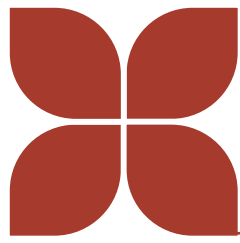


# Chapter 5: Cultural Resources

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## INTRODUCTION

Historic and cultural resources – such as historic buildings and landmarks, archaeological sites, and community events and traditions – help define a community’s identity and sense of place. This chapter highlights the historic and cultural resources that shape the City of Stoughton and outlines strategies for preserving them and guiding future community planning.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◊ Stoughton’s historic and cultural assets strongly define its identity: historic buildings, cultural traditions, and community institutions – such as the Opera House and Carnegie Library – are central to Stoughton’s unique sense of place and community pride.
- ◊ Preservation is a community priority: public input repeatedly emphasized protecting Stoughton’s historic downtown, local businesses, and small-town charm. Residents want growth, but not at the expense of the city’s historic character or authenticity.
- ◊ While Stoughton’s Norwegian heritage remains a defining feature, residents support expanding multicultural programming and celebrations to reflect the diversity of today’s community.
- ◊ Arts, culture, and creative placemaking are vital to community vibrancy: cultural districts such as downtown’s Arts and Entertainment district and the Depot Hill Creative District are emerging hubs for creativity, economic activity, and community events.
- ◊ Stoughton is rich in historic and cultural resources with:
  - Six historic districts
  - Over 500 buildings on the state and national Register of Historic Places
  - 1,317 properties in the WI Historical Society’s Architecture and History Inventory
  - At least 62 documented archaeological sites

## GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND ACTIONS

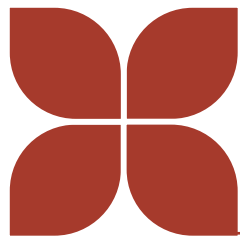
### Goal 1: Preserve, enhance, and celebrate the City’s historic, cultural, and archaeological resources.

#### Strategies:

1. Protect and steward historic buildings, districts, and cultural landscapes.
2. Promote economic reinvestment through preservation and adaptive reuse.

#### Actions:

- ◊ Collaborate with the Landmarks Commission to protect resources contributing to Stoughton’s historic character through continued design review, education, and proactive identification of potential landmarks.
- ◊ Ensure updates to downtown zoning districts and plans reinforce historic preservation goals, promote adaptive reuse, and support arts and cultural programming.
- ◊ Encourage adaptive reuse of historic buildings.
- ◊ Identify and evaluate additional properties and districts that may qualify for local, state, or federal historic designation.
- ◊ Support restoration and rehabilitation of historic buildings by promoting federal and state historic tax credit programs and by sharing technical preservation and funding resources with property owners.
- ◊ Coordinate with the Stoughton Area Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Services to amplify heritage-based tourism and cultural attractions.
- ◊ Maintain and update local design guidelines for historic districts, residential infill, and downtown development to ensure compatibility with the historic and architectural context.
- ◊ Maintain existing and explore the creation of new local incentives, such as matching grants, low/no-interest loans, or reduced fees, to encourage reinvestment in downtown historic buildings and aging residential neighborhoods.



## Goal 2: Support and grow Stoughton’s cultural identity, arts community, and creative economy.

### Strategies:

1. Strengthen cultural districts and creative placemaking efforts.
2. Celebrate community heritage and cultural traditions.

### Actions:

- ◇ Recognize and promote the Arts & Entertainment District and Depot Hill Creative District as hubs for arts, culture, entertainment, and creative businesses and activities.
- ◇ Support community events and festivals, such as Syttende Mai, Juneteenth, Pride, Coffee Break, Victorian Holiday, and Koselig, that celebrate the variety of Stoughton’s cultures to ensure cultural programming feels welcoming and not “exclusively Norwegian”.
- ◇ Elevate the library, Livsreise, Opera House, Historical Society, and arts groups as central cultural anchors.
- ◇ Integrate placemaking projects – murals, public art, lighting, outdoor performance spaces, and streetscape improvements – into downtown and neighborhood planning efforts.
- ◇ Collaborate with the Stoughton Area School District, Chamber of Commerce, library, churches, civic groups, and service organizations to promote cultural programming, history education, and intergenerational storytelling.
- ◇ Partner with local arts organizations and private property owners to expand opportunities for public art, artist studios, creative pop-ups, and cultural events.
- ◇ Continue to highlight Stoughton’s Norwegian heritage while also supporting multicultural stories, voices, and events that reflect the full diversity of today’s community.

