

East Wilson Street Historic District

In nineteenth-century Wisconsin, the railroads were the highway system of the day, making railroads the dominant catalyst for economic development. Farmers, manufacturers, and virtually all other producers of goods depended on the railroads to get their products to urban markets to the east. Railroads were also the main form of long distance travel and migration, and local commerce benefited from passenger train traffic by concentrating businesses around depots where travelers would disembark.

Around 1870 two railroads built passenger depots in the Wilson Street area – the Chicago and Northwestern Railway and the Milwaukee Road. Three other rail extensions to other areas of the State passed through these depots. During construction of the depots, a concentration of small businesses sprang up along Wilson Street to take advantage of the dramatically increased traffic in the area from railroad passengers arriving in Madison, railroad employees, and vendors delivering shipments to trains.

A Prussian named Herman Kleuter was one of the first businessmen to profit from the depot traffic. He opened a grocery store in 1867 on the 500 block of Wilson Street. Then, in 1871, after business had increased, he built the two-story brick building that now stands at 506-508 East Wilson Street. Other Madison entrepreneurs built hotels and commercial buildings in the area, and merchants opened saloons, restaurants, grocery stores, tobacco shops, and barber shops. After World War II, rail traffic declined, and with it, the Wilson Street commercial area. The last Milwaukee Road passenger train left Madison in 1971.