

**Approximate boundaries:**

**N**-I-94 (partial) I-794; **S**-Hank Aaron State Trail (partial)  
Menomonee River (partial); **E**-Milwaukee River; **W**-Miller Park Way

# DOWNTOWN *Menomonee River Valley*

## NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

The Menomonee River Valley is a large, generally non-residential area that has a number of newly constructed industrial buildings and old industrial buildings converted to new uses. The Harley Davidson Museum and the Potawatomi Hotel and Casino are the most prominent recently constructed buildings.

The neighborhood, as its name implies, is a valley with very steep inclines on sections of both the northern and southern boundaries of the valley. Only a few streets follow a rectangular grid. Many shadow the curve of the terrain and natural features of the land or the bend of the Menomonee River. There are a number of open green spaces throughout the area. Three Bridges Park is a 24-acre commons that is part of the Hank Aaron State Trail. It is south of the River on the southern boundary of the Menomonee River Valley neighborhood. See photos below.

## HISTORY

The Menomonee River Valley took its name from the river that runs through it. In turn, the waterway was an Indian name for wild rice—manomin.

### Early populations

The earliest populations that inhabited the Menomonee River Valley were Potawatomi, Odawa, Menomonee, Ojibwe and other American Indian nations. Living in five villages at the edge of the Valley, the Natives used the river to harvest rice, hunt waterfowl, and fish.

### *Arrival of European Americans*

By the 1840s, many American Indians were forced out of the area by white land speculators and settlers. Early Milwaukee land developer, Byron Kilbourn, founded the Milwaukee & Waukesha Railroad (later known as the Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Company or simply the Milwaukee Road) in 1847. After a few false starts, the railroad made a maiden run up the Valley. By 1857, it reached the Mississippi River.

Both immigrants and migrants found jobs accessible in the early days of Valley development. Newly arriving immigrants took jobs filling in the marshes with soil and gravel from the adjoining bluffs. The area even welcomed garbage as fill. Residents, grocers, and butchers from nearby neighborhoods brought their refuse to the Valley, which was subsequently covered with a thin layer of ash.

The railroad thrived, initially transporting mainly people and agricultural products from nearby farms. By 1869, the Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad opened a large stockyard in the Valley. This attracted job-seeking immigrants. But it also became a place of employment for African American migrants from the South. An early example of a railroad worker became one of Milwaukee's first black activists. See below.



Today's neighborhood-  
City Lights Brewery building

## Menomonee River Valley resident profile (mid-1800s) (Information from census and other public records)

### Ezekiel Gillespie

Born in Greene County, Tennessee, the son of an African American slave and most likely her white owner, Ezekiel Gillespie was raised in slavery. As a young man, he purchased his freedom for \$800. Settling briefly in Indiana, he arrived in Milwaukee in 1854. He initially got a job selling groceries on Mason and Broadway (then Main Street).

Ezekial married twice—outliving both—first to Sophia (nee Anderson), a mulatto from North Carolina, and second to Catherine (nee Lukas), a mulatto from Ohio. With the two wives, he had children Symenthia, Mary, Emma, Alice, William, Ida, Oley, Jesse, and Charles (and perhaps more). The Gillespie family lived at various locations in and bordering the Menomonee River Valley, including the Third Ward, Walker's Point, and possibly Merrill Park.

Ezekial Gillespie saw the opportunities in the developing Valley. When employment opened at the Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Company, he took jobs as a porter and then as a messenger for the railroad. The Railway Company became a major employer of early arriving African Americans to Milwaukee—a trend that continued during the years of the Great Migration.

Early on, Gillespie saw himself as an activist in support of the early arriving blacks in the city. When he tried to vote in 1865, he was denied a ballot. At the insistence of Milwaukee leaders such as Sherman Booth, he sued the Board of Elections. The case of *Gillespie v Palmer* went all the way to the Wisconsin Supreme Court where the justices sided with Gillespie. The case became a watershed moment for African American rights in the state.

At the end of his life, Gillespie moved to Chicago. He died there in 1892, but his remains were brought back to Milwaukee, where he joined a multitude of other Milwaukee leaders and wife Catherine at the Forest Home Cemetery.

