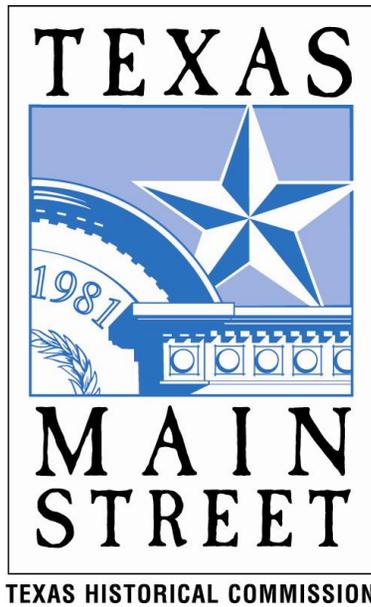


# Defining Local Historic District Character

For Any Main Street, Texas



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## PART 1

### Introduction

#### Texas Main Street Program

The Texas Main Street Program (TMSP) is part of the Community Heritage Development Division of the Texas Historical Commission. The TMSP is the state coordinating program that operates in affiliation with the National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Cumulatively since 1981, Texas Main Street communities have realized well over \$2 billion in reinvestment into their historic downtowns, and have added more than 27,000 jobs and almost 7,000 new small businesses. These reinvestments show that significant economic development impact can be realized through historic preservation. There are many reasons why downtown revitalization is a crucial tool for enhancing the economic and social health of a community. In addition to being the most visible indicator of community pride and economic health, the historic downtown is also the foundation of community heritage. The historic buildings in a downtown are prime locations for the establishment of unique entrepreneurial businesses and can also be tourism attractors, all of which add to the community's sales tax collections and property values. Today, big-box development permeates the national landscape, making it even more important that communities be proactive in saving and using their historic spaces to avoid becoming featureless places.

#### Your Main Street

There is no other place just like your Texas Main Street. The buildings, structures, objects, and landscape features within a historic district work together to create a unique sense of place. As a whole, a historic district becomes more than just a collection of individually significant historic buildings. Based on its own unique combination of building forms, architectural styles, streetscape features, and landscape features, a district gains a distinct historic character. Character of a building or district refers to “all those visual aspects and physical features that comprise the appearance of every historic building. Character-defining elements include the overall shape of the building, its materials, craftsmanship, decorative details, interior spaces and features, as well as the various aspects of its site and environment” (National Park Service, Preservation Brief 17: 1). Because the significance of each property within a historic district is linked to its neighbors, it is especially important that property owners work together to maintain and preserve each property for the shared benefit of the whole historic district. Additionally, property owners should create a common strategy for preserving and maintaining a historic district's sense of place.

The purpose of this report is to get you to look at your town in a new light. Familiarity of a place can make you lose sight of the attributes that make your district distinctive. This report should help you to take a fresh look at your historic district and “see” what makes your Main Street different. The end result will help your town attract visitors to your Main Street district because it is different from any other town in Texas.

**This report provided by the Texas Historical Commission’s Main Street staff will pose a variety of questions and observations for you to consider and research. As you go through this report, check off the open bullets on the left side of the pages when you answer the question.**

## Research Your Town's History

Do research on your town's history. This will be useful not only for your Main Street program, but also for the Main Street board members, committees, and city officials, as well as the general public. This history is intended to be brief. A detailed history can be included as an appendix.

- When and how did your town get started?
- Who were key people in your town's history?
- What were pivotal events in your town?
- What caused your town to prosper?
- What connections did your town have with neighboring towns or counties?
- Does your town have an iconic structure such as a commemorative monument or fountain? If yes, how did this come about?
- Did your town have art movements? Theaters and movie houses? A drive-in movie theater?
- What modes of transportation affected your town? What were the lasting influences of transportation?
- What were the key products that your town produced? Cotton? Lumber? Oil? Bricks? Cattle? Something else?
- What happened in your downtown during national events, such as westward expansion or emancipation?
- When did your town get electricity?
- What happened in your town during Prohibition? The Great Depression? World War I? World War II? How do these events connect your town to Texas and the national historic context?



