

NORTH SIDE *Beerline B*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Beerline B is concentrated around one street--Commerce. The Holton Viaduct with its marsupial bridge runs overhead through the center of the Beerline, connecting the Brady Street neighborhood with Holton Street and the Brewer's Hill, Riverwest, and Harambee neighborhoods. Beerline B also includes several connections between the neighborhood on the hill and the Milwaukee River, including Kilbourn Park, Booth Street Stairs, and the Milwaukee Rowing Club. Condominiums line both sides of Commerce Street.

The only building that is not residential is the structure that houses the Lakefront Brewery. This building was constructed in 1908 to house the coal burning power plant for the Milwaukee Light and Power Company. The building was purchased by Lakefront Brewery in 1998. See neighborhood photos below.

HISTORY

The area that is today's Beerline B neighborhood was named after a railroad line that once operated within its boundaries. Over the generations, today's Beerline B territory was claimed by the neighborhoods of Riverwest and Brewer's Hill.

Early populations

The earliest population of today's Beerline B was Polish. There is some evidence that Poles were living in that area as early as the 1850s. In 1854, a family of five Polish immigrants perished when their 12-foot by 12-foot shanty caught fire in an area that was somewhere between East Brady Street and the Milwaukee River. The fire department did not immediately respond because the officers initially thought the blaze was outside the city limits. In Tom Tolan's comprehensive history of the area in *Riverwest: A Community History*, he documents the historic settlements from the early industrial developments on the river's banks to the defining moments in Riverwest culture in the 60s and 70s and beyond. He discusses the Polish Kashubes in the area around Brady Street and the Milwaukee River. According to Tolan, the Polish neighborhood, or *Kompa*, "was the closest thing you could get in the middle of an American industrial city to a rural Polish village. Most residents kept ducks, geese, and chickens, and a good number had pigs, cows, or goats as well." The area next to the Milwaukee River would remain essentially Polish (with some Germans, Irish, and Italians) until the 1960s.

Commerce Street

Commerce Street today defines the emerging neighborhood of Beerline B. The area where the street is located was once a portion of a canal. In 1839, Ohio canal builder and Milwaukee land developer, Byron Kilbourn, had a plan to build a canal between the Milwaukee River and the Rock River which would ultimately provide a waterway to the Mississippi River. However, a competing canal company convinced the state legislature that a route between Green Bay and the Mississippi River would be a more pragmatic trading course and dropped support for Kilbourn's venture. Hence the canal was never completed and never got further than Kilbourn Avenue. In the meantime, the diminutive canal was used for water sources for businesses along



Todays neighborhood-
Lakefront Brewery

its route, including tanneries, breweries, lumberyards, and other industrial spaces. In the late 1800s that chunk of the canal was filled in and Commerce Street emerged.

One of the first major enterprises to appear on Commerce Street was the Albert Trostel & Sons Tannery. The massive facility was one of the largest tanneries in the world and would become one of Milwaukee's largest employers for nearly 100 years.

The neighboring Beer Line B (built in the 1850s) provided service to the industries on Commerce and the Schlitz, Blatz, and Pabst breweries just south of today's neighborhood. The line followed the west bank of the Milwaukee River along Commerce Street and had a roundhouse on Humboldt Boulevard and North Avenue where a Pick & Save store later stood.

The street remained an industrial corridor long into the 20th century. The following table summarizes the resident factories and other businesses on Commerce Street during the height of the Great Depression in 1940. See the following table for details, and notes below.

<i>Addresses on N. Commerce Street in 1940</i>	<i>Names of businesses and organizations from Milwaukee City Directory</i>
1413	CM ST P & PRR Co. (scale house)
1414-18	Premier-Pabst Corporation (storage facility)
1417	Milwaukee Grain and Sock Exchange (weighing department)
1434	The Riebs Company (grain elevator)
1520	Premier-Pabst Corporation (grain elevator)
1526-42	Milwaukee Grain and Feed Company
1600	Louis Bass Junk
1630	Harry Bremer Inc. Junk
1662	Frank G. Maltey 6
1664	William F. Schultz Tavern
1700	Richard H. Mueller Tavern
1708	Moser Wolfgang 5
1770	Ed Schuster & Company (wholesaler)
1776	Albert Trostel & Sons Tannery
1816	Standard Tar Products Company
1858	Ed Schuster & Company Inc. (service building)
1872	Milwaukee Electric Ry & Light Company (staff and substation)

