Central District – Historic Third Ward

BAY VIEW – A Milwaukee Mill Town

Historic Third Ward
THIRD WARD
MILWAUKEE

HISTORIC THIRD WARD
Historic Third Ward

To walk the streets of the Historic Third Ward is to experience urban possibility in its fullest dimensions. The neighborhood began as a marsh, emerged from the muck to become a center of commerce, survived a catastrophic fire, provided a home for two of Milwaukee’s largest and poorest ethnic groups, and then, after a period of virtual abandonment, was reborn in the late twentieth century as a destination neighborhood, a capital of chic that bears more than a passing resemblance to SoHo or the South Loop. The Third Ward has had more lives than the luckiest cat. Every stage in its long history has left a visible mark, giving the community a unique sense of place that continues to attract visitors, investors, and homeseekers decades after its latest transformation began.
When the first urban settlers ascended the Milwaukee River—the city's front door in its formative years—dry land was in short supply. Where the Menomonee and Kinnickinnic Rivers met the Milwaukee, newcomers found an expanse of cattails, marsh grass, and wild rice that would become, in time, Walker's Point, Bay View, Downtown, and the Third Ward. Pioneer historian James Buck recalled the Ward in a state of nature. “From Huron [Clybourn] Street south,” Buck wrote, “all was marsh and water, except two small islands and the strip along the beach.” The two islands underlie today’s Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and the parking structure on Milwaukee and Chicago Streets. The rest of the Third Ward was a paradise for muskrats.

The rodents had less room to maneuver as Milwaukee matured. The river was the community’s main artery of commerce, and landfill activities along its shores began almost immediately. Tons of gravel were scraped from the bluffs north of Michigan Street to the waiting wetland below, and the boggy riverbanks were gradually transformed to building sites. Water Street—an aptly named thoroughfare if there ever was one—literally emerged as Milwaukee’s main street, years before Wisconsin Avenue would claim that role. By 1855, less than a decade after the city incorporated, Water Street was lined with businesses from Juneau Avenue all the way to the swing bridge to Walker’s Point. The river side of the commercial strip was a solid wall of docks where schooners and steamboats called daily during the season of navigation.

The blocks inland from Water Street were largely residential. Milwaukee was divided into five wards when it became a city in 1846, and the Third was universally recognized as the Irish ward. Refugees from famine in their homeland, Irish families were Milwaukee’s first major immigrant group, making up 15 percent of the population in 1850. It was largely Irish laborers who filled the marsh, and it was largely they who covered it with modest frame houses as soon as the muck was dry. The neighborhood that resulted, with a population of 4,142 in 1850, was anything but glamorous. Milwaukee’s gashouse, which burned copious amounts of coal to produce gas for lighting, was a particularly noxious presence in the heart of the neighborhood, and the surrounding blocks had the highest concentration of saloons in the city. Milwaukeeans who traveled in politer circles knew the Ward as the “Bloody Third,” a reputation earned with fisticuffs. When the Milwaukee Police Department compiled its arrest statistics for 1859, 38 percent of the scofflaws were Irish—more than five times their share of the population. Tragedy went hand
in hand with poverty. The loss of the *Lady Elgin* in 1860 cast a lasting pall over the neighborhood. Nearly 300 people drowned when the excursion steamer sank off Winnetka, Illinois, most of them members or supporters of an Irish militia company on their way home from a fund-raising trip to Chicago.

The Third Ward was, in effect, Milwaukee’s first ghetto, but the neighborhood also had its advantages. It was, first of all, close to work—on the docks, on the railroads, and on gangs filling in swamps or grading streets. Employment was never far away, and the dense concentration of Irish families—and their appetite for civic life—had political implications as well. The Third Ward provided a base of support for several Irish mayors and produced its own crop of legendary politicos. The most notable was Cornelius Corcoran, a local feed merchant who served as the Ward’s alderman from 1892 to 1935—a tenure of forty-three years. “Connie da Cork” was Common Council president for thirty of those years, a record in no danger of falling. Corcoran Avenue, near the site of the old gas works, gives the Democratic warhorse a measure of immortality.
By the 1880s the Irish were moving up in the world, and higher incomes meant, for many, a move to higher ground. Although some families migrated to the East Side, the greater movement was westward, first to Tory Hill and then to Merrill Park, where the children and grandchildren of the immigrants established St. Rose Church in 1888. Their exodus from the Third Ward was hastened by the worst fire in Milwaukee’s history. The blaze broke out on October 28, 1892, at the Union Oil Company, near the site of today’s Public Market. Fanned by gale-force winds, it tore through the heart of the Third Ward in a matter of hours. The modest frame homes erected by the Irish “faded into smoke as fast as tissue paper,” according to one eyewitness, and a wall of flame “covered the entire eastern horizon.” By the time the fire was extinguished, it had killed 4 people, destroyed 465 houses on 20 square blocks, rendered 2,500 homeless, consumed 25 million gallons of water, and destroyed over $6 million in property.