## Your Historically Distinctive Main Street

### Your Main Street Story: Why Your Town is Different

Often a downtown or Main Street was the economic and social center of the town. The Main Street district typically has a collection of building types that help tell the story of your Main Street. This historic character provides several positive aspects by offering a distinct identity for businesses, fostering heritage tourism, and attracting investments.

- What made your downtown/Main Street area significant?
- Why was downtown important socially and culturally during various time periods (events, daily business, gathering place, etc.)
- Was downtown important regionally and why?
- What population groups did business downtown?
- Is there one building or a group of buildings that stands out or does not seem to fit historically? Why?
- What effect did the unusual building or group have on the community at large?
- What memories do current residents hold about downtown?

### Historical Photographs and Records of Your Main Street

Take a look at distinctive features and recurring patterns, streetscape elements including canopies and awnings, signage, street lights and street furniture, and parking configurations. Historical photographs are valuable resources for discovering what your historic district used to look like, as are maps, paintings, tax records, city directories, and documents. Keep in mind that a picture is worth a thousand words.

- What did your district look like historically?
- Does your town have a courthouse square or public square?
- How was the town laid out? On a square grid pattern? Linear? Colliding grids? Radial?
- What did your Main Street look like?
- What types of buildings did your Main Street have? One story? Two story? Multi-story?
- What architectural styles were present?
- What visual rhythms were present (such as building widths or heights, recurring architectural features)?



## Your Main Street Yesterday and Today

Now that you have looked at your Main Street and have assessed its distinctive features, recurring patterns, and streetscape from the historical standpoint, let's analyze both the historical views of your Main Street and what your Main Street looks like today. It is important to be as open and visible about problems or issues with the historic district as it is with opportunities; remember it is only possible to **fix** a problem after it has been identified. Take an honest look at the existing district including buildings, streetscape, and accessories.

### How Has Your District Character Changed?

Look at changes in your Main Street.

- What changes have occurred to the buildings?
- What has been the pattern of alterations? Addition of slipcovers? Stucco laid on top of existing material? Changed-out windows? Altered canopies?
- How many buildings have been demolished or have deteriorated from neglect?
- What characteristic details have been obscured by additions or removed?
- What inappropriate changes have been made?
- Are the changes reversible?
- Would reversals require minor or major undertakings?
- How have these changes altered the distinctive character of your Main Street?
- What are the common changes that obscure the historic character of your Main Street's architecture?
- Are there vacant lots where buildings used to stand? How has that affected the building and street rhythm?

### Changes to Canopies and Awnings

Canopies and awnings provide shade from the sun and shelter from the rain, as well as regulate the amount of light and heat entering the building. Canopies were often a recurring pattern on commercial buildings and therefore a unifying element. This type of canopy should be retained as much as possible. Look at your town's historical photographs for clues about canopies and awnings.

- What types of canopies did your Main Street buildings have?
- How were they supported (tie-rods, chains, poles)?
- What materials were they made of?



- Did the canopies/awnings cover the transom windows?
- Have the canopies been altered significantly?
- How many have been removed or replaced with different types of canopies or awnings?

### **Changes to Storefronts, Windows and Doors**

Main Streets typically featured stores that contained glass display windows with an entry door to the business. Recessed entryways are common in Main Street towns. Windows were commonly framed with painted wood or sometimes metal of bronze or brass. Doors were often wood-framed glass panels and paired to allow for a wider doorway. A secondary door is sometimes found on the façade for entry to the second floor. Transom windows placed over doors and windows augmented the natural lighting that came through the display windows. Operable transoms also provided ventilation.

- What type of storefronts did your Main Street have? How have they changed? When were they changed?
- Have the doors been changed to more modern steel or aluminum doors?
- How many windows have been replaced with solid walls or smaller windows?
- Were transom windows covered up?
- What type of glass was used in the transom windows? Stained? Prism? Glass block?

