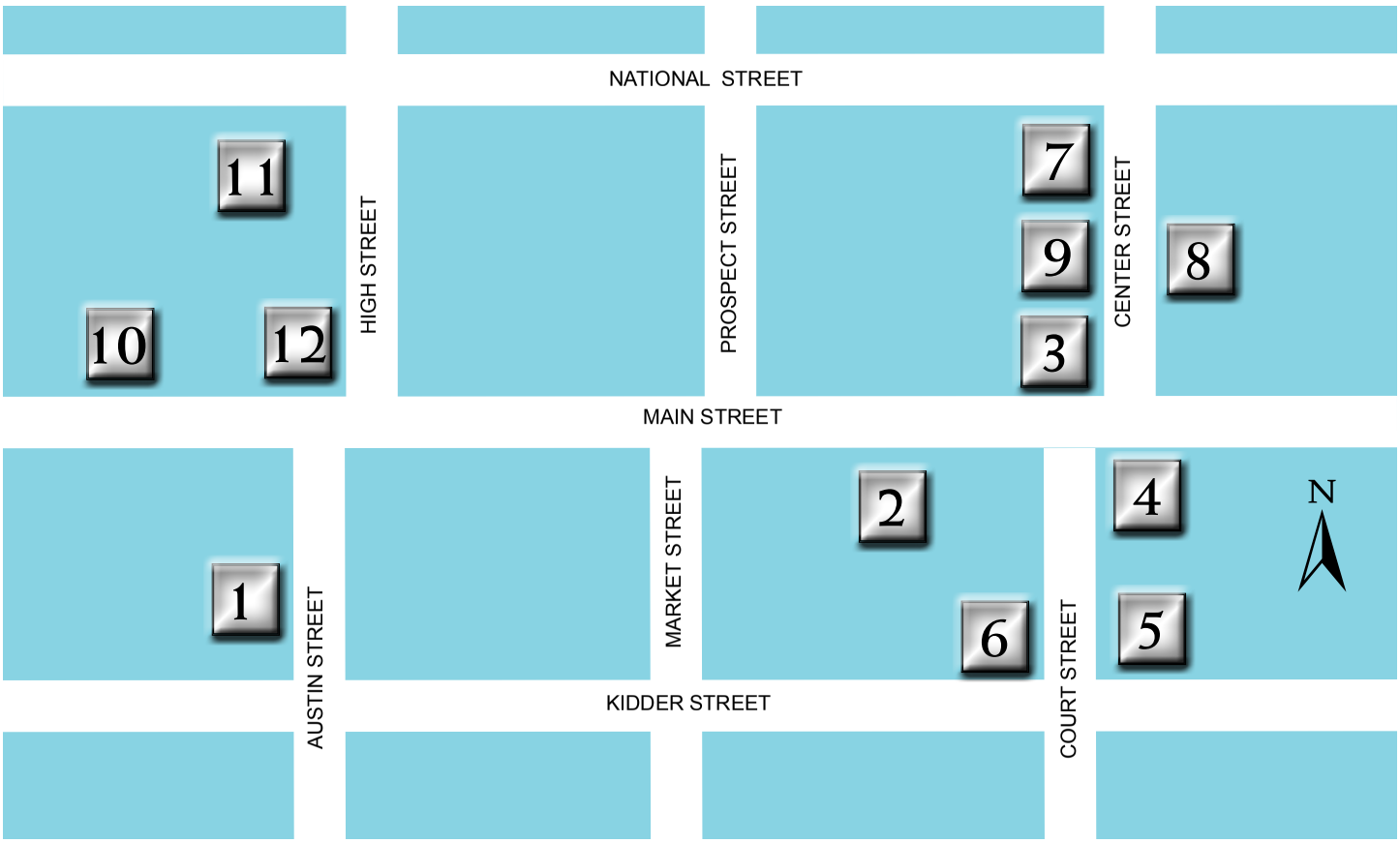
VERMILLION DOWNTOWN MASONRY TOUR


NATIONAL STREET
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VERMILLION DOWNTOWN MASONRY TOUR

By Jim Wilson

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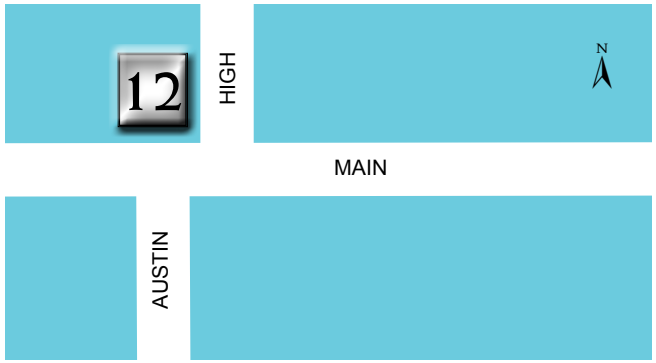
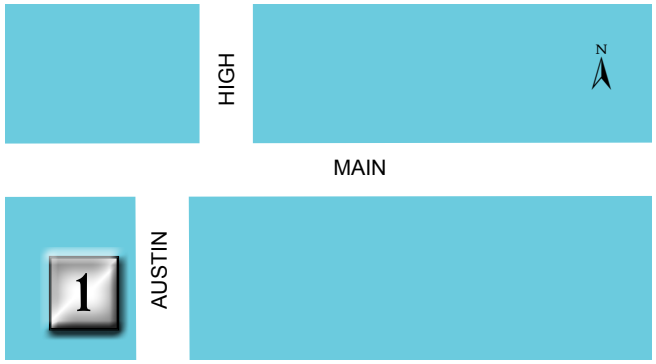
When the Veteran's memorial was installed it called for an alteration to the original retaining wall. The change from old to new is obvious. I would note that it is standard historic preservation practice not to make alterations to historic buildings an exact match in order to alert viewers to the fact that an alteration or addition was made.



This walking tour of downtown masonry will seem to be incomplete to any experts that follow along but well might provoke a response similar to that of the student who was asked by his teacher what the student though of the novel Moby Dick and responded by saying that "he had learned more about whales than he really wanted to know" from everyone else.