## Goal 3: Protect archaeological resources and Indigenous heritage.

### Strategies:

1. Ensure responsible stewardship of archaeological sites and burial places.

### Actions:

- ◇ Consult with the Wisconsin Historical Society and Ho-Chunk Nation when development is proposed near mapped or suspected archaeological sites or burial grounds.
- ◇ Collaborate with the Office of the State Archaeologist to identify, document, and interpret additional sites when feasible.
- ◇ Require early archaeological review during development review for projects adjacent to the Yahara River or other known archaeological zones.
- ◇ Support public education and respectful interpretation of Indigenous history in the area.
- ◇ Encourage voluntary preservation agreements and promote property tax incentives available to private landowners who protect archaeological sites.

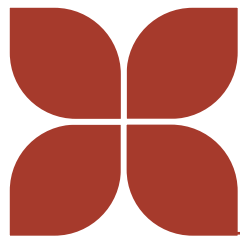
## Goal 4: Enhance Stoughton’s visual character and sense of place.

### Strategies:

1. Focus on enhancing the attractiveness of and showcasing community character through key corridors, public spaces, and gateways.

### Actions:

- ◇ Encourage beautification projects, including streetscape plantings, pedestrian amenities, wayfinding signs, and art installations in high-visibility areas, such as downtown.
- ◇ Expand wayfinding and interpretive signage highlighting historic districts, landmarks, cultural sites, and trail connections.
- ◇ Promote design excellence for private development and public infrastructure in ways that reinforce Stoughton’s identity.



## SURVEY RESULTS

### Cultural Resources

The 2026 Comprehensive Plan survey reveals strong community interest in preserving Stoughton’s historic character, strengthening cultural identity, and expanding inclusive arts, cultural programming, and community gathering spaces. Several major themes directly inform the Cultural Resources chapter, reaffirming the importance of historic preservation, cultural inclusion, and support for the city’s prominent cultural institutions.

Survey comments show consistent pride in Stoughton’s small-town charm, historic downtown, and Norwegian heritage, with many respondents explicitly citing the City’s historic and cultural identity as a defining strength and something that must be preserved.

#### Representative Quotes:

**“I love this size of community and how friendly everyone is.”**

**“The ‘close knit’ feeling is a welcome change from larger cities.”**

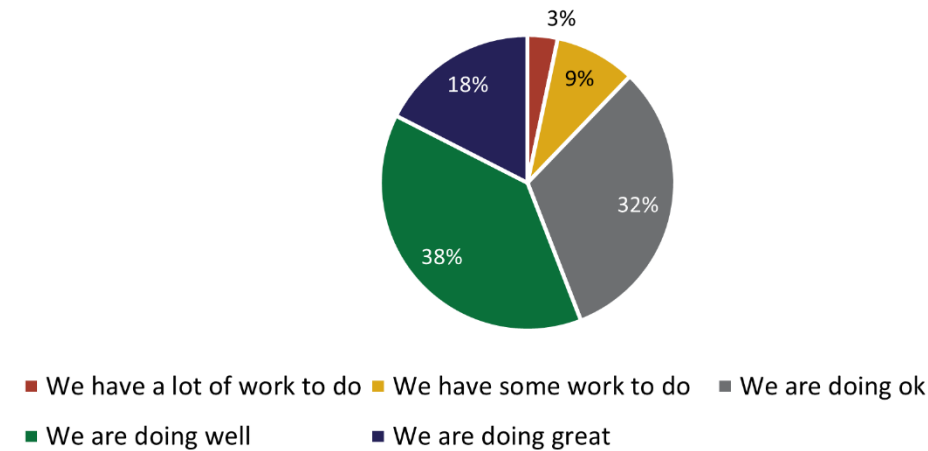
**“Love living here, need some growth but keep Stoughton small town charm.”**