Retaining existing historic glass storefronts, transom windows, doors, and recessed entries should be encouraged. Where these elements have been removed entirely, replacement with glass display windows is encouraged to recreate the visual socialization, increase display space, and augment natural lighting. However, keep in mind that some modernizations of storefronts have now become historic in their own right, such as Art Deco and Moderne.

### **Changes to Decoration and Detailing**

The details and decorative elements create texture and visual interest for the streetscape. These details should not be hidden or altered as they contribute to what makes your Main Street distinctive.

- What are the prominent details of your Main Street past and present?
- Is there a particular architectural style or form that is prominent, such as Art Deco or decorative cast iron?
- Do the corner buildings have angled entries?

- Do the buildings have stepped parapets?
- Do the buildings have decorative brickwork or colored brick or tile?
- Do the buildings have pigmented structural glass, such as Vitrolite or Carrera?
- Do the buildings have decorative pressed metal cornices or details?
- Do the buildings have cast iron storefronts?
- Do any buildings have turrets or oriel windows?

Now, look at your Main Street from the positive standpoint.

- How much of your Main Street's historic character remains?
- What details are still intact?
- What buildings retain most of their original configurations, materials, and details?
- Are any of the changes noteworthy and deserve preservation in their current state?

### **Streetscape Changes**

A streetscape refers to the street environment.

- What changes have occurred to the streetscape? Are there street accessories (trash cans, benches, lighting, signs)? What do they look like?
- What are the common and unique elements of your Main Street's streetscape?
- Historically, how was parking organized? Has that changed? If so, how much has it changed?
- Have demolished buildings created voids or altered setbacks from the sidewalk? If so, how many? How has that affected the block as a whole?
- What were the sidewalks like originally? How have they changed? Have the sidewalks been updated to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements?

### **Changes to Lighting and Miscellaneous Items**

Street lighting evolved from gas lights to electric lights. Sanborn maps are useful for tracking down power plant locations and getting approximate dates of arrival. Newspapers would also be helpful in tracking down exactly when electricity arrived.

- Are there street accessories (trash cans, benches, lighting, signs)? What do they look like?
- When did electricity arrive in your town?
- What types of lighting were present along the street?
- Singular light poles?
- Multi-branched light poles?
- Taller street lighting?
- How has the lighting changed?
- How could the lighting be improved?

Street accessories, such as benches and trash cans, were historically scarce. Today, street lights, trash cans, and street furniture are necessary items for downtown areas today for safety, cleanliness, and rest.

- Did your Main Street historically have street accessories, such as benches or trash cans?
- Does your Main Street have street accessories now? What kinds?

Other items that were not utilized historically are satellite dishes, newspaper vending machines and drop boxes, and public art.

- Does your Main Street have satellite dishes on the facades of the buildings?
- Are the newspaper vending machines and drop boxes scattered around or are they grouped together in less conspicuous locations?
- What could be done to improve their looks or location?
- Do your streets include public art?

### **Changes to Signage**

Signage was used to advertise the name of the business as well as what products were sold within. Look at your historical photos for clues for what types of signage were used as well as font styles.

- What types of signs did your Main Street have? Board signs? Wall signs? Canopy signs? Perpendicular signs?
- When did illuminated signage show up?
- How has the signage changed over time?
- Do the modern signs hide architectural details? Do they detract from the historic character by being over-scaled or too dominant to the overall building or block?



## **PART 2**

### **What's Next?**

#### **How Can Your District be Used?**

##### **Gathering Place**

Your Main Street's historic district is and should continue to be used as a gathering place. In addition to the typical holiday parades and bazaars, other events could be a farmers markets or annual festivals that capitalize on your Main Street's distinctive assets.

Think of your historic downtown as an outdoor museum and your historic buildings as artifacts to be interpreted. Research on the history of buildings and businesses often uncovers interesting, funny, or provocative stories that can create tremendous value for residents and visitors. Share these authentic stories through walking tour brochures, interpretive plaques, live tours, and storytelling events to reveal the history of your town. This will provide additional leisure and educational opportunities to be enjoyed downtown.