In the course of this tour we will discuss the materials and how they are used and put together. The most common masonry unit seen in downtown Vermillion is the brick. There are also some examples of stone work and concrete block. The distinguishing characteristic is that all of the masonry products come in standard sizes and the parts are readily interchangeable.

Normal bricks are approximately 8" x 3 ¼ x 2 1/2. These dimensions allow for the bricks to be laid in standard patterns that result in even courses when the mortar joints are taken into consideration. The brick or stone units come in a variety of colors and faces. The joints between units determine the visual characteristics of the wall through the use of color, width and character.



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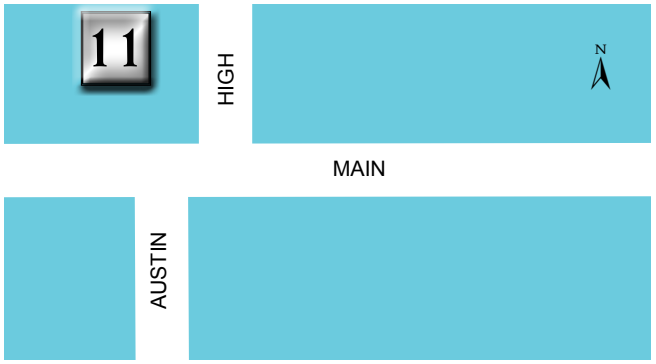
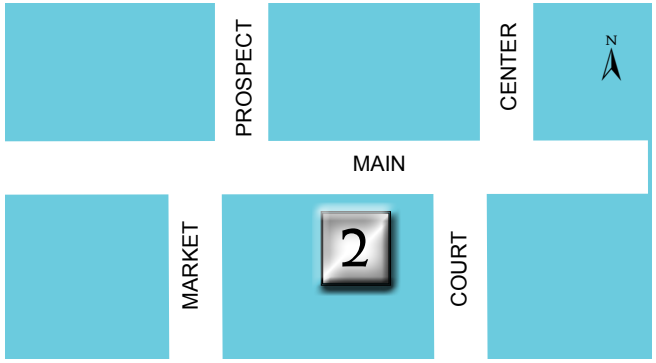
In the 1980's the County decided that it was necessary to provide a secure covered entryway on the rear of the building. As is obvious from the photo an effort was made to match the form and material used in the building. The color is not a good match.