**“Preserving Stoughton’s historic character is critical to its identity.”**

**“We should balance Norwegian heritage with more inclusive cultural events.”**

**“We don’t want to lose what makes Stoughton different from every other town.”**

Culture: Stoughton embraces and highlights the rich and varied cultural backgrounds of its residents.



Respondents frequently expressed a desire for a more vibrant, active, and engaging city, mentioning arts programming, events, and cultural activities, accessible to all ages. There is strong support for improved public spaces, gathering places, and creative placemaking, including public art and enhancements downtown and along the riverfront.

Many residents voiced mixed feelings about growth, citing fear of losing Stoughton’s heritage, historic neighborhoods, and small-town feel.

## Cultural and Historic Assets to be Preserved and Promoted

Public input revealed strong community consensus around the cultural and historic assets that define Stoughton’s identity and should be preserved or promoted. While residents overwhelmingly value the city’s Norwegian heritage and historic downtown, many also emphasized the importance of broader cultural inclusion, preservation of natural areas, and adaptive reuse of historic structures.

### 1. Norwegian Heritage

Residents repeatedly identified Norwegian culture as the city’s signature identity and “brand.” Common references included Syttende Mai, rosemaling, the Norwegian Dancers, Livsreise, and the city’s immigrant history. Many respondents view these traditions as essential to Stoughton’s tourism appeal and smalltown character.

At the same time, many comments asked the city to balance Norwegian heritage with more multicultural celebrations and culturally inclusive programming (e.g., Juneteenth, Pride, broader cultural events).

### 2. Historic Downtown, Main Street, and Historic Neighborhoods

The downtown historic district is described as one of Stoughton’s most important and beloved assets. Survey respondents see downtown as:

- ◇ Walkable, charming, architecturally distinctive
- ◇ A key economic draw for visitors
- ◇ A place where building maintenance, occupancy, and façade integrity matter

Many comments highlight concerns about disinvestment or deteriorating buildings.

Historic residential neighborhoods, including Victorian and early 20thcentury homes, were also frequently cited as important to preserve.

### 3. Signature Landmarks and Civic Facilities

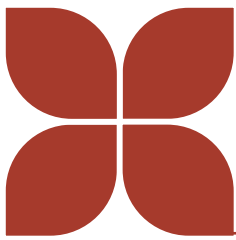
Several facilities appeared consistently across hundreds of responses:

#### Stoughton Opera House

- ◇ The most frequently named landmark
- ◇ Treasured for its architecture, performances, and role as a regional arts destination

#### Carnegie Library (Stoughton Public Library)

- ◇ Widely praised and often noted as underpromoted and under-staffed
- ◇ Many want increased visibility for its historic value and architecture



## Cultural Resources

### Additional landmarks referenced:

- ◇ Stoughton Historical Museum
- ◇ Train Depot / Railroad history
- ◇ Clock Tower
- ◇ Old High School (1892 building)
- ◇ Tobacco warehouses, Mandt Wagon Works, Stoughton Trailers' heritage
- ◇ Village Players Theatre, arts district buildings

### 4. Festivals, Arts, and Community Events

Community events are seen as central to Stoughton's cultural identity. Frequently mentioned events and activities include:

- ◇ Syttende Mai
- ◇ Stoughton Fair / Junior Fair
- ◇ Local arts programming, public art, galleries
- ◇ Outdoor concerts, Gazebo Music
- ◇ Coffee Break Festival
- ◇ Juneteenth (noted by many as under-advertised and deserving of greater support)

Residents link these festivals directly to Stoughton's small-town character, tourism, community cohesion, and youth and family engagement. Many expressed a desire for expanding multicultural festivals and adding international community days.