##### **Government Services**

What government services does your town have in the Main Street historic district? These types of facilities are reliable draws for local residents. Encourage your town to keep these facilities downtown as the users and employees of these facilities can also be customers for the surrounding local businesses.

##### **Retail**

What types of retail stores does your Main Street have? How can these be supplemented to encourage more people to come downtown? Food businesses are key in downtowns because if visitors need to leave town to eat lunch or get refreshments, they probably will not make the effort to return to resume shopping as the place where they do get sustenance will also have shopping opportunities. Locally owned stores are more likely to have specialized items that are tailored to your town's personality than chain stores.

##### **Entertainment**

How could your larger buildings, such as masonic halls or theaters, be repurposed for entertainment (assuming they are not already in use)? Art shows by artists or school children are another possibility that could be showcased in various shops along Main Street.



### **Professional**

The upper floors of the multi-story buildings could be used to house lawyers, tax consultants, dentists, etc. The first floors utilized by professional businesses often lead to blocked-up storefront windows – detracting from the historic character of the building and weakening the pedestrian friendliness of the streetscape. As these professions often prefer privacy for their patrons, upper-floor operations might be more ideal.

### **Residential**

The upper floors of the multi-story buildings could be rezoned for residential purposes. Residential use of buildings would supply additional income for building owners and businesses.

### **Planning**

#### **Existing Codes and Ordinances**

A community that actively seeks to protect its historic buildings provides an attractive investment for those who want to live in and be a part of an authentic community. As mentioned in the introductory section, it is important that property owners work together to maintain and preserve each property for the shared public benefit of the whole historic district. Additionally, property owners should create a common strategy to preserve and maintain a historic district's sense of place. One way to do this is to have building codes, zoning, and ordinances in place to protect historic resources.

Local preservation ordinances, zoning laws, and building codes are tools traditionally used to maintain the balance between the welfare of the general public and the interests of individual property owners.

- What codes has your town adopted?
- Are these codes appropriate for historic properties?
- Where are they kept on file?
- What sign and zoning ordinances does your town have?
- Does your town have a historic preservation ordinance?

### Financial Assistance

- Does your town have financial assistance programs set up to help local property owners or business owners?
- What are the programs for? Is information about these programs easily accessible by the owners and board members?
- What is the design review process?
- Does your town have any tax incentives, such as property tax abatements or property tax freezes? Tax abatements are where the city may enter into an agreement to waive and/or postpone property taxes. Tax freezes lock in property values at the pre-rehabilitation value for a certain period of time.
- Does your town have a revolving loan fund or low interest loan fund to help owners make historically appropriate building improvements?
- Does your town have any grant programs for façade, sign, and/or paint projects?

### Future Development Needs

As with any town, changes will occur in your Main Street. How your Main Street changes is up to the city and its residents and property owners.

- What changes may happen in the future?
- Is there a Master Plan in place that protects historical buildings?
- How can sensitive changes be guided?
- What can be initiated to encourage historically appropriate development?

As part of the Main Street Program, your Main Street should, at a minimum, follow the **Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation** for any alterations done to its historic buildings, or preferably set up design guidelines for its historic district. The Standards are broad, philosophical principles meant to guide preservation practice. Although most design guidelines are based on the Standards, local design guidelines contain specific recommendations tailored to the characteristics of a particular district or neighborhood, while the Standards do not take into account local economics, politics, attitudes, and goals.

**Design guidelines** are more practical and applicable for your Main Street than the Standards as the design guidelines would be created with your Main Street in mind specifically, rather than the Standards' broad ideas intended to guide preservation practice as a whole. The

guidelines would afford your Main Street more input into how it wants its historic areas to develop. Design guidelines are written and graphic instructions created for preservation commissions and property owners to encourage appropriate exterior alterations, additions, demolitions, and new construction within local historic districts. Design guidelines illustrate the desired appearance of new development so that it most appropriately mixes with historic architecture and enhances overall value. Design guidelines typically suggest compatible scale, setbacks, roofline, size of openings, texture, and other elements that produce suitable new construction. Design guidelines are a great tool for ensuring that growth in your Main Street's treasured historic area meets certain standards and enhances the character. For more on creating design guidelines, contact your Texas Main Street Program representative.