Vermillion, like most western towns, suffered a devastating fire in 1890 which led the city government to insist that downtown buildings constructed after that time be constructed of brick. There were brick buildings constructed prior to that and the Austin-Whittemore house is one of them, built in 1882 out of common brick with a quartzite foundation.

The brick is laid in what is known as stretcher bond. All bricks are laid flat with the long side exposed. Mortar is light gray and joints are standard width. The quartzite foundation is made of slightly irregular stones with the joints filled with mortar. The brick is soft and erodible.



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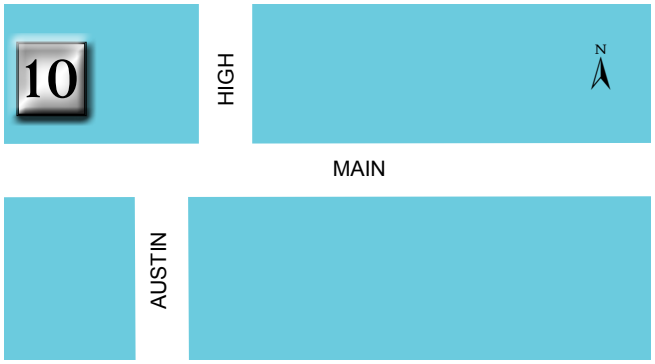
The Clay County Courthouse is the most monumental building downtown and was constructed in 1912/1913.

The Courthouse is classical in its organization with a visually significant base, central portion and a defined top. The base consists of rough faced yellow stone battered walls topped by grey smooth-faced grey limestone. These units are also laid in a stretcher bond fashion. The public safety center addition is compatible in surface treatment and color and is not particularly obtrusive.

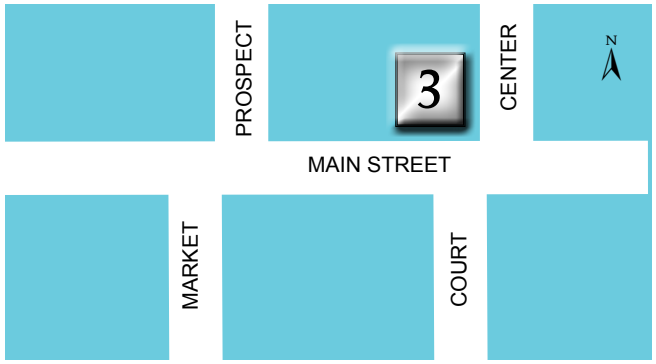


2

This picture illustrates the many ways that both face brick and molded brick can be used to decorative effect. The bricks can be laid flat, on edge or with the short or long sides exposed. This allows for the development of a multitude of geometric designs as well as the use of projecting ridges, dentils, quoins and other features. The use of molded brick can emphasize entrances, windows or other façade features. Molded or pressed brick comes in a variety of shapes, sizes and designs. It has historically been expensive enough to be used in a limited fashion on street facades of buildings.

The variety of pressed brick found on facades on this block of Main Street is unusual. Ribbed, rounded edges, circular designs, bullseyes and the combination with stone. I would also note the use of the luxfer prisms in some transoms. These were scientifically designed to focus light into the backs of rooms that generally lacked side windows.