### 5. Riverfront, Parks, Agricultural, Natural and Cultural Landscapes

The Yahara River and riverfront are referenced as both a natural and cultural asset. Parks, open spaces, and wetlands were also frequently tied to Stoughton's identity.

Respondents highlighted the importance of Stoughton's farming history, historic wagon works, trailer manufacturing, and industrial facilities as well as the surrounding farmland as part of the city's cultural landscape.

## HISTORIC RESOURCES INVENTORY

When describing the history of the City of Stoughton, it's important to acknowledge the land's original inhabitants – most prominently the Ho-Chunk Nation - who have lived in the region for nearly 12,000 years, contributing to the area's historic and natural resources.

The federal government, through its General Land Office, surveyed the land that is now Stoughton in 1833 using the Public Land Survey System. According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, at that time the area was described as “thinly timbered in burr, white and yellow oak, a strip of timber dividing the prairie along the river.” Luke Stoughton saw the potential with the Yahara River and founded what is now the City of Stoughton in 1847, establishing a sawmill, grist mill, and dam and encouraging teachers, doctors, blacksmiths, and shop owners to settle there. The arrival of the railroad in 1853 secured the community's role as a hub for manufacturing and commerce – nearby farmers brought their crops to town for processing, and wagon manufacturing became the primary industry. Tobacco then succeeded wheat as the dominant crop in the area, leading to the construction of large warehouses and sorting houses, many of which have been preserved and repurposed for other uses today. Tobacco processing provided work for the many Norwegian immigrants arriving around this time who were seeking fertile farmland, economic opportunity, and religious freedom. Over 75% of Stoughton's population was of Norwegian descent by 1900<sup>6</sup>.

Stoughton was platted in 1847, incorporated as a village in 1868 and incorporated as a city in 1882. Its population and economy grew steadily until World War I, when the emergence of automobiles and tractors brought the demise of wagon manufacturing and tobacco farming depleted the soil, leading to the collapse of the community's two primary economic drivers. After facing economic challenges in the 1920s and 1930s, Stoughton rebounded with new industries, such as truck manufacturing.

The large wave of Norwegian immigration in the late 1800s established Stoughton as one of the most “Norwegian” communities in the United States, a heritage reflected today in local place names, community events, and customs. In 2023, approximately 21% of Stoughton residents reported Norwegian ancestry, the second most common ancestry reported (German ancestry was the most common at 37%)<sup>7</sup>.

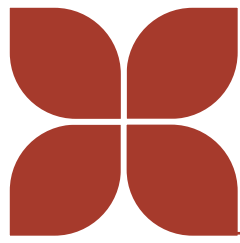
### HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Much of Stoughton's history can be seen in its buildings today, especially those remaining that were constructed during the City's boom from 1880 to 1910. Stoughton has a total of six historic districts - geographically defined areas that contain historic sites, structures, or buildings – five of which are listed in the National Register of Historic Places and one that is locally designated. The city also has over 500 buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the State Register of Historic Places, as well as 1,317 properties listed in the Wisconsin Historical Society's [Architecture and History Inventory](#) (AHI).

Being a federally designated historic district or property means it has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a federal list of sites recognized for their historical, architectural, or archaeological significance and deemed worthy of preservation.

A federal designation functions primarily as recognition and an incentive rather than a set of regulations. The federal government does not control what a private property owner may or may not do with their property. However, the designation does offer protection from adverse impacts of federally funded or permitted projects, such as highways or large housing developments, by requiring those projects to minimize harm to historic resources.

Owners of income-producing properties within a designated historic district may be eligible for Federal Historic Tax Credits, as well as State of Wisconsin Historic Tax Credits. Wisconsin also offers tax credits for qualifying residential historic properties.