<i>Addresses on N. Commerce Street in 1940</i>	<i>Names of businesses and organizations from Milwaukee City Directory</i>
1890	Calloway Fuel Company (dock)
2114	Edward L. Kasal Fish Bait

Notes from census and other public records:

- As in most Milwaukee neighborhoods prior to 1970, the majority of the proprietors were immigrants and very few had educations beyond 8th grade.
- Louis Bass with the junk dealership was a Jewish immigrant from Poland. He and his wife Bella lived in the Sherman Park neighborhood.
- Harry Bremmer was also Jewish and lived in Sherman Park. He was an immigrant from Russia.
- Richard H. Mueller with the tavern at 1700 N. Commerce was a German immigrant. He lived at the same address as his tavern.
- Ed Schuster was the founder of the Schuster's Department Store chain with various neighborhood locations in lieu of downtown ones. It was purchased by Gimbels in 1962 and for a time the chain was known as Gimbels Schusters.
- Edward L. Kasal with the bait shop was the son of Austrian immigrants. Apparently there still was enough fishing done on the Milwaukee River to support the selling of bait.

By late in the 20th century, the national trend toward deindustrialization was affecting the businesses on Commerce Street. The massive Trostel Tannery was decommissioned in the 1970s and the main building was imploded in the 1980s. The State of Wisconsin purchased the property with the intention of turning it into a prison. But residents balked and the proposal was abandoned. By this time most of the industries along Commerce Street had closed and the street lingered as a weedy eyesore for north side drivers heading downtown.

Change began when the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee started to clean up the corridor. As they did, developers took notice. At the close of the 20th century the former industrial properties were being transformed into housing complexes, retail spaces, and diverse uses such as a rowing club. The site of the former Trostel Tannery was sold to a developer and transformed into Trostel Square—a riverfront complex consisting of two apartment buildings, two townhouse buildings, and one with both apartments and town homes.

Businesses also took notice. In 1998 Lakefront Brewery, which had been housed in an old bakery building in Riverwest moved to an antique power plant on Commerce. The giant among craft beers immediately attracted outsiders to the developing corridor with its lagers, pretzels, daily brats, Friday fish fries, and Sunday brunches.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today's Beerline B residents are mostly condominium owners with middle-(and sometimes upper middle)-class household incomes. The former industrial corridor along Commerce Street today consists of over 15 condo developments. Each of the Beerline B projects has between 15 and 126 units.

According to neighborhood oral histories conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc., the new Beerline B residents have often been perceived as self-segregated from their surrounding Riverwest and Brewer's Hill neighbors. Some of the older residents describe the new condo

dwellers as well-heeled yuppies or lacking a community focus (see quotes below).

However, as the projects continued to attract new tenants, it was becoming obvious that Beerline B was emerging as its own neighborhood.

INTERESTING NEIGHBORHOOD FEATURES

- **Lakefront Brewery** at 1872 N. Commerce, is a craft beer producer and a popular restaurant (see photo).
- **Beerline Café** at 2076 N. Commerce, is a vegetarian restaurant.
- **Kadish Park**, on the northern boundary of the Beerline B neighborhood, has an amphitheater that features free music and theatrical performances.

RECURRING NEARBY OUTINGS (Health conditions permitting)

In the following section the website addresses have been eliminated due to technical problems with the various ways different web browsers display PDF files. Website information on these events is available through the book *Milwaukee Area Outings on the Cheap*. See below.

SKYLINE MUSIC SERIES			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Jul. thru late Aug., Tues. 5:30	Kadish Park, south of North Ave., west of Bremen St.	A great evening of music in Riverwest, topped off with one of the most dramatic views of the city.	Free

RIVERWEST SECRET GARDEN TOUR			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jul., Sun. 12-4pm	Garden Park, Locust and Bremen Sts.	Tour of 14 Riverwest gardens.	\$5

RIVERWEST GARDENERS MARKET			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid-June-mid-Oct., Sun. 10am-3pm	2700 N Pierce St.	Fresh produce from Wisconsin farmers, baked goods, arts, crafts.	Free

RIVERWEST ART WALK			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Oct., Sat. all day	Get tickets and maps at Art Bar (722 E. Burleigh St.), Jazz Gallery (926 E. Center St.), and Riverwest Food Co-op (733 E. Clarke St.)	A walk that features artist studios, beautiful gardens, and various sanctuaries.	unk