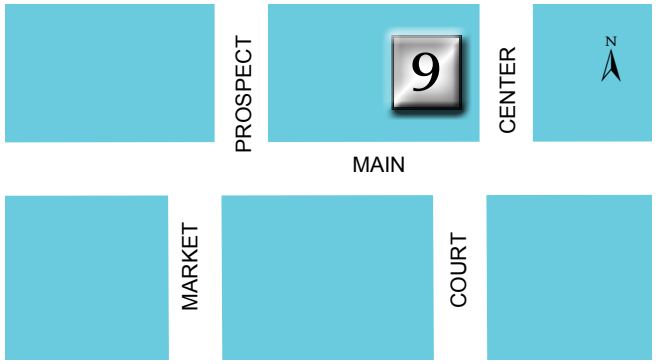
Bricks are porous clay products that once painted generally have to remain painted. The paint penetrates the brick and sinks into the pores of the surface and is normally impossible to remove even with abrasive cleaning. Abrasive cleaning will remove the surface of the brick and expose the softer interior while leaving some paint speckles. A hard surfaced, glazed brick can sometimes have the paint successfully removed but usually once painted the brick should remain painted.



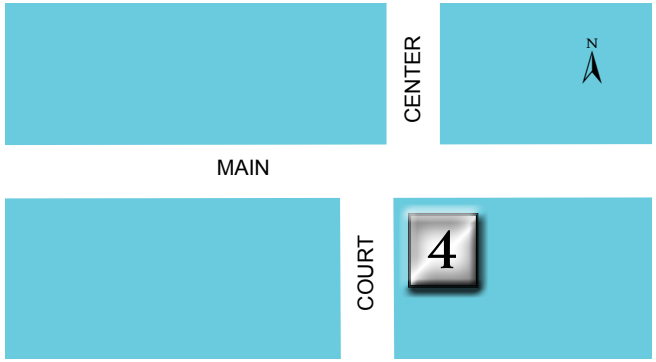
Historically there has been a distinct difference between repointing and tuckpointing. Repointing is the replacement of mortar joints in a brick wall to replicate the joints that exist or simply to repair the wall. Tuckpointing is a particular technique that in the 19th century was a specialized masonry trade. Most often used as a technique with cut stone units with slightly irregular edges it consists of filling the joints between stones flush with masonry the same color as the stone and then applying a bead in a contrasting color on top of the base mortar. The best example of this is in Vermillion is found on Old Main.

Although there are hundreds of different kinds of bricks, for our purposes we will talk about three different types: Common brick, face brick and molded brick. It is easy to note that on many of the downtown buildings the brick on the side and rear facades looks much different than the brick on the front or street façade

It is easy to see the difference between the common brick used for the side of the building that has a rougher surface and more irregular shapes than the harder, slicker surfaced brick that is use on the front of the building. This was done because the common brick is cheaper. This particular yellow toned face brick with the darker diagonal slashes is known locally as Yankton brick.

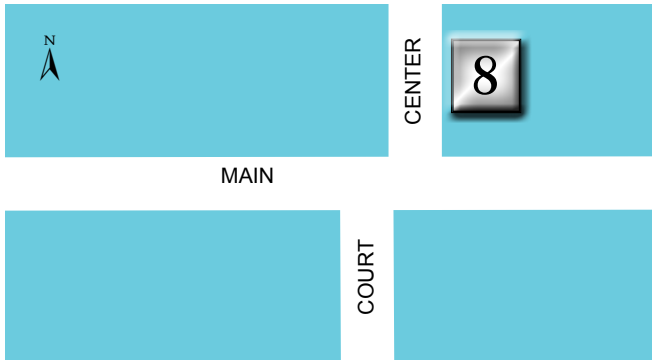


The Vermillion National Bank Building at 1 West Main is an excellent demonstration of the use of a variety of masonry techniques and materials. There is a barely visible rough faced stone foundation, the use of blond brick as a base material with the brown stone accents and details. Note the arched brick window heads on the side façade as well as the brick dentil strip below the metal cornice. This is a superbly done small building which survived the fire of 1890.