## Cultural Resources

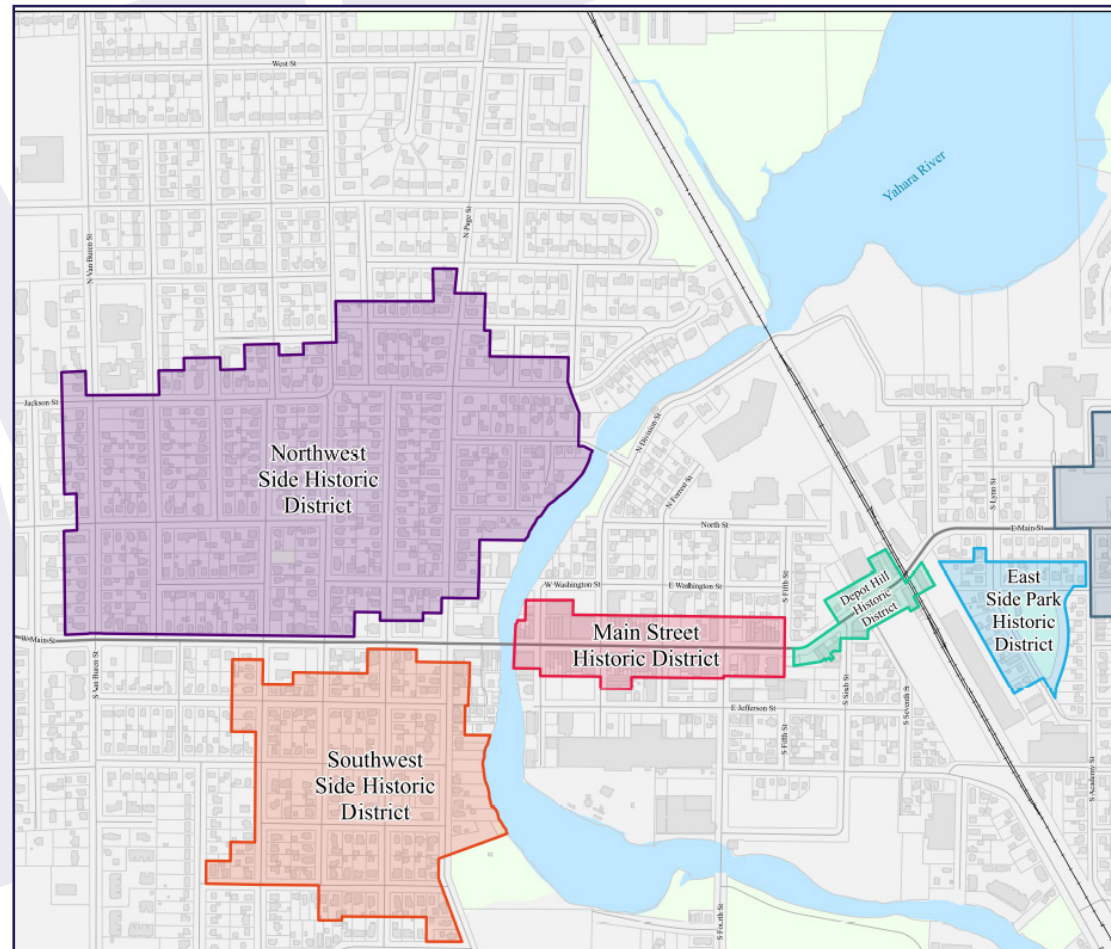
At the local level, regulations are administered by the Stoughton Landmarks Commission, a body of seven community members appointed by the mayor with the purpose of recognizing and preserving the historic and cultural resources within the City of Stoughton, as prescribed by [Stoughton's Landmarks Ordinance](#). Activities of the Commission include coordinating educational activities, designating local historic landmarks, providing design expertise, and performing design reviews of applications to alter locally designated historic buildings. The Commission oversees permissible exterior alterations and improvements through the city's landmarks ordinance and adopted design guidelines. The Stoughton landmarks ordinance follows the National Park Service preservation guidelines with respect to the protection and treatment of historic properties.

Federally-designated historic districts in Stoughton include the Northwest Side Historic District, Southwest Side Historic District, East Side Historic District, East Park Historic District, and Depot Hill Historic District. The Main Street Commercial Historic District is locally designated.