The 1892 blaze left an impressively blank canvas, and the next generation of Milwaukeeans wasted no time filling it in. Water Street had been the city’s commercial center in pioneer days, but Milwaukee’s retail axis had rotated ninety degrees, to Wisconsin Avenue, even before the inferno—the natural result of rapid population growth west of the river. The fire accelerated trends that were already under way. Water Street was rebuilt as Milwaukee’s wholesale district, and the blocks just inland, between the river and Milwaukee Street, sprouted an assortment of warehouses and light manufacturing plants both larger and more numerous than those they replaced. At the turn of the twentieth century, Third Ward manufacturers made envelopes, cigars, clothing, furniture, gas stoves, lead type, bags, mirrors, biscuits, and a broad assortment of other products. The attractions were obvious: a central location and easy access to both water and rail transportation. A single-track rail line on the Third Ward’s lakefront had swelled to a fully equipped freightyard for the Chicago & North Western Railroad, with its own roundhouse at Polk and Jackson Streets.
The blocks between the tracks and Milwaukee Street—the eastern portion of the Ward—remained largely residential. Many of the original homes, flimsy as they were, escaped the fire, and a second crop of small frame houses covered the burned-over sections. As the Irish vacated the Third Ward, a new immigrant group moved in behind them: the Italians or, more specifically, the Sicilians. Their Milwaukee population swelled from fewer than 200 in 1890 to 1,740 in 1900 and 4,788 ten years later. The greatest number emigrated from the coastal villages of northern Sicily, including the tiny twin ports of Porticello and Sant’Elia. The Sicilians chose the Third Ward for the same reasons the Irish had: affordable housing and easy access to jobs in the city’s tanneries, factories, railroads, and coal yards. The more entrepreneurial newcomers went into the fruit and vegetable trade, beginning with hand-drawn pushcarts and graduating, in a few fortunate cases, to commission houses of their own on Broadway.

The Italian immigrants and their Irish predecessors had something besides poverty in common: Catholicism. The Celtic faithful had worshiped at St. Gall’s Church, across the river on Michigan Street, but the Sicilians built their spiritual home, Blessed Virgin of Pompeii, in the heart of the neighborhood, on Jackson Street between Clybourn and St. Paul. Dedicated in 1905, “the little pink church” was a simple brick structure with a decidedly cramped floor area of 5,000 square feet, but its interior was festooned from ceiling to floor with frescoes, ornamental plasterwork, and life-sized statues of Christ and the saints. This Mediterranean wonder quickly became the hub of an urban village—a role most apparent during the summer festa season. The people of Pompeii established thirty-one religious societies, most of them named for the patron saints of their members’ home villages. Each saint’s feast day became the occasion for an exuberant festa, featuring Italian bands, tug-of-war contests, food stands, and fireworks. At the high point of the celebration, members of the host society paraded through the Third Ward behind a litter bearing a statue of their patron saint. By procession’s end, the litter was generally covered with paper money pinned there by the faithful.

Sicilian immigrants poured into the vacuum left by the departing Irish. Some newcomers, including Tony Machi, went into the produce business.

The most successful peddlers graduated to their own wholesale houses on Broadway, known for decades as Commission Row.

Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church, completed in 1905, was the spiritual and social heart of the Third Ward Italian community—and the scene of colorful street festivals that helped relieve the squalor of the neighborhood.
Renewal, Removal, and Renewal II

The festivals were memorable high points in the life of the Third Ward, but they could not conceal the dinginess of the neighborhood. The “Bloody Third” had not been an especially desirable area during its heyday as an Irish stronghold, and it had not improved with age. As the Sicilians crowded into homes left behind by the Irish or tacked together after the fire, the Third Ward’s average household size climbed to 5.89 people per unit—the highest density in the city. In 1910 government investigators pronounced the neighborhood’s housing the worst in Milwaukee.

Conditions deteriorated even further as Third Ward businesses shouldered their way into the residential area east of Milwaukee Street. The procession of brick-clad warehouses and light factories made the homes of “Little Italy” increasingly expendable—so expendable that some Sicilians ripped old dwellings apart for firewood. In 1915 historian George La Piana predicted the neighborhood’s early demise: “... day after day houses are disappearing to give way to big iron and concrete factories. In ten years this section will be a distinctly business district, and the Italians will be forced to move away.”

La Piana underestimated the staying power of some Italians by nearly forty years, but the long-term trend was clear. Although the first generation generally stayed put, their children were much like the Irish families of the 1880s: they left the Third Ward as soon as they could afford to. The Lower East Side was their destination of choice. By 1919 so many families had relocated there that Blessed Virgin of Pompeii opened a small mission to serve them: St. Rita’s, on Cass Street near Ogden. Within a decade the mission had 300 children in its Sunday school, compared to 400 at Pompeii’s, a clear sign of things to come. As the exodus continued, East Side Italians outnumbered those remaining in the Third Ward, and in 1939 they dedicated St. Rita’s Church on Cass and Pleasant. The Blessed Virgin of Pompeii’s role became increasingly symbolic. It was still the mother church (and the Third Ward was still the home of hundreds of immigrant mothers), but the life of the second generation lay beyond the borders of the old neighborhood.

The beleaguered community’s long downhill slide continued after World War II. Conditions were so wretched that in 1955 the Third Ward became the focus of Milwaukee’s first urban renewal project, which took in nearly the entire area between Michigan and Menomonee Streets east of Milwaukee Street. Of the 230 structures in that rectangle, 83.5% were classified as “dilapidated or badly deteriorated.” One by one, and despite stubborn resistance from the Third Ward’s oldest residents, the City of Milwaukee condemned and cleared hundreds of houses. The area’s population plummeted from 2,402 in 1950 to a mere 258 in 1960. Freeway construction dealt the crowning blow; a block-wide swath of the remaining businesses and homes was cleared to make way for Interstate 794 in the mid-1960s. Blessed Virgin of Pompeii was already a lonely sentinel in an urban wasteland by that time, and it lay directly in the freeway’s path. In 1967 the little pink church was demolished—shortly after being declared Milwaukee’s first official historic landmark.

The wholesale and factory district west of Milwaukee Street seemed destined for the same fate. The area was brimming with what most postwar developers regarded as industrial relics: aging buildings with inefficient multiple floors, impossibly high ceilings, and too many windows. Parking was a perennial challenge, and congestion was a fact of life.

By the 1950s some of the Ward’s oldest houses remained standing only by force of habit.
The smart money was on precisely the kind of structures that had popped up after 1960 in the urban-renewed blocks east of Milwaukee Street: low-slung, geometric boxes that served as both office and industrial space. The old immigrant quarter had been transformed into a suburban-style business park—clean, efficient, modern, and without a shred of historic character. No one seemed to know what to do with the aging (and increasingly empty) buildings on the river side of Milwaukee Street. In the 1970s there were serious proposals to turn the district into a "combat zone"—a headquarters for adult-themed businesses. In the meantime the Third Ward’s population plunged to a new low of just seventy-four people in 1980.

Not everyone agreed that the old commercial district was doomed. There was, in fact, a saving remnant of business-owners who believed that the neighborhood’s best days were still ahead. In 1976 they formed the Historic Third Ward Association to promote the area’s advantages and turn back any and all attempts to denature its landscape. The group’s timing was impeccable. It was in the 1970s that Milwaukeeans, and Americans generally, awoke to the enduring value of vintage architecture. Here, on the very threshold of Downtown, was a treasure trove of buildings—no two alike, many designed by prominent architects—with unlimited potential and, not incidentally,
The Water Street bridge has long been the southern gateway to the Historic Third Ward.

