph
Water
Hospitals and Clinics
Public Schools
Carver County Courthouse

Recommendations and Future Actions

1. As demonstrated above, the volume of commerce, service and industry records in Chaska is large, and also transitory. The *Chaska History Volumes I and II*, as well as other local histories, do an admirable job of chronicling this information; however, due to the amount of history and changes in the various businesses, even the most clear records can become confused. The HPC should create a comprehensive database that cross-references past businesses and buildings.

2. These contexts provide an extremely brief overview as to the significance of Chaska's commercial and industrial operations, as well as its civic services. Further research should be completed on the topic, and complete survey work completed to establish the existence and condition of these resources.
3. The HPC has already completed design guidelines for the downtown area. As businesses in the downtown core complete renovations, they should follow the design guidelines to the best of their ability; in most cases, they work need not be completed all at once, and the suggested renovations would increase the value of the property by adding to its integrity and aesthetics. HPC members should ensure that building owners and local residents know about these guidelines, perhaps through storefront displays.
4. In particular, most of the civic buildings (ranging from the City Hall on down) have been lost. Chaska should try to find ways to interpret these resources that demonstrate the early importance of these properties, perhaps through a display at the History Center. As part of this, the city should consider surveying and cataloging its various sites that have, at some time, served the public, such as the previous post office and library locations.
5. The City Square is a very visual representation of public space, and should be preserved, interpreted, and used accordingly.