### Northwest Side Historic District

Primarily a residential area directly north of West Main Street, this district has close to 250 historic homes dating from the 1850s, with the majority built between 1880 and 1915. The most common style is Queen Anne, with a number of Italianate, American foursquare, craftsman/bungalow, and colonial revival styles as well<sup>8</sup>.

Map 1: City of Stoughton Historic Districts



Map 1: City of Stoughton Historic Districts

### Southwest Side Historic District

This district is located south of West Main Street, adjacent to the Yahara River. In this neighborhood of over 120 historic homes, Queen Anne style is again the most common, with many Italianates as well. Almost three-quarters of the buildings were constructed between 1880 and 1910<sup>8</sup>.

### Main Street Commercial District

Spanning Main Street between fifth street and the river, this commercial district includes the Romanesque Revival Stoughton Opera House and many Italianate, Queen Anne, and Neo-Classical styles of mostly two-story buildings constructed from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century<sup>8</sup>.

### East Side Historic District

With over 80 historic homes, this primarily residential district is on Stoughton's east side, spanning north and south of East Main Street between South Academy Street and North Henry Street. Most of the historic homes in this district Most of the 80 plus homes were built in the short period between 1890 and 1915, and the majority are of that era's popular Queen Anne style<sup>8</sup>.

### East Park Historic District

A small triangular-shaped district encompassing approximately six bungalow and craftsman-style homes and the charming East Side City Park just south of East Main Street.

### Depot Hill Historic District

Spanning both sides of East Main Street from Fifth Street to the railroad tracks, the Depot Hill Historic District consists of fourteen mostly intact nineteenth and twentieth century commercial buildings that range in size from two large a-stylistic utilitarian form tobacco warehouses to a small Craftsman style gasoline filling station, as well as the City's historic train depot building. This district comprises the eastern end of Stoughton's historic commercial core, crossed at the district's eastern end by the still active north-south-running tracks of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroad. The twelve contributing district resources were built between 1885 and 1939 and display a variety of architectural styles and vernacular forms. These styles range from Italianate to Art Modern to Commercial Vernacular. Regardless of their type, style, or form, all but one of these buildings exhibit masonry wall cladding<sup>8</sup>.

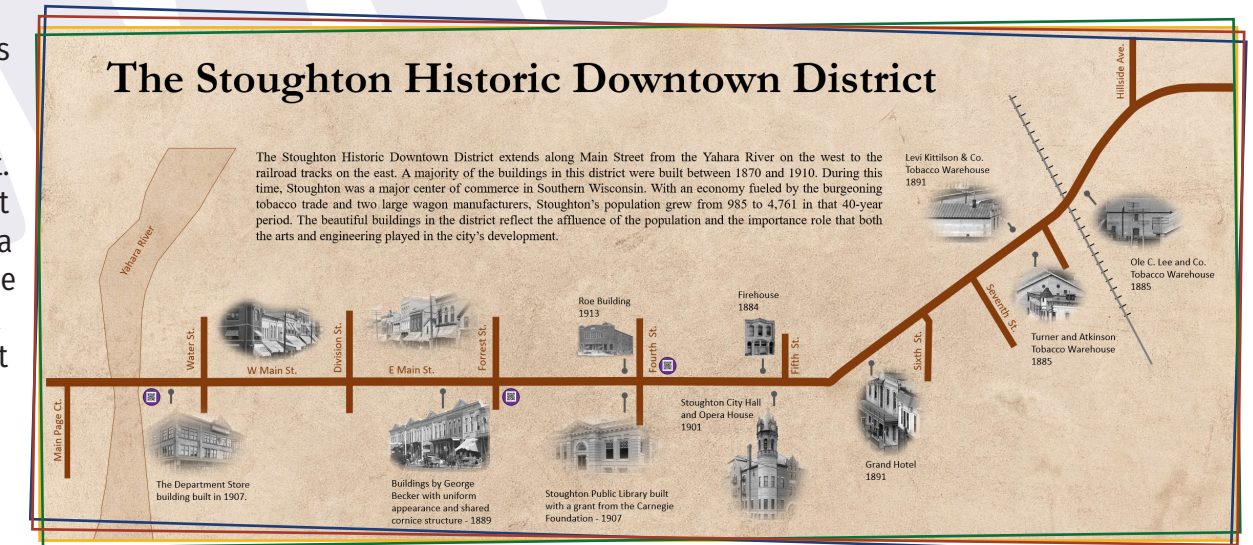
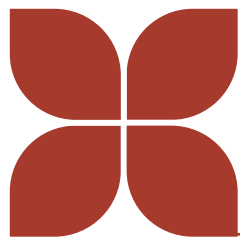


