

At Home in Northfield



A Look at the City's Historic Houses



Nestled along the banks of the Cannon River in southeastern Minnesota, Northfield stands out among pioneer towns which have thrived over nearly 150 years. Although situated near a large metropolitan area, the compact city is surrounded by a rich agricultural region. The city's intact historic character owes much to the handsome buildings in its late nineteenth-century neighborhoods and within its well-conserved downtown along the river.

The original plat of Northfield was recorded by lawyer, temperance advocate, and townsite developer John Wesley North in 1855. Like many speculators, North was attracted to the waterpower potential of the river and built an early dam, sawmill, and gristmill. Many early townsites were laid out along the Cannon, and between 1855 and 1875, 15 mills were built along the 20 river miles between Northfield and Faribault. Few sites, however, proved as successful as Northfield. Some of its early success was due to the local advancement of the "middlings purifier," which allowed hard spring wheat to be ground into bread flour with a high gluten content. Lumber, dairy products, and stock raising were other mainstays of the nineteenth-century economy. The late nineteenth-century development of St. Olaf and Carleton colleges provided Northfield with two hillside campuses embellished with stylish buildings. The towers and steeples of many campus buildings create a picturesque skyline which is visible for miles.

Above: Portion of an 1869 Bird's Eye View.



Many of Northfield's pioneer houses, those constructed between 1855 and the Civil War, were simple gable-roofed structures built by local carpenters guided by native wit as well as pattern books.

The Greek Revival Style — based on the simple proportions of the Greek temple but dramatically scaled down for domestic architecture — was also popular with early Northfield builders. Classical details such as returns at the eaves, flat molding strips at the cornice, sides, and entry of the building, and wooden clapboard siding were essential components of the Greek Revival house exterior.

Few Greek Revival houses in Northfield have survived without alteration of original details. However, the house at 503 Washington Street retains its fine classical entry with sidelights, and Greek Revival details are well-conserved on the house at 403 Nevada Street.

Above: 403 Nevada Street, ca. 1860-1870 with later additions.

Detail: Entry at 503 Washington, ca. 1860.

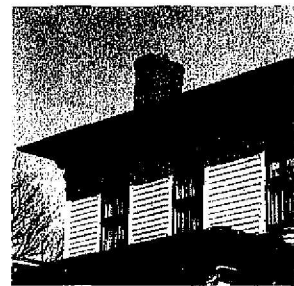


After the Civil War, the growth of Northfield's economy and the development of the colleges helped to establish a new class of business owners, professionals, and faculty who constructed fine residences on both sides of the river. The design of many post-Civil War houses reflected the stylish exteriors of early college buildings, most notably Willis Hall at Carleton (1872) and Old Main at St. Olaf (1877).

The Italianate Style was widely employed by builders of elaborate as well as simple houses. Round-arched windows and a variety of sawn wooden trim, including brackets at the eaves and ornate porch work, embellish many examples. Among well-conserved early Italianate houses near the Carleton campus are 107 College Avenue and 113 Nevada Street. On the west side, the John Way House at 708 St. Olaf Avenue is situated on only a portion of the extensive grounds which once surrounded it. Way, a native of Vermont, moved his family into this house in 1882. For a time it served as a boarding house for St. Olaf students.

Above: John Way House, 708 St. Olaf Avenue, ca. 1880.

Detail: 107 College Avenue, ca. 1870.

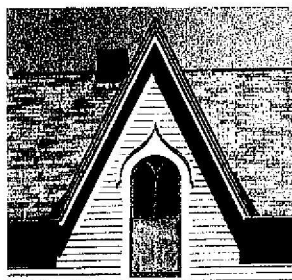




The picturesque Gothic Revival Style was popular in America at mid-century and Gothic and Italianate details were often freely combined. Steeply-pitched gable roofs and dormers, elaborate bargeboards, and pointed-arch windows are distinctive elements of Northfield's Gothic-Italianate houses. Among the city's best examples are those at 500 E. Fourth St., at the southeast corner of Central Park, and at 518 Union Street. Both date from the 1870s. However, distinctive roofs and dormers combined with round, pointed or ogee-arched windows can also be seen on at least twenty houses on the east and west sides of the city and in the surrounding rural area. While a local carpenter might have been the author of many of these buildings of similar appearance, perhaps a pattern book plan was their common source.

