

# The Cities of Wahpeton ND and Breckenridge MN Downtown Design Guidelines



Prepared by  
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## CREDITS

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Historic photographs included in this report are from the collections of the Cities of Breckenridge Minnesota and Wahpeton North Dakota, the Wilkin County Historical Society, and the Minnesota Historical Society. Thanks also to Ruth Poppel, Roger Jensen, and Jim Oliver.

Wahpeton Cover Photograph: *Dakota Avenue looking east from intersection of Sixth Street, circa 1943*

# CITIES OF WAHPETON ND AND BRECKENRIDGE MN DOWNTOWN DESIGN GUIDELINES

Prepared with the support of the Cities of Wahpeton North Dakota and Breckenridge Minnesota

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## PREFACE

The Cities of Wahpeton and Breckenridge are pleased to present the Downtown Design Guidelines. This publication provides building preservation and rehabilitation information for property owners within the joint downtowns.

One of greatest resources in the two commercial districts is their unique concentration of historic and architecturally interesting buildings. This manual is designed to demonstrate how using guidelines can often uncover and preserve a building's hidden historic or architectural value.

The city government staffs have fielded many questions from property owners about improvements or repairs to their buildings ranging from the proper treatment for doors and windows, awnings, and signs, to painted or deteriorating masonry. The written guidelines and visual examples within this manual are meant to aid those desiring to reuse or recycle an historic property. The illustrations, comprehensive in nature, represent the ideal. At times, because of financial constraints, a property owner may incorporate only part of the plan or undertake long-term phasing of the plan.

This guide is part of a continuing effort to encourage downtown building improvements. It provides information on programs designed to encourage the rehabilitation and preservation of Wahpeton and Breckenridge's commercial architecture. The cities have resources available, such as the "Preservation Briefs," National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior to assist property owners with restoration and rehabilitation projects. Additional programs and financial assistance may be available. For more information, contact Breckenridge Community Development Office at (218) 643-2733, the Wahpeton Economic Development Office at (701) 642-8559, or visit the Heritage Preservation Services website of the National Park Service at: [www.nps.gov/history/hps/](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/).



*Etching of the Wahpeton Opera House built ca. 1882 at 403 Dakota Avenue. The performance space was on the upper levels, with retail services at the street level.*

## INTRODUCTION

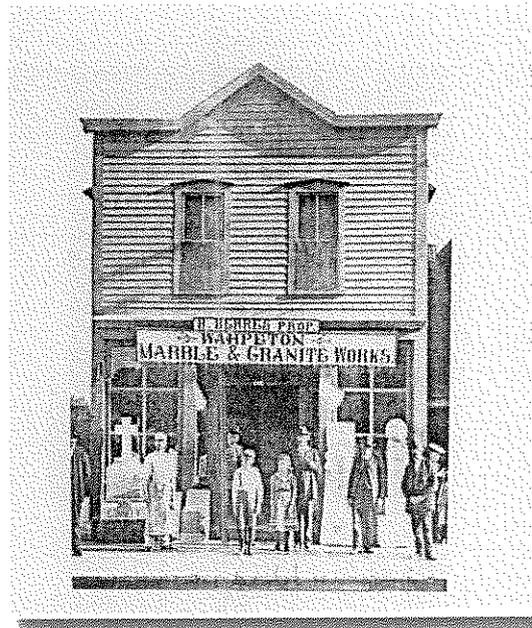
Despite their proximity, Breckenridge, Minnesota and Wahpeton, North Dakota at first might seem like completely different entities. In two different but adjoining states, with separate governments, constituencies, and priorities, there would seem little at first that is the same about them. But a common heritage, springing from the fertile dry lakebed where the Bois de Sioux and Otter Tail Rivers meet to flow northward into the Red River and eventually into Canada, unites these sister cities, as does their recognition of their past as a basis for future community development. Partners in so many initiatives over their histories, Breckenridge and Wahpeton now stand together to build their future.

Breckenridge is the older of the two communities, the first site settled with dreams of a "Chicago on the prairie." Prior to white settlement, the general area had been camped upon for generations by both the Chippewa and Dakota (Sioux) tribes, who fought many battles over the site's control. A confrontation at Battle Lake in the early 1800s gave the Dakota ultimate title to the Otter Tail River basin, and following that much of the area was owned by three French-Sioux women — Angelique Martin, Mary Marlow, and Angeline Lagree (a plaque naming these three women sits in the small park on 5th Street North at Minnesota Avenue in Breckenridge). In 1851 treaties opened the area for white occupation.

Breckenridge was officially settled on January 30, 1857 by a group of ten, including J.W. Prentice, Daniel Johnston, J.C. Moulton, Pierre Bottineau, Charlie Bottineau, Ed Dunn, "English Bill" (the cook), and three ox team drivers, with the financial backing of George Brott and E. Demortimer. This group had left Saint Paul a month earlier, determined to settle the site because of its unique position at the mouth of the north-flowing river. Once it was platted, Henry T. Welles (for whom Welles Memorial Park is named) became the title-holder to the area, and the decision was made to name the town after Vice-President John C. Breckenridge. Soon after, in August 1858, nearby Fort Abercrombie was established, in order to protect the white settlers in this unstable area.