In addition to creating design guidelines for the historic district, other helpful items are a Historic Preservation Committee, a Certificate of Appropriateness, tax incentives for historic preservation, and historical markers. A **Historic Preservation Committee** typically is comprised of a small number of local citizens. The role of the committee varies by town, but its purpose is generally to review historic zoning cases; to approve certificates of appropriateness and tax abatement applications for city landmarks, and sign and building permits in historic districts; to review applications for historic preservation tourism and grant monies; to maintain city survey of cultural resources; and to promote historic preservation activities.

A **Certificate of Appropriateness** is a document that the Historic Preservation Commission approves, stating that specific work has been approved by the Commission. A Certificate of Appropriateness ideally is required before most exterior work begins and before a building permit can be issued. Changes involving new construction, reconstruction, alteration, demolition, major maintenance, exterior color changes, and the introduction of fences, walls, lighting fixtures, permanent landscaping, etc. require a Certificate of Appropriateness.

**Tax incentives** can be utilized to encourage private participation in preservation. In considering appropriate incentive, the city should conduct a cost/benefit analysis to measure the anticipated loss of tax revenue against potential economic gains to the community from preservation activities. Tax incentives help to promote the rehabilitation of historic structures of every period, size, style, and type. Tax incentives can be instrumental in preserving the historic places that give cities, towns, and rural areas their special character. Tax incentives for preservation can attract private investment to the historic cores of cities and towns. They also can generate jobs, enhance property values, and augment revenues for state and local governments through increased property, business, and income taxes. A **Tax Credit** is a reduction from the tax bill and is usually a percentage of the money spent on rehabilitation or a property or structure. **Tax increment**



**financing (TIF)** is a fairly common tool available to local governments for economic development. TIF is a technique to publicly finance needed structural improvements and enhanced infrastructure within a defined area. These improvements usually are undertaken to promote the viability of existing businesses and to attract new commercial enterprises to an area. The cost of improvements to the area is repaid by the contribution of future tax revenues by each taxing unit that levies taxes against the property. The additional tax revenue that is received from the affected properties is referred to as the tax increment. Each taxing unit determines what percentage of its tax increment, if any, it will commit to repayment of the cost of financing the public improvements. Only a city may initiate a TIF; however other entities may join if they choose. The term Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) is the new name for TIFs — these terms are used interchangeably.

**Historical markers** are another useful tool to utilize. Historical markers are plaques that commemorate a wide variety of historical subjects including events, people, buildings, sites, and organizations as official recognitions of historic resources. These can be recorded at the local, state, or federal levels. Having historical markers on the local, state, and national levels are useful in several ways including:

- May help qualify property owners for grant funding or tax incentives
- Give property owners priority access to technical assistance from the Texas Historical Commission staff
- Guide travelers to places of historical interest, although owners need not to provide public access
- Identify properties in Texas that deserve protection
- Assist government and private groups planning new development
- Recognize properties of local, state, and national significance

## Assistance

### Agencies to Assist Owners

Property and business owners can get help for their buildings within the historic district area from the following sources:

- Your Main Street manager and advisory board
- Your town's City Hall, planning department, historic preservation officer
- The Texas Historical Commission
  - Main Street program



- \* Design assistance
- \* Technical information
- \* Economic information
- Certified Local Government program
- Visionaries in Preservation program
- Division of Architecture program
- Division of History and Archeology program
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
- National Register of Historic Places
- The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

### **Resources for Researching Building Histories**

Finding out information about a historic building helps with the rehabilitation process. If you know what your building looked like in the past based on historical photographs, it will be easier to replicate details or make sympathetic alterations. Sources of information for historic buildings and other information include:

- Local and county historical societies
- Local newspapers
- Local and county libraries
- Sanborn Fire Insurance maps (available online through your local library)

### **Maintenance & Repairs**

The historic buildings of your Main Street should have regular maintenance inspections and repairs. A small repair now can save hundreds or thousands of dollars of extensive repairs later – the clichés of “a stitch in time saves nine” or “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” are very applicable for historic buildings. The National Park Service’s Preservation Briefs are great resources that cover many maintenance issues for historic buildings. <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm>.