Photo Courtesy: [www.historicstoughton.org](http://www.historicstoughton.org)



## Cultural Resources

### CULTURAL DISTRICTS

In addition to formally designated historic districts, Stoughton also has two cultural districts downtown: the Arts and Entertainment District, encompassing most of downtown, and the Depot Hill Creative District, a newer, informal district in the Depot Hill/East Main Street area that denotes existing and up-and-coming “creative” spaces, including art galleries, maker-spaces, and artist studios/classes. The Depot Hill Creative District is enhanced by the newly created Arts Zoning District.

Established by resolution in 2014, Stoughton’s Art and Entertainment District promotes art through events like the popular Art Walk, which showcases local artists in downtown shops and is supported by the Stoughton Downtown Merchant Association and Stoughton Arts Council. The Arts Zoning District was established in 2025 to regulate the design and construction of new buildings within this arts mixed-use district.



Photo Courtesy: Stoughton Utilities

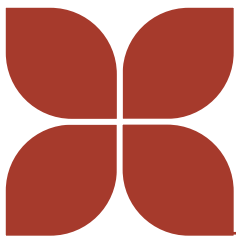


### PLACEMAKING AND ART

Placemaking is a people-centered approach to planning, designing, and managing public spaces to create vibrant, inclusive, and functional areas that improve community health, happiness, and well-being. Placemaking is a collaborative process for shaping public spaces to maximize shared value, and when it intentionally integrates art and culture, it is known as creative placemaking.

### LOCAL LANDMARKS

Stoughton has 32 designated local landmarks, properties receiving distinction by the Landmarks Commission because of their significant historical, architectural, archaeological, engineering, cultural, or aesthetic value to the community. The City’s landmarks include a mix of historic houses, school buildings, a church, power plant, Carnegie library, Opera House, commercial buildings, and train depot. A full list of Stoughton’s local landmarks can be found on the Landmarks Commission website at <https://www.stoughtonlandmarks.org/local-landmarks>



## LOCAL HISTORIC DESIGNATION PROCESS

Any individual or group may nominate a building, site, or area for local historic designation. Nominations are reviewed by the Stoughton Landmarks Commission, a body of seven community members appointed by the mayor with the purpose of recognizing and preserving the historic and cultural resources within the City of Stoughton, as prescribed by [Stoughton's Landmarks Ordinance](#). Activities of the Commission include coordinating educational activities, designating local historic landmarks, providing design expertise, and performing design reviews of applications to alter locally designated historic buildings. After reviewing the nomination, the Landmarks Commission makes a recommendation to City Council for final approval. Once designated, properties are protected under Stoughton's Landmarks Ordinance and exterior changes requiring a building permit must first receive a [Certificate of Appropriateness](#) (COA) from the Commission and comply with design guidelines (see below) to ensure compatibility with the historic character of the property.

Steps to Become a Local Landmark in Stoughton:

1. A site, property, or building must be nominated, including documentation of its history and architectural significance.
2. The Landmarks Commission reviews the nomination to determine whether it meets city criteria.
3. The Commission makes a recommendation to the City Council.
4. The City Council decides whether to designate the property as a local landmark.
5. Once designated, the owner must obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) for any exterior changes or site work.