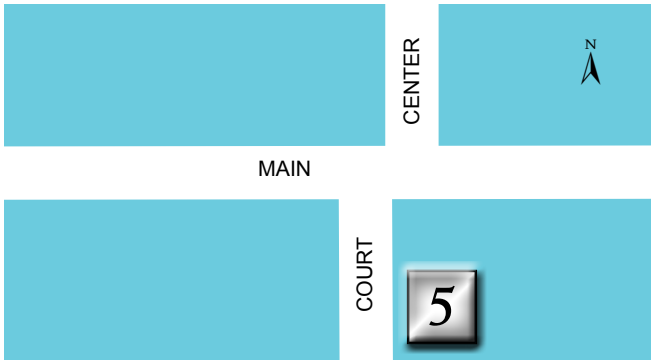
The small addition at the rear of Lumos Studios on Center Street is an excellent example of the use of bricks of different colors for decorative effect.

I have seen excellent examples of this where different mortar colors are used with the different bricks to stunning effect. It should be kept in mind that mortar joints are an essential part of any masonry wall. The can vary in width from standard to very thin to the point of almost disappearing. The mortar can vary in color and the joint can be flush with the face of the brick, recessed and can be concave, convex or raked. Frank Lloyd Wright, in order to emphasize the horizontality of his buildings utilized bricks that were longer and thinner than normal bricks and laid in a stretcher bond pattern with recessed horizontal joints and flush vertical joints. This produced a strong horizontal line that flattened and stretched his buildings. This type of construction was also utilized on the Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City.



The First National Bank Building at 1 East Main was built in 1893, remodeled in 1929 and the west wall was altered in 2010.

The 1893 building was constructed of purple quartzite with orange sandstone trim. Portions of the sandstone were deteriorating and required replacement. The 1929 remodeling involved the expansion of the building by doubling its size on Main Street and the installation of the "modern" art deco façade. As part of the 2010 remodeling the owners elected to replace all of the sandstone with grey concrete. The concrete replacement parts were simplified versions of the sandstone, lacking some of the distinctive details found in the original. The use of grey concrete also drastically altered the appearance of the building as it eliminated the color contrast which made the original so distinctive.