- Compile a list of qualified contractors, craftsmen, and artisans to assist building owners and business owners on their projects
- Compile a list of appropriate materials that are generally compatible with your buildings



## Architectural Glossary

**Bulkhead:** The member of an entrance frame that forms a base for a sidelight adjacent to a door.

**Canopy:** A covered area that extends from a wall of a building, protecting an entrance.

**Corbel:** A projection or one of a series of projections, each stepped progressively outward with increasing height, and usually projecting from a wall or chimney.

**Cornice:** Any molded projection that crowns or finishes the part to which it is affixed; the exterior trim of a structure at the meeting of the roof and wall.

**Door frame:** An assembly built into a wall consisting of two upright members (jambes) and a head (lintel) over the doorway.

**Inset sign area:** A recessed portion of a wall that is designed to contain a sign.

**Pier:** A member, usually in the form of a thickened section, that forms an integral part of a wall; usually placed at intervals along the wall to provide lateral support or to take concentrated vertical loads.

**Tie rod:** A rod in tension, used to bind parts of a structure together.

**Transom bar:** A horizontal member that separates a door from a window, panel, or louver above.

**Transom window:** A window located above a door or window, which may or may not be operable.

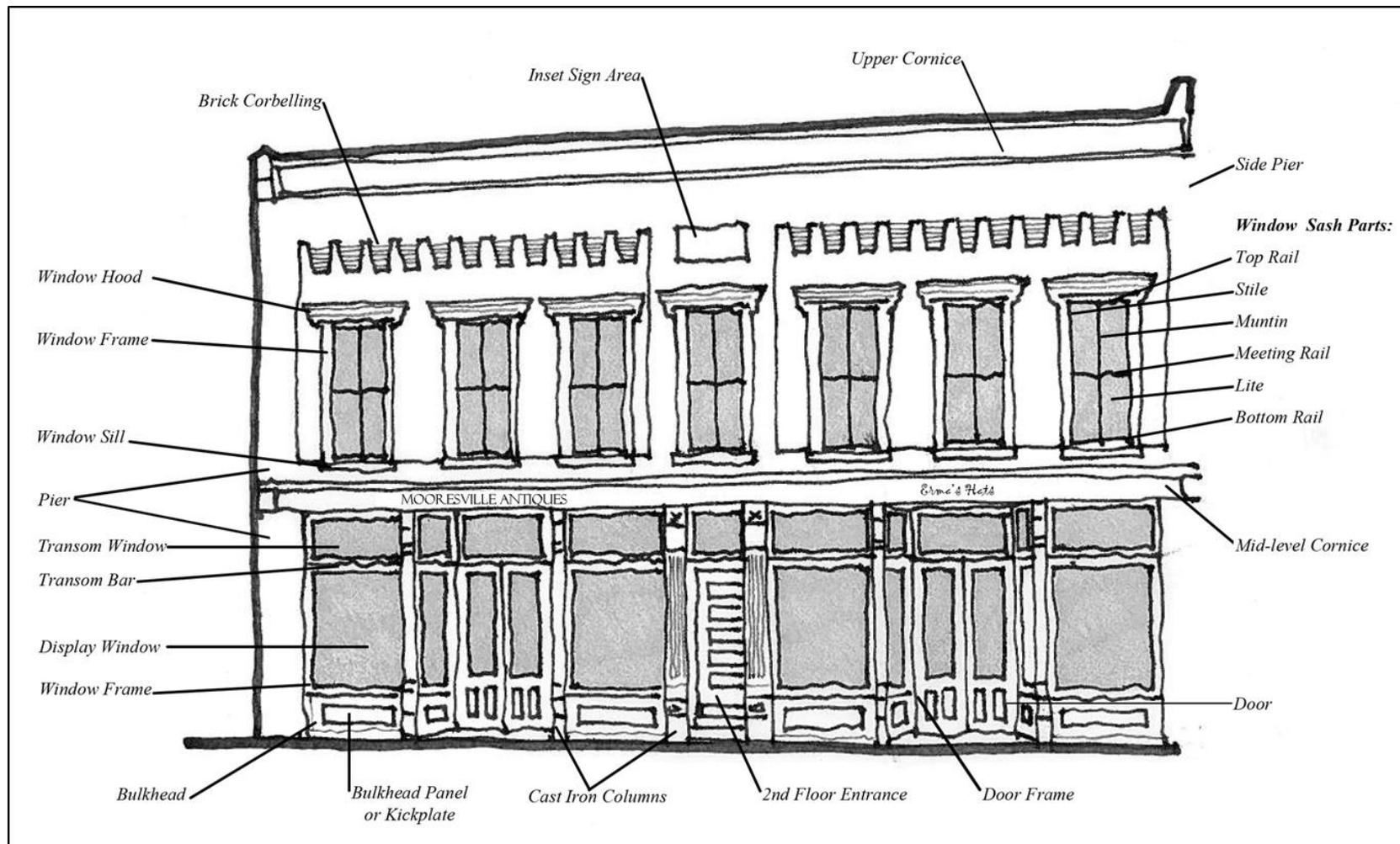
**Window frame:** The fixed, non-operable frame of a window designed to receive and hold the sash or casement and all necessary hardware.