### *Industry comes to the Valley*

In time, local entrepreneurs began to see some of the newly filled land of the Menomonee River Valley as more than a place where people and products could be transported. With the easy access to the railroad and the river, industrialists began to develop the area. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a cadre of industries made the Valley their home, including the Pfister & Vogel Tannery; Plankinton Packing Company; International Harvester; Nordberg; Chain Belt; Harnischfeger; National Enameling & Stamping Company (NESCO); Gueder, Paeschke & Frey, Cutler-Hammer; and Falk. These factories, and others, provided tens of thousands of jobs to Milwaukeeans.

However, during the years following World War II, the Menomonee River Valley began to fall out of favor. The Valley was described by north siders and south siders alike as an eyesore. Residents complained about the pollution problems and the garbage and industrial odors. Despite the addition of County Stadium and the subsequent move of the Boston Braves to the Valley in the early 1950s, a number of factories were struggling and some closed. The deindustrialization years of the late 1970s and 1980s hastened the process. Historian John Gurda describes this eloquently in *Milwaukee: City of Neighborhoods* (p. 38).

Year by year, the Valley lost economic mass, and quiet reigned where the bluffs had once echoed with the shrill blast of factory whistles and the pounding of heavy machinery.

## The sea change

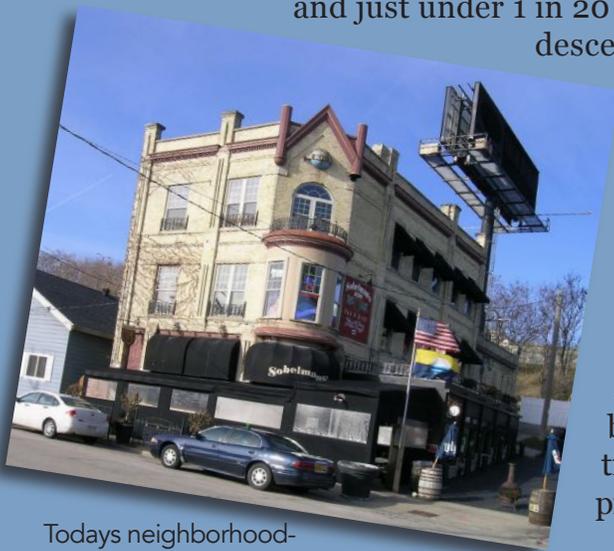
By late in the 20th century, political leaders were working to redevelop industry in the Valley, but this time with attendant features that promoted health and esthetics. In 1999 a group of business leaders, politicians, community activists, environmentalists, and architects organized to form the Menomonee Valley Partners. They developed an award-winning plan to redevelop the Valley. With their guidance, amenities such as the new 6th Street Viaduct, Three Bridges Park, and the Hank Aaron Trail were added to the neighborhood. The Potawatomi Casino that opened in 1991 as a bingo hall, expanded in 2008 to a beautiful complex that included over 3,000 slot machines and added a luxury hotel less than a decade later. In 2001, the state-of-the art American Family Field replaced old County Stadium. Seven years later, the Harley-Davidson Museum opened, followed by the Iron Horse Hotel, with its warehouse-styled architecture, a short walk away.

## Current populations (as of 2021)

While the Menomonee River Valley is not a residential neighborhood, it does have just over 100 residents. Of these, over 8 in 10 residents are European Americans, and most of these claim ancestry in Germany, Ireland, and Poland. Just over 1 in 10 residents are African Americans and just under 1 in 20 are Latinos (about three quarters claiming Mexican descent and most of the others of Puerto Rican descent).

The remainder of the population includes a scattering of Asians (most of Pakistani and Chinese ancestry) and people of mixed racial backgrounds.

The median household income in the Menomonee Valley is approximately \$60,000 annually, placing the neighborhood in the middle income stratum. The leading occupations of adults in the area are in the fields of management, business, and education. The neighborhood has over six times the number of residents in the legal field than their proportions in other Milwaukee areas.



Today's neighborhood-  
Sobelman's Pub & Grill on St. Paul Ave.