Above: 518 Union Street, ca. 1870.

Left and right below: the ogee arch (l) and the gable-end trim details (r) characteristic of many of Northfield's Gothic-Italianate houses.



The early twentieth-century Arts and Crafts movement inspired the design of a number of Northfield houses built between 1910 and 1925. Builders of bungalows as well as larger Craftsman houses were influenced by the popular publications of Gustav Stickley of New York, who promoted an "honest" architecture based on simple forms drawn primarily from English sources. Exterior materials such as stucco, stone, and wood were treated naturally, and shingles and clapboard were usually stained rather than painted.

A good example of the style is the Ole Rolvaag House at 311 Manitou, which dates from 1911. Nearby, the house at 800 St. Olaf Avenue has a fine Arts and Crafts porch, detailed with sturdy wooden posts resting on stucco piers. The St. Olaf Avenue area has a good collection of Arts-and-Crafts inspired houses from this period.

Above: Ole Rolvaag House, 311 Manitou Street, 1911. (National Register of Historic Places.)

Detail: Bungalow trim:
318 Manitou Street,
ca. 1912.



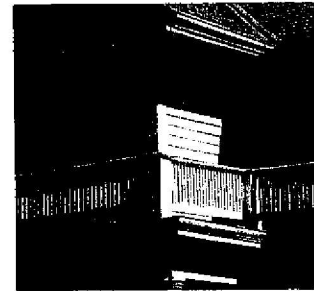


Northfield, like many Minnesota cities, experienced a building boom in the 1890s. Large, elaborately-detailed Queen Anne Style commercial blocks which housed retail stores, offices, and even the Northfield Knitting Company were constructed along Division Street. Many Queen Anne style houses of this period have steeply-pitched gable roofs, a variety of small windows in gable peaks, and richly detailed exterior surfaces. Turned porch posts and spindle trim embellish the Queen Anne porch, and towers, turrets, and patterned shingles are common details. Many of Northfield's houses from this period are traceable to plan books such as *Shopbell's Modern Houses*, a popular late nineteenth-century catalogue.

At the turn of the century, the Classical Revival Style also became popular with builders. A front porch with classical columns and a prominent three-part Palladian window in the front gable end are standard features of many Northfield examples.

Above: The recently-restored A.J. Whiting House, 518 E. Fourth Street, ca. 1889.

Right: The Classical Revival Style: 310 E. Fifth Street, 1901.



Since its creation in 1979, the Northfield Heritage Preservation Commission has conducted studies and planning projects focused on the city's architectural and historic resources. A current study examines residential architecture from 1855 to 1940. Information about the history and significance of these houses has been gathered from local sources, chiefly newspapers, historic photographs, and recollections of residents. If you have photographs or information about any of Northfield's historic houses, please contact the Heritage Preservation Commission c/o the Community Development Department, 645-8833.

Northfield's houses are diverse in character and include simple cottages as well as turn-of-the-century mansions. A great variety of interesting architectural styles were employed by local carpenters and craftsmen. Preservation of the historic character of these buildings is, in part, dependent on the conservation of historic features such as window and porch trim, and wooden shingle and clapboard siding. The Heritage Preservation Commission can assist property owners in planning maintenance or restoration projects and welcomes your questions.

Above: Historic architectural details in Northfield.

Cover: Professor C.H. Cooper House, 210 Union, 1889. Photograph ca. 1900, courtesy of Northfield Historical Society.

Prepared by Landscape Research for the Northfield Heritage Preservation Commission.

Photographs by Carole Zellie, 1991.