

# Historic Downtown Manchester

Walking Tours led by Susan Barlow, *Manchester Historical Society*

Before 1890, large trees lined Main Street. “Downtown” was mostly a residential neighborhood, with **churches** at the beginning, middle, and end.

- Center Church, at the top of the hill, has had several buildings over the years. In 1904, the congregation abandoned the style of its Victorian Gothic building, and built the white colonial-style building we see today.
- St. James, built in 1875 and the oldest church building Downtown, underwent major renovations after the destructive hurricane of 1938, when it was in doubt whether the congregation could save the structure.
- In 1924, the Methodist-Episcopal Church, now South United Methodist, moved into its new stone church in “English Country” style, reminiscent of a castle.

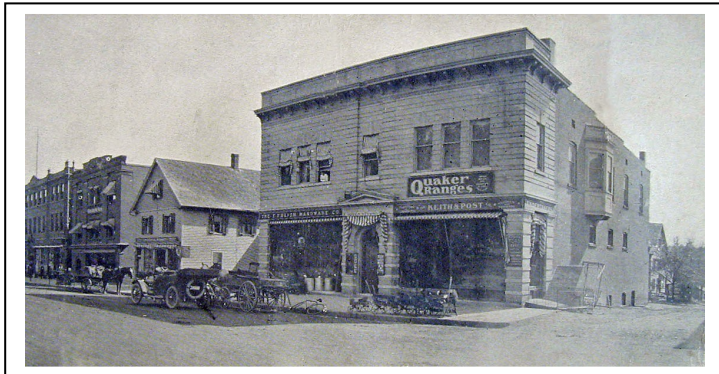
At the south end of Main Street, today’s Bennet Academy, was built as **Educational Square** beginning in 1914, after the 1913 Ninth District School fire. The Bennet Apartments started life as Manchester High School in 1904.

Commercial development began at the southern end, where you could shop for groceries and sundries at the former Cheney’s store (no longer there). Urban development began in earnest in 1893, as building construction began moving north from Charter Oak Street. The east side of Main Street has more **commercial buildings** than the west side, dating back to when the Cheney family (founders of the silk mill dynasty) owned from Hartford Road to St. James Street, with mostly houses lining the west side of the street.

Three free-standing residences remain in the Downtown business district – the 1941 parsonage of the South Methodist Church, and, at 750 Main, the circa 1910 former **home of Patrick Gorman**, a stonemason and contractor, who was active in Manchester in the early 1900s. Although now converted to offices, much of its classically inspired detail has survived – a mansard roof with patterned colorful slate roof-tiles, three gable-roof dormers with cornices, Tuscan columns, bow-front windows, and fanlights. A third, the former residence and office of Dr. Noah Burr, is nestled between the Johnson blocks, at 687 Main St., where a mansard roof is visible behind the storefronts.

**Colonial Revival style** encompasses many variations, from the sedate and classical to the more flamboyant, and many Downtown buildings exemplify the style. Most of Main Street’s development was between 1890 and 1930, so many of the buildings’ styles and materials are similar, but each has its individual motifs.

For example, the 1910 **Selwitz block**, at 623 Main Street, uses brick in a “Flemish Bond” pattern, alternating dark and striated brick – a popular style in early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial architecture. Although the original storefront has been “infilled” with brick to decrease the size of the window openings, much of the original detail remains. Brick piers define the corners of the building, with a triangular motif at the top. The roof has a low parapet wall with a stepped parapet centered in the façade. Parapets, or “false fronts,” were also common at the time, and disguised flat roofs.



## Corner of Purnell Place and Main Street Circa 1914.

*From the archives of the Manchester Historical Society.*

Another example, the 1909 **House and Hale block** at 945-953 Main, demonstrates its Colonial Revival style with a symmetrical façade, segmentally-arched entryway, and pedimented pavilion embellished by a garland motif and crowned by a crest. The second-story windows are set between stone sills and flat arches with keystones.

Manchester is fortunate to retain the vintage nature of its Downtown. We can learn a lot from studying these buildings, truly *gems from the past*.

**More information available at:**

<http://data.visionappraisal.com/ManchesterCT/DEFAULT.asp> Database of Manchester’s houses, with date of construction. Click “enter online database” to search.

<http://www.buffaloah.com/a/DCTNRY/vocab.html> Illustrated glossary of architectural terms.

For membership information about the Manchester Historical Society: [http://www.manchesterhistory.org/MHS3\\_Membership.html](http://www.manchesterhistory.org/MHS3_Membership.html)

***Our Downtown is on the National Register of Historic Places.***