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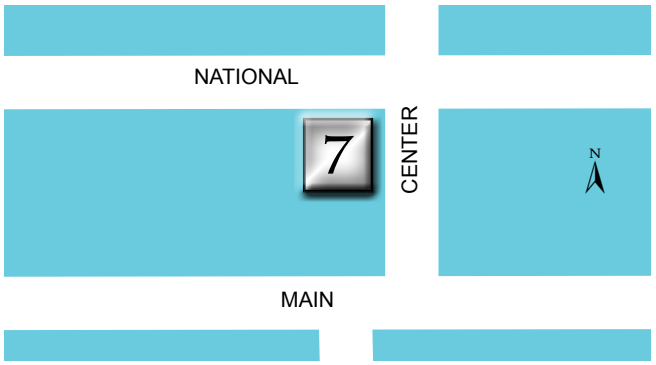
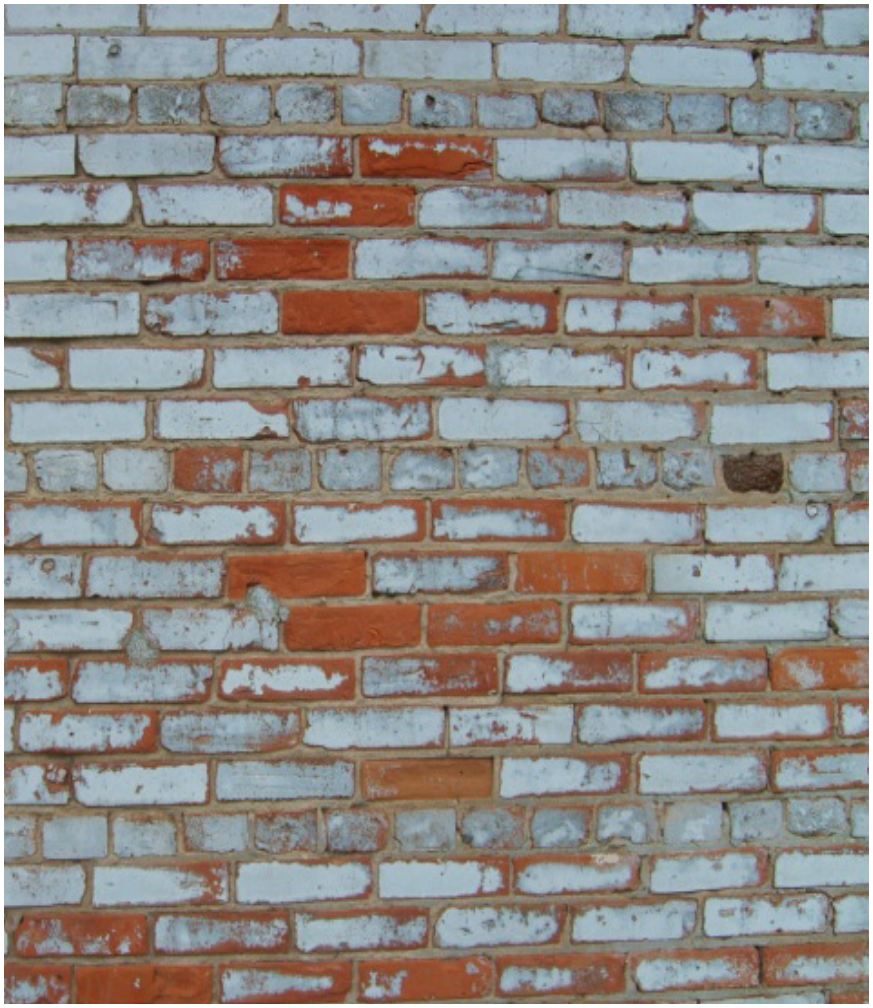
Almost all of the downtown buildings in Vermillion have their bricks laid in a stretcher bond pattern. There are two downtown examples of common or American bond. This consists of several courses of stretchers separated by a row of headers. This one is found on the side of the old livery building at Main and National and one on the alley façade of the theater on East Main.





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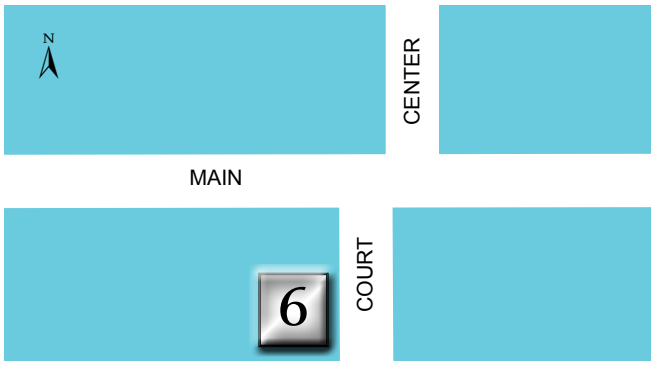
The Post Office Building at 16 Court Street, built in 1931, was built to standard government specifications. You will note that there are projecting brick quoins built into the corners and that the brick is laid in an English Bond pattern which alternates stretcher courses with header courses.



The large window near the front shows the use of glass block as a 1950's treatment to both provide privacy and avoid the purported energy loss and repair problems of regular windows. The second floor windows are modern replacements with fake muntins. The use of brick to produce decorative cornice features and projecting columns breaks up an otherwise bland facade and is a good indication of what an accomplished bricklayer could do.