Breckenridge existed for only a few years before it became a bloody casualty of the Dakota Uprising of 1862. Dakota chief Little Crow had vowed to kill all whites in the area, while many of its young men were serving in Civil War battlegrounds. In August of 1862, five hundred Dakota warriors set off to capture a U.S. government wagon train, which had been passing over the Otter Tail River following the conclusion of negotiations with the Red Lake Chippewa. They also sought to eliminate all white settlement in the area, mainly in Breckenridge, Old Crossing, Graham's Point, and some more isolated farmsteads. Alerted in advance to the conflict, most of the 45 residents of Breckenridge retreated to Fort Abercrombie for protection. Three young men — Edward Russell, Charles Battle, and Martin Fehrenbach — remained behind to watch over the town.

The Dakota occupied Breckenridge for just one night, burning and ransacking the town and killing all three of the young men, whose bodies they left in the hotel yard. Later that fall, Fort Abercrombie itself was unsuccessfully besieged. Citing the continued uncertainty, most residents left the area, and Breckenridge and the surrounding farmland was essentially abandoned.



*Turn-of-the-century "Boomtown" architecture of the Wahpeton Marble & Granite Works. Traces of this type of early commercial construction can still be seen at 308 Dakota Avenue.*

The area was too rich in resources to lie fallow for long, however. In 1864, Morgan T. Rich crossed the river from Minnesota, starting only the second settlement in the Territory of North Dakota. Initially called various names including Chahinkapa (Dakota for "Tops of the Trees"), Richville, and Elizabeth (after Rich's wife), the town was founded in 1869. By 1873 it had been renamed Wahpeton, which was Sioux for "Dwellers Among Leaves," reflecting both the area's history and natural beauty. Wahpeton was incorporated in 1887.

However, the real revival of the area came with the expansion of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad in to Breckenridge in 1871. Initial railroad activity gave both Breckenridge and Wahpeton a large and immediate growth spurt. Though he almost lost the lines in the National Panic of 1873, by 1879 James J. Hill had and expanded the system as part of his St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway Company holdings (later to become the Great Northern Railway Company). The town of Breckenridge was the western termination of the line until 1880, and was also the division headquarters well into the twentieth century. The line crossed over into Wahpeton and beyond in 1880, followed by a second line, the Northern Pacific, Fergus and Black Hills Railway in 1882, and by the Fargo and Southern Line in 1883.

The railway brought much prosperity to the area, making it a hub of commercial and agricultural activity. There was also accessory but important river traffic, including steam traffic first by the "Anson Northrup" and then by other boats following the northward flow of the river. Both flat boats and ox carts carried grain and other perishables to the rail yards for distribution. Soon, however, railroads (and later highways) became the dominant method of transportation, however, and by the early twentieth century water traffic had all but ceased.

Transportation and agriculture drew many more settlers to the area, and by 1876 the local ferry could no longer keep up with traffic between Wahpeton and Breckenridge, so the first bridge over the river was constructed. Although Breckenridge was initially the more established settlement, Wahpeton, as the county seat, soon outgrew its older Minnesota neighbor. No longer a frontier town, it became an established city, with the Methodist Red River Valley University (now the North Dakota State School of Science) established in 1889. The deep red brick buildings of this school stood in contrast to the area's other major educational institution, The Wahpeton Indian School for the Education of Indian Children, established in 1904.

The two cities were further united by the "shortest interstate streetcar line in the United States," the Wahpeton-Breckenridge Street Railway Company, which ran along Minnesota Avenue and Dakota Avenue



*An early 20th century post card reads:  
Main Street, Breckenridge, Minn.*

between the two downtowns (a distance of 1.14 miles) from 1910 to 1925. The streetcar ran for 18 hours a day, at the cost of a nickel (later 7¢), and allowed easy access between the two downtowns. It was especially convenient for some; since North Dakota was dry at that time, it allowed Wahpeton residents easy access to Breckenridge's eleven bars and saloons.

Many fires during this period destroyed early historic resources, especially in Breckenridge, which lost the Miksche and Vertin blocks in 1907, the Hyser Hotel (a favorite for railroad crews) in 1908, and the Phelps Block in 1918. More recently, the town lost sixteen lives with the Stratford Hotel fire of 1977.

From an early frontier settlement, both Wahpeton and Breckenridge evolved into small, stable agricultural settlements by the middle of the twentieth century. While the railways waned, the two cities were still able to maintain their own governments and identities, especially Wahpeton with its status as county seat and its educational resources. Medical centers and businesses moved to the area, and recreational resources include Chahinkapa Park (which holds the Prairie Rose Carousel as well as the zoo), the Bois de Sioux Golf Club, and Welles Memorial Park at the riverside.

Perhaps more importantly, each city still maintains a distinctive downtown presence, though now united by automobile rather than ferry or streetcar. The main intersection of Minnesota Avenue and 5th Street North in Breckenridge includes the old drugstore building, with apartments above, and several other storefronts, all across from the old railroad terminus.

A mile away, the majority of the downtown historic resources are located along Dakota Avenue. The blocks between 4th and 6th Street hold the most promise, including the old Opera House, Citizen's Bank, the Benda Block and other storefronts. The city's two National Register listed buildings are also located on Dakota Avenue: the old U.S. Post Office at 602 Dakota Avenue and the former Wahpeton Hospital at 720 Dakota Avenue. Adjoining blocks, though less well-maintained, include a bevy of potential resources.

Properly preserved and restored, the downtown cores of both Breckenridge and Wahpeton can again stand as two independent but interconnected communities, with related histories, yet unique elements that highlight both their similarities and their differences.