LOCUST STREET FESTIVAL OF MUSIC AND ART			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jun., Sun. 11am-8pm	Locust St. between Humboldt & Holton	Featuring six live music venues and a variety of food, artists and vendors with up to 30,000 people.	Free

FREE FAMILY SWIM			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jun.-early Aug., Tue. & Thu. 1:05-2:15pm	Riverside H.S., 1615 E. Locust St., enter door #5; 906-4959	Swimming. Children 7 and under must be accompanied by adult. Swim caps can be purchased at site. 393-2502	Families, free

BRONZEVILLE WEEK			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Aug., 2 nd week	MLK Dr., between Garfield Ave. and Center St.	Cultural and arts festival, with a run/walk run, health screenings, trolley rides, arts night, poetry readings.	Free

CENTER STREET DAYS			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Aug., Sat. all day	Center St. between Humboldt Ave. & Holton St.	Music, food, arts, crafts, cart race, car show.	Free

FREE FAMILY SWIM			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Wed. 6:50-7:50pm	Gaenslen Elementary, 1250 E. Burleigh St., north door #4	Swimming. Children 7 and under must be accompanied by adult. Swim caps can be purchased at site. 267-5734.	Families, free

ART BAR			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
3pm-2am	722 E. Burleigh St.	Permanent and temporary art exhibits.	Adults free

BRADY ST. FESTIVAL			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jul., Sat. 11am-12am	Brady St.	Music, food, arts, crafts.	Free

BRADY STREET PET PARADE			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
October	Brady St.	Brady Street Pet Parade.	Free

FESTIVUS ON BRADY			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Dec., Sat. 9:30pm-1:30am.	Brady St.	Opportunity to air grievances and participate in feats of strength to win Festivus pole, per Festivus Seinfeld episode in 1997.	Free

WALKING TOUR—BRADY STREET			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late May-mid Oct. Sat.'s 1:30pm	Check website	Tour through the neighborhood on a half-mile stroll and learn about the area's Polish and Italian roots, the counter culture of the '60s and '70s and the area's recent urban renaissance.	Check website

Most of these outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing. To access the book that provides nearly 600 outings—all priced under \$10—for the entire Greater Milwaukee area, go to <http://mecahmilwaukee.com/NonFiction.html>

QUOTES FROM RESIDENTS

Quotes from 2005 oral history of Riverwest conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.¹—Then

“I’m thinking about the time when the train still went through there--the Beerline. The wonderful little railroad was one of the busiest routes that the city used to get the beer out of town.”

“I think that, except for maybe some of these condos going up, I think everyone has been pretty much the same social class. Y’know? I guess maybe there’s a middle, sort of a middle class and a lower class, but there’s not filthy rich people driving limos around Riverwest.”

Quotes from 2021/22 oral history of Beerline B conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.—Then

“One interesting thing is that my father was a Milwaukee firefighter and he worked sort of in that neighborhood. So he was a firefighter in that neighborhood and he got called out on a run. And it was for a body. And they found a body that was on the hill that ran along Commerce Street. So it was between Lakefront Brewery and Humboldt. And so they called the fire department because they needed someone to help them get a line down the hill so that they could take this body off the hill. So my dad was the driver and so he was kinda asking the guys like: “Oh, well, who found the body?” and then the police officers said: “Oh the surveying crew found the body.” And he was like: “oh really? Why are they surveying?” and he said: “oh, they’re going to build condos here.” And my dad was like: ”condos here? Who’s going to live here?” And that was probably in the late eighties, early nineties. And so his recollection of the area was like: “Nobody’s going to fricking want to live here” and he was wrong. My dad loves to tell that story.”

“Well Commerce Street, that was the original industrial park of Milwaukee. It’s where the canal was until they filled the canal in. And then they, you know, put the street where the canal was and so that was industrial until I moved down here and then they started building condos down here. So now it’s mostly professionals or people who have retired or something on that side.”

¹ Urban Anthropology Inc. complies with human subjects requirements of formal research and asks informants to sign informed consent forms that stipulate anonymity, hence names are not provided with the quotes.