## INTERESTING NEIGHBORHOOD FEATURES

- **Potawatomi Casino and Hotel**, at 1721 W. Canal St., an Indian casino/hotel owned and operated by the Forest County Potawatomi Community.
- **Iron Horse Hotel**, at 500 W. Florida St., with 100 loft-style rooms.
- **Three Bridges Park**, along the Menomonee River between 27th and 37th, a park and outdoor science classroom.
- **Hank Aaron Trail**, with an entry point at 400 W. Canal, provides a continuous connection between American Family Field and Lake Michigan.
- **Zimmerman Architectural Studios**, at 2122 W. Mt. Vernon, a 120-person firm with a global project base.
- **Harley-Davidson Museum**, at 400 W. Canal, celebrating 100 years of Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

## 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.

### ECO ART WEDNESDAYS

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Weds., 4-5:30pm	Menomonee Valley 3700 W. Pierce	Children work on nature-inspired recycled arts and crafts. Take home own creation every week! Register at Urban Ecology website.	unk

### EARLY MORNING BIRDWALK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Most Tue.'s. 8-10am	Menomonee Valley, 3700 W. Pierce St.	A walk for bird watchers of all ability levels to explore Three Bridges Park for birds. Register at Urban Ecology website.	Free, need to register

### SLEDDING THE SLOPES OF MENOMONEE VALLEY

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jan. Tue. 4-6pm	Menomonee Valley, 3700 W. Pierce St.	An evening of snow and sledding in Three Bridges Park with hot chocolate (if there is no snow, will hike Three Bridges Park). Register at Urban Ecology website.	Free

### CROSS COUNTRY SKIING FOR KIDS

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jan. Thu. 4-6pm	Menomonee Valley, 3700 W. Pierce St.	Bring children to workshop designed just for kids to learn all they need to know before hitting the slopes, with gear provided. Register at Urban Ecology website.	unk

### FAMILY HIKE

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mar. & Apr, Nov, Tue.'s 4-6pm	Menomonee Valley, 3700 W. Pierce St.	Guided hike to see changes in seasons through Three Bridges Park. Register at Urban Ecology website.	Free

### SHAKESPEARE IN THREE BRIDGES PARK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jul., Fri. 7pm	Menomonee Valley behind Palermo Villa next to 33rd Ct.	Play performed by Summit Players along river in the park.	Free, but donations welcome

### KALVELAGE MANSION TOUR

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Consult website	2432 W. Kilbourn Ave.	Tour of a German Baroque masterpiece designed by Otto Strack.	unk

### HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mon., Tue., Wed., Fri. 10am-4:30pm, Thu. 10am-8pm; Sun, 12-5pm	Marquette campus at corner of 13th & Clybourn Sts.	Permanent collections include Old Masters' prints, Ralph Steiner photos, Marc Chagall Bible series, Barbara Morgan photos, and Finnegan, Fishman, Tatalovich, and Rojzman collections.	Free

### HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mon., Tue., Wed., Fri. 10am-4:30pm, Thu. 10am-8pm; Sun, 12-5pm	Marquette campus at corner of 13th & Clybourn Sts.	Permanent collections include Old Masters' prints, Ralph Steiner photos, Marc Chagall Bible series, Barbara Morgan photos, and Finnegan, Fishman, Tatalovich, and Rojzman collections.	Free

### MARQUETTE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Nov. thru late Feb. (regular season)	Al McGuire Center, 770 N. 12th St.	Marquette University women's basketball games.	unk

### POST ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE PARTY

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Mar., Sat. 1:30-5pm	Irish Cultural Heritage Center, 2133 W. Wisconsin Ave.	Live entertainment, children's activities, leprechaun stories, and more	Free

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

If you are a resident of the Marquette neighborhood and would like to make an interesting observation about the area, please send your quote to [JFLanthropologist@currently.com](mailto:JFLanthropologist@currently.com)

## PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-The Harley-Davidson Museum



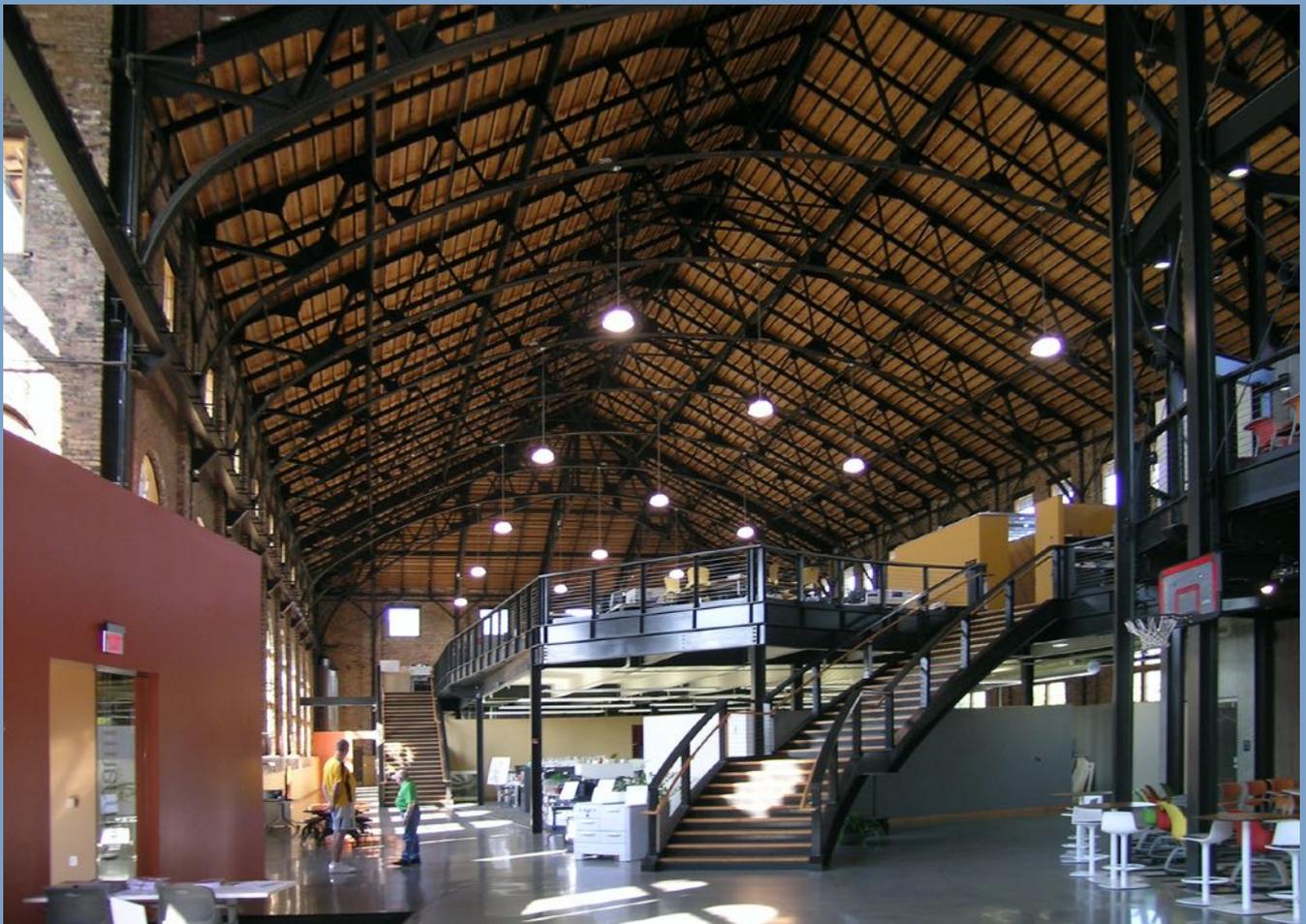
Today's neighborhood-View from N. 25th looking east to City Lights Brewery and the Potawatomi complex



Today's neighborhood-View from the Menomonee River looking east



Today's neighborhood-The headquarters of Zimmerman Architectural Studios



Today's neighborhood-Inside Zimmerman Architectural Studios

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods* and Jill Florence Lackey's and Rick Petrie's *Germans in Milwaukee: A neighborhood 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:

[JFLanthropologist@currently.com](mailto:JFLanthropologist@currently.com)



[www.urban-anthropology.org](http://www.urban-anthropology.org)