The Water Street bridge has long been the southern gateway to the Historic Third Ward.

The Water Street bridge has long been the southern gateway to the Historic Third Ward.

The Water Street bridge has long been the southern gateway to the Historic Third Ward.

the highest concentration of exposed brick and open beams in the state.

The welcome result was a second renewal more organic, more complete, and far more constructive than the forced dislocations of the 1950s. The resurgence began in the late 1970s and has been more or less continuous ever since. Building by building, block by block, the old Third Ward hummed with new life. A saddlery became a brewpub, a shoe factory became a salon, an old gas works building became a restaurant, a Broadway commission house became a fashion center, and an industrial incubator built on the river in 1920 became the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design in 1992.

The Third Ward went through an endearingly scruffy period early in its transformation but, today’s art students notwithstanding, the bohemian has largely given way to the cosmopolitan. Nowhere else in Wisconsin will you find such a high concentration of bistros, boutiques, and gastropubs. Nowhere else will you find, in a single neighborhood, restaurants showcasing the cuisines of France, Japan, Belgium, Italy, China, Turkey, and Ireland. The Third Ward’s specialty shops offer goods that are by turns trendy, kitschy, and edgy. The Milwaukee Public Market, a Water Street landmark since 2005, features some of the city’s finest bakery, wine, cheeses, seafood, spices, flowers, salads, coffees, and chocolates. Art galleries abound, and the performing arts have found a welcoming home at the Broadway Theater Center. If you had told any Milwaukeean in 1970 that he or she would one day come to the Third Ward for fine art or a live play, the reaction would almost certainly have been disbelief.

There was new life on the eastern edge of the neighborhood as well. In 1970, after a slow start in other locations, Summerfest moved to Maier Festival Park on the Third Ward lakefront. The event grew so fast that by 1977 organizers could call it the largest outdoor music festival in the world. The area to the west was already in the throes of renewal; now the Summerfest site prompted a return. Hoping to recover, or at least revisit, the sense of community they had known in the old Third Ward, a group of former Blessed Virgin of Pompei
The Milwaukee Public Market revives a durable Third Ward tradition of fine, fresh edibles available throughout the year.

parishioners decided to hold a reunion on the festival grounds and invite the general public. The result was Festa Italiana, which debuted in 1978 and became the model for all the ethnic festivals that followed. Proceeds from Festa Italiana enabled the group to build a permanent home just west of the Summerfest grounds in 1990. Completion of the Italian Community Center marked, in the most literal sense, a homecoming.

There have been hundreds of other homecomings in the Third Ward. One of the most heartening aspects of the post-1970 resurgence is the demonstrated desire of people to live there again. Few communities in the entire metropolitan area have enjoyed such a robust real estate market, both for new construction and for repurposed old buildings. Long-vacant weedlots east of Milwaukee Street have sprouted state-of-the-art condominiums and apartment blocks. Water Street windows that once provided light for garment workers now sport balconies with potted plants and lawn chairs. The Third Ward’s riverfront projects mirror those on the south bank to form what might be called Condo Canyon. The Ward’s new residents tend to be younger, better-educated, and more affluent than the metropolitan average—precisely the sort of individuals that every city works to attract and retain.
The Historic Third Ward has shown an endless capacity for reinvention since the 1830s. It began as a watery wilderness and went through a kaleidoscopic existence as a retail center, a manufacturing district, a produce market, and a haven for immigrants before emerging in its modern form. There are still tangible reminders of the past—in street names like Corcoran Avenue, in ghost signs advertising such bygone articles of commerce as “notions and furnishings,” and in the ample inventory of historic buildings. Perhaps the deepest connection between past and present lies in the fact that, after years as a demographic desert, residents have returned. From its low point of seventy-four in 1980, the Third Ward’s population shot up to nearly 2,400 in 2010. As it was in the beginning, the Third Ward is once again a neighborhood.
The Italian Community Center’s courtyard provides a gracious outdoor setting for Milwaukeeans of all backgrounds.

From factories to fine living: A wall of condos rises along the bustling Third Ward Riverwalk.

The aptly named Renaissance, an elegantly remodeled office building, was built in 1896 as a dry goods warehouse.

A firefighter and his dog rest outside an old fire station that now houses an upscale clothing store.