**Window hood:** A cover placed above a window to shelter it.

**Window sash:** Any framework of a window; may be moveable or fixed; may slide in a vertical plane or may be pivoted. Window sash parts: top rail, stile, muntin, meeting rail, lite, bottom rail.

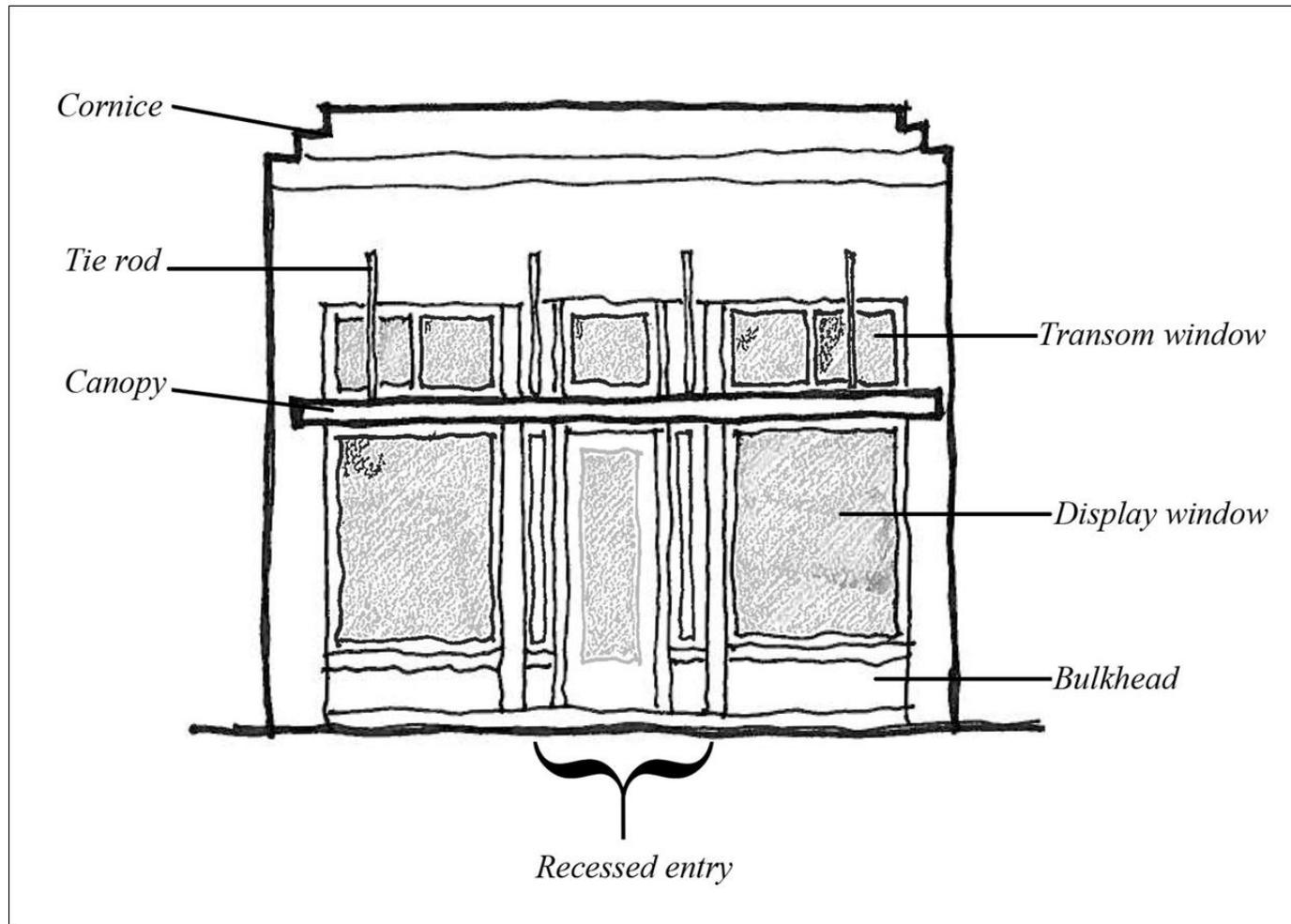
**Window sill:** The horizontal bottom member of a window frame or other frame.





Architectural terms for a two-story building.





Architectural terms for a one-story building.



## Marketing and Promoting Your History

From the marketing and heritage tourism aspects, look at what is distinctive about your Main Street for event ideas and advertising possibilities. The following phrases might help you to consider some possibilities that could be used for ideas.

- Nicknames for your town
- Your town is known for...
- Characteristics of your town
- Effect of transportation on your Main Street
- Does your town have a historic train depot?
- Does your town have a county courthouse? Historic courthouses are always special and deserve marketing and heritage tourism attention. The history of the town can often be told through the courthouse history. What role did the courthouse play in town planning?
- Is your town along a historic trail or highway?
- Is your town along a scenic drive or does it have a natural attraction?
- Does your town have a historic dancehall and is there still an active music culture? Theater culture?
- Does your town have civic, women's, or fraternal organization buildings?
- Does your town have any buildings designed by architects? What are the stories behind these special buildings?
- Does one (or more) of your buildings have significant architectural features or construction method not commonly found?
- Was the Civilian Conservation Corps or Works Progress Administration active in your town? What structures did they build? How did they affect the community?
- Does your town have the "first", "last", "only", "longest continually operated" store, theater, etc.?
- Did your town have a significant event? Did a famous person live in your town?
- Did your town host a special festival every year in the past, such as a cotton festival or old settlers reunion?
- Is your town near an old battlefield or fort?

- Does your town have a listed National Landmark, National Register property, State Archeological Landmark, Historic State Cemetery, listed historic district, or local historic designation?
- Does your town have a historical museum?
- Does your town have a historic/archeological site, memorial, heritage site, historic structure, or object?
- Does your town have park or recreation area?
- Does your town have culturally significant foodways that can be experienced in local restaurants? Are there cooking demonstrations or classes?
- Do you have artist studios in your historic downtown and can people take lessons or workshops from these artists (painting, photography, sculpture, weavers, glass blowing)?