"If you come down here to the Beerline B, I mean, you had tanneries, you know, we are in an electrical building. Right next to us were big coalfields. That's where the coal from Milwaukee all came in and was dumped on the side of the riverbanks, just up north to us. And so that was all there, but they only had like warehouses. Right next to us was the Gimbels warehouse and then Trostel tannery. Schlitz brewery was right down the river on the Beerline. So those are different things that came about our industries. Now there's Lakefront Brewery yeah. That's about it (laughs) for us here, and then you go up to Riverwest and you got different ones up there."

Quotes from 2005 oral history of Riverwest conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.—Now

"My objection to the new developments on Commerce Street is that they did not integrate. The objection is not race-based, but class-based. In order to rebuild a community neighborhood, you need to integrate not based upon income. A lawyer may be black or white, but still a lawyer and costs keep going up. It would be nice if the city would do what we asked the suburbs to do and that is to integrate a variety of income levels into a neighborhood."

"I'm sort of mystified by the whole condo phenomenon, it seems like they're building them nonstop. And I have trouble believing that they're going to find that many people to live there. And like when I walk down commerce street it's really strange because it seems like there's, there's all these condos but there's no cars and there's no traffic, and I don't see people walking around so, but maybe I'm wrong about that."

"But there has been, among some of the punk element, ever since the Commerce Street area started getting developed, there's always been this weird gentrification of yuppies just about ready to move in and take over, so there's been some obvious political graffiti from time to time against that. People were happy when one of those in-construction condos down there burned down. There was even the thought that maybe someone was an arson for that reason. Someone spray painted "yuppies still suck" on one of the billboards in the Brewers Hill developments."

"I think the reaction to the condos on Commerce was different by people from Riverwest than it was from Brewer's Hill. In Riverwest it was, like, 'you should try to be more like us,' where in Brewer's Hill they were trying to promote the whole home-ownership line and this didn't include the renters or the condo owners—it was preserving the old houses. That's just my take."

"[Beerline B resident] I feel like some of the people in Riverwest feel that we should be more social and hang out with them. But what we have I think is our own neighborhood that's starting to gel."

Quotes from 2021/22 oral history of Beerline B conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.—Now

"The Commerce Street area has definitely changed. I mean you can google the history of Commerce Street because they tried to build a canal there and it was gonna connect the lake with, I don't know, the Mississippi River or something. I mean I'm sure you've seen all kinds of pictures of what Commerce Street used to look like. And you should see pictures now what it looks like, because it's full of condominiums. Completely redeveloped! It's a kind of a residential area now."

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"The Beerline has changed beyond recognition since the Rowing Club moved there in 1991. So, we moved downtown and the essence of what we were doing at that time was to change this industrial landscape, this kind of industrial wasteland into a new center of urban living with a residential retail. I mean, no more tanneries, right. No more ironworks (laughs)."

"Now the downtown river not only doesn't smell, it has fish in it, people kayak on it, people row on it. People do all kinds of things on it. It's a very pleasant place to live. And so whatever Milwaukee's problems are, downtown is flourishing and the river is flourishing."

"It used to be perceived as unsafe to walk along the river there. And now, you know, because of the Milwaukee River Greenway Project and with the help of the River Revitalization Foundation, that area has become this like gem."

"And then just the activity. There's a brewery and just the life that's out on the river and in the public spaces. It is all very specific to the area, the way that it was developed, not just for residential developments, but we also really focused on public spaces, public green spaces and then connecting to the neighborhoods around it through a series of different stairwells."

"They changed in that it was, you know, all commercial and nobody really lived there. And now it's probably more White, upper class than anything because of the condominiums. But up at the top of the hill the entire Riverwest neighborhood is very diverse. I think that it's probably still pretty Polish."

"Part of Beerline would be where Kadish Park is. If you're talking about Beerline, I would say those are very expensive homes and while there is diversity, I would say the large percentage would be fairly well to do and White. But when you go directly to the west of the park and surrounding and adjacent to it, those homes have gotten more valuable, but I would say it's very much a mix of White, African-American and Hispanic, and the same thing when you go north of the park."

PHOTOS

Todays neighborhood-The Holton Viaduct and Marsupial Bridge



Todays neighborhood-Condos on Commerce St.



Todays neighborhood-Lakefront Brewery

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods*, or Tom Tolan's *Riverwest: A Community History*.

Do you have great photos of this neighborhood? Are you a resident with an interesting quote about this neighborhood? Do you have recurring outings, additions, corrections, or general comments about this neighborhood? Please email your input to Dr. Jill Florence Lackey at: jflanthropologist@currently.com