There are no ongoing review requirements to maintain landmark status; however, it is expected that designated properties will be appropriately maintained and/or restored.

SOH Plaquard Placeholder



In 1988 Stoughton became the twelfth Certified Local Government (CLG) in Wisconsin, a status signifying certification by the Wisconsin Historical Society that Stoughton enforces its local preservation ordinance. CLG status makes the city eligible for certain grant funding provided by the National Park Service and administered by the Wisconsin Historical Society. Such grants have funded a number of Stoughton Landmarks Commission-led projects, including surveys and nominations of several districts to the State and National Registers of Historic Places, publication of district walking tour brochures, and the publication of two design guideline booklets.

## Local Preservation Ordinance

A local preservation ordinance is a statute adopted by municipalities to identify, protect, and manage historic, architectural, or cultural resources. Authorized by state legislation, such ordinances allow local governments to create commissions, designate local landmarks and districts, and review exterior changes to properties to ensure their protection.

## DESIGN GUIDELINES

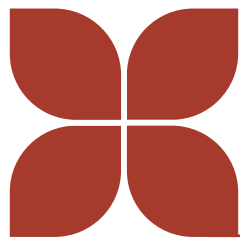
Design guidelines encourage new buildings to complement the character of their surroundings and demonstrate sensitivity to nearby historic structures, without requiring replicas of historic designs. High-quality contemporary architecture can enhance historic neighborhoods when designed thoughtfully. Stoughton's Landmarks Commission is available to provide guidance on design considerations, and additional resources are available through the [Wisconsin Society of Architects](#). Residential and downtown design guidelines for Stoughton can be found on the [Landmarks Commission website](#). These guidelines provide direction for property owners and businesses on maintaining historic integrity, encouraging restoration, and guiding compatible infill construction.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Stoughton's planning area contains at least 62 known archaeological sites and cemeteries documented by the Wisconsin Historical Society. This total reflects only those sites formally reported; many additional sites such as burial mounds, unmarked graves, historic campsites, cabins, and early homesteads likely remain unidentified. Many of these features are situated near the Yahara River and only a few have been evaluated for their historic significance or to determine their eligibility for listing on the State or National Register of Historic Places.

Archaeological and cultural resources are protected through a combination of federal and state laws. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies, and any projects using federal funding or permits, to consider impacts on sites listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. At the state level, statutes such as 44.40, 44.43, and 44.47 regulate how archaeological sites are treated during public projects and prohibit unauthorized disturbance on public lands. Burial sites, including cemeteries and effigy mounds, receive additional protection under Wis. Statutes 157.70, which applies to both public and private lands.

While most archaeological sites on private property are not automatically protected, landowners can receive property tax incentives if they formally agree to preserve these resources. The Office of the State Archaeologist and the Wisconsin Historical Society oversee these programs and maintain lists of qualified consultants.



## OTHER CULTURAL RESOURCES

In addition to designated local landmarks and historic districts, Stoughton is home to many other cultural resources, attractions, and community groups that contribute to the identity and vibrancy of the community.

- ◇ Livsreise Norwegian Heritage Center
- ◇ Stoughton Historical Society
- ◇ Syttende Mai Festival
- ◇ Other Community Events
- ◇ Stoughton Junior Fair, Art Walk, Coffee Break, Juneteenth, Pride, Victorian Holiday, Koselig Week
- ◇ Stoughton Opera House
- ◇ Stoughton Public Library
- ◇ Art Galleries and Makerspaces
- ◇ Stoughton Arts Council
- ◇ Downtown Shops and Restaurants
- ◇ Service Clubs and Civic Organizations

Protecting Stoughton's cultural and historic resources will require continued local awareness, cooperation with surrounding jurisdictions, and collaboration with county and state agencies to ensure that valuable sites are preserved for future generations.

### Did you know?

Stoughton's Norwegian heritage isn't just history—it's a living cultural asset. Traditions like Syttende Mai, the Norwegian Dancers, rosemåling, and Livsreise continue to shape the city's identity, community pride, and tourism appeal.



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