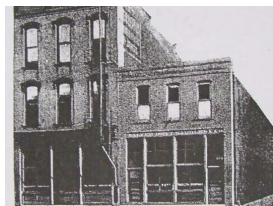


# Court Avenue building holds storied business history



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(Photo: State Historic Preservation Office )

A history lesson: Des Moines' startup scene is much older than you think.

In fact, a building that could be considered the city's first business incubator most likely stood around the time of the Civil War.

Luckily for history buffs and fans of Schlitz beer, that building at 208 Court Ave. still stands today. It's home to the popular basement bar Shorty's and the now-closed restaurant Sbrocco. It was recently sold to a developer who plans give the three-story building a face-lift.

**CONTEST:** [Help pick the name for 208 Court Ave.'s new restaurant \(/name208court\)](#)

We recently learned a little more about origins of 208 Court Ave., which is one of the oldest buildings in that part of downtown.

Hoping to learn the age of the building, new owner Todd Millang enlisted the help of Jennifer James, an architectural historian and preservation consultant. James discovered that several merchants got their start in the building before opening bigger stores and new businesses.

"It was a sort of business incubator for quite a few years," Millang said.

Just how old is the building?

It's not clear, but James found evidence dating it to about 1868 and maybe earlier.

It was clear the building stood in 1880, the year Polk County assessor's records begin. Then James found a photo in the state archives from about 1871 that shows 208 Court Ave. as part of a row of three buildings.

The next clue was a hand-drawn map dated 1868 that shows three buildings at the same location.

A city directory from 1866 indicates the building was around in 1865 but isn't definitive, James said.

Today, bar patrons regularly descend steps into Shorty's Somewhat Fancy Bar, which at one time was the only bar in town to serve Schlitz beer on tap.

Millang, a commercial real estate agent and owner of Johnny's Hall of Fame, another Court Avenue bar, said he wants to keep Shorty's as is. He's developing a new restaurant for the first floor and is partnering with [The Des Moines Register for a naming contest. \(/name208court\)](#)

Millang plans to convert the second floor to additional dining space and the third floor into apartments. He is looking into adding an elevator to the outside of the building.

The building won't be eligible for historic tax credits because its original facade has been replaced.

James found evidence that several successful businesses got their start at 208 Court Ave. and a pair of adjoining buildings:

- Stricker & Bro., a clothier that appears to have operated from 1866 to 1868 or 1869.
- Howell & Seeburger, a hardware company, occupied one of the storefronts from 1866 to about 1873, before moving to a larger location.
- N.L. Goldstone, a dry goods retailer, opened in 1869. The owner went on to open Goldstone's Hotel, one of the largest buildings in the East Village during its time.
- The Walter Boyt Saddlery Co. moved into 208 Court Ave. in 1901 and later expanded into a larger building nearby. The company exists today as Osceola-based Boyt Harness Co., which sells gun cases, hunting clothing and other gear.

Through the 1860s and 1870s, Court Avenue served as the commercial and retail heart of the city, James said. In the 1880s and 1890s, retailers moved

north to Walnut Street, and Court Avenue transitioned to a wholesale district, thanks to the proximity to the railroad.

"The fact that this building wasn't redeveloped (when much of the rest of the area was) really makes it stand out," she said.

## Renovations begin at courthouse

Speaking of Court Avenue, renovations of the Polk County Courthouse are underway. Scaffolding has been erected around the courthouse as crews begin part of an \$81 million renovation to improve safety and efficiency at the century-old building.

Some of the court complex changes have already occurred. The Polk County attorney's office last month moved into the former J.C. Penney building directly north of the courthouse.

## Hansen cuts ribbon on Ballyard Lofts

Downtown apartments keep coming. Hansen Real Estate Services hosted a ribbon-cutting Wednesday at Ballyard Lofts, a 43-unit market-rate apartment complex next to Principal Park.

The apartment complex, at 350 S.W. Second St., was renovated from a century-old brick warehouse. It opened to residents last month.

## Residential building bounces back in April

Rebounding from a slow winter, metro-area residential building permits surged nearly 50 percent in April, led by large apartment complex projects in Des Moines, Ankeny and Altoona.

Metro-area cities issued 612 permits for houses, townhomes and apartments last month, up from 411 the same month a year earlier, according to a report from the Home Builders Association of Greater Des Moines.

For the year, residential building permits are up 9 percent, according to the report. Single-family construction is down, while permits for townhomes and apartments are up.

Some 248 permits for apartments were issued in April, up from 99 the same month last year. And that doesn't include multifamily housing permits in Waukee, which had not been reported as of Tuesday.

Des Moines issued permits for 71 apartment units, which included a mixed-use project on Ingersoll Avenue on the edge of downtown that will house a Veridian Credit Union and 47 apartments.

Ankeny issued 105 multifamily building permits, while Altoona issued 72.

## About the column

The Growth column is a weekly look at how greater Des Moines is growing as developers break ground throughout the metro. Joel Aschbrenner will tell you each Thursday about a new development, explore a trend or touch on several projects garnering interest. Email him at [jaschbrenn@dmreg.com](mailto:jaschbrenn@dmreg.com) or send a tweet to [@joelaschbrenner](https://twitter.com/joelaschbrenner). Find more coverage at [DesMoinesRegister.com/ Development](http://DesMoinesRegister.com/Development). ([/business/development/](http://business/development/))

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