

LAWRENCE

BUSINESS

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OUR EVER EVOLVING
DOWNTOWN
WITH MASS STREET AT ITS HEART



Building a Future on the Foundation of History

These historic buildings are rich in history and tradition, each having its own unique tale of the path that led it to where it is today.

by Bob Luder, photos by Steven Hertzog and from Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History

They're some of the oldest and most historic structures in Lawrence, downtown or anywhere in the area. But there's so much more to them than mere brick-and-mortar, fancy European architecture or adorned interiors. What lies within these structures are some of the city's oldest, most-respected and venerated businesses, companies which have gone a long way toward defining Downtown Lawrence itself.

A hotel that stands as the most historic and iconic in Kansas—and certainly among the most famous in the entire central part of the country—has been featured in movies and hosted legends of screen and politics. A concert, movie hall and meeting place has etched its place in history by hosting early talkies, civil war confabs and world-famous musicians and bands.

A department store has survived as a unicorn—one of the few stand-alone department stores to outlast the age of malls and chain stores. A jewelry store, passed down through generations of family that has rid-

den good, old-fashioned honest customer service to become one of the longest-running continuous family businesses in the country.

And every community needs that reliable, go-to watering hole where generations have met after work or on weekends to drink, eat and commiserate with each other. They all are icons of the Downtown Lawrence area and of the city as a whole—all vital pieces of history.

"Historic buildings are a tangible reminder of our community's heritage," says Steve Nowak, executive director for the Watkins Museum of History, which itself is housed in a historic structure in Downtown Lawrence. "They inspire us to imagine what life might have been like in times past and to remember those who came before us. In Lawrence, where many old buildings still fulfill their original purpose or house the businesses that built them, those structures also remind us that the present is linked with the past, and that we today shape the community we pass to future generations."

Following are five such businesses that have been instrumental in making Lawrence a great place to live and work through the years, and a brief history of each.

The Eldridge Hotel 2024



Sidewalk café with The Eldridge in the background



The Eldridge on the bottom right, looking south



The Historic Eldridge Hotel

Though most infamous for being sacked and burned during Quantrill's Raid in 1863, the building on the original site of the Eldridge Hotel suffered a similar fate nearly 10 years earlier.

The original building on the site was the Free State Hotel, built in 1855 by settlers from the New England Emigrant Aid Society. It was intended to serve as quarters for settlers who came from Boston and other areas while their homes were being built, and is named so to make clear the intent that Kansas would enter the union as a free state.

A year after it was built, the hotel was attacked and burned to the ground by proslavery Douglas County Sheriff Samuel Jones. Col. Shalor Eldridge rebuilt the hotel and added an additional floor, vowing to do the same every time the building was destroyed. The next time would be in 1863, when William Quantrill and his raiders rode into Lawrence, killed more than 150 people and burned and destroyed much of the city.

Eldridge again promptly rebuilt the hotel and this time gave it his name. The Eldridge Hotel stood until 1925 as one of the finest hotels west of the Mississippi River. But by that time, the hotel was beginning to show its age. A group of Lawrence business leaders was organized by Billy Hutson to tear down and rebuild The Eldridge, and restore it to its former place of grace and dignity.

Because of changing trends, The Eldridge closed in 1970 and was converted into apartments. It remained that way until 1985, when another group of local investors organized to once again refurbish the old building and return it to its original use—that of an elegant, upscale hotel. It underwent yet another renovation in 2004–2005 and once again assumed its role as Lawrence's premier hotel.



*BOWERSOCK OPERA HOUSE LAWRENCE KS.
Originally, Liberty Hall was the Bowersock Opera House*

Liberty Hall

Like its close neighbor across the street, the building that today stands as Liberty Hall arose from the literal ashes of an early tragedy. The Herald of Freedom, Kansas' first abolitionist newspaper, occupied the building at the corner of Seventh and Massachusetts streets in the years leading up to the Civil War. But Jones, the same man who burned the Free State Hotel to the ground, set fire to the building during the First Sack of Lawrence, destroying it in 1856.

The space didn't stay dormant for long, however, as Samuel Edwin Poole rebuilt the structure the same year, creating Liberty Hall, a community space to host debates, town meetings and political speeches.

In 1882, local businessman J.D. Bowersock purchased and renovated the building, adding a floor and turning the space—renamed Bowersock Opera House—into a theatrically themed opera house and well-known entertainment destination. Unfortunately, in the early 1900s, a fire started by poor electrical wiring again destroyed the building. The opera house was completely rebuilt in the beaux-arts style with imperial roman facade that exists today as an events venue hosting local and touring acts.

In 1924, Liberty Hall became the first theater in Kansas to show a "sound" movie, showing "The Canary Murder Case."

The old building, which contains many of the original chandeliers, tiled floors and marble staircases to this day, underwent several other changes through the years—the Jayhawker Theatre, the Red Dog Inn nightclub, Bugsy's disco club and the Lawrence Opera House—before being purchased in 1986 and reopening into what it is today: a video store, coffee shop, independent cinema and community gathering spot.

On Jan. 20, 2012, Liberty Hall celebrated 100 years on the corner of Seventh and Mass.



Liberty Hall as it stands today



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Weaver's Department Store (1950's)

Weaver's Department (courtesy of Weaver's)



Weaver 's Store
1911-1929



Weaver's 2024

Weaver's

Another Lawrence business with origins predating the Civil War, Weaver's department store's history began when Lathrop Bullene opened a dry goods store at 723 Massachusetts St. in 1857, one year before R.H. Macy opened his famous first store in Manhattan, New York. It traded in groceries, tools, cloth and other staples of everyday life.

A.D. Weaver, who married Bullene's daughter, Gertrude, joined the business in 1883. The couple bought the store three years later and renamed it Weaver's. A.D.'s son, Art Weaver, began working there in 1915. In 1929, the business moved two blocks down the street, to 901 Mass., taking over the building of the Innes, Bullene & Hackman Department Store. This happened just days before the infamous stock market crash that brought about the Great Depression.

The store survived that and World War II, while at the same time facing pressures from the new trend of chain stores—JCPenney, Sears, Woolworths—opening around the country. In fact, between the years of 1929 and 1954, 60 percent of independently owned department stores closed or merged, from 2,166 stores to 905.

Still, Weaver's survived. Art Weaver recruited Larry Flannery to the business in 1950. When Weaver retired 12 years later, Flannery, friend Jack Eckles and a group of Kansas investors bought the store. That incorporated group owns Weaver's to this day.

After acquiring a men's clothing store next door, Weaver's now has 20,000 square feet of selling space and 10,000 more square feet for offices, storage and other operations.

A downtown improvement program provided funds for a new front facade of the building in 1971. In 1987, Larry Flannery's son, Joe Flannery, became Weaver's president and general manager, only the fifth in the company's history. The company further secured its future when it purchased the building in 2000.

To this day, Weaver's has prided itself on customer service, providing tailoring, free home delivery, shipping, special orders, free gift-wrapping year-round and a wedding registry. While it now offers online ordering, the crux of its operations will always focus on the in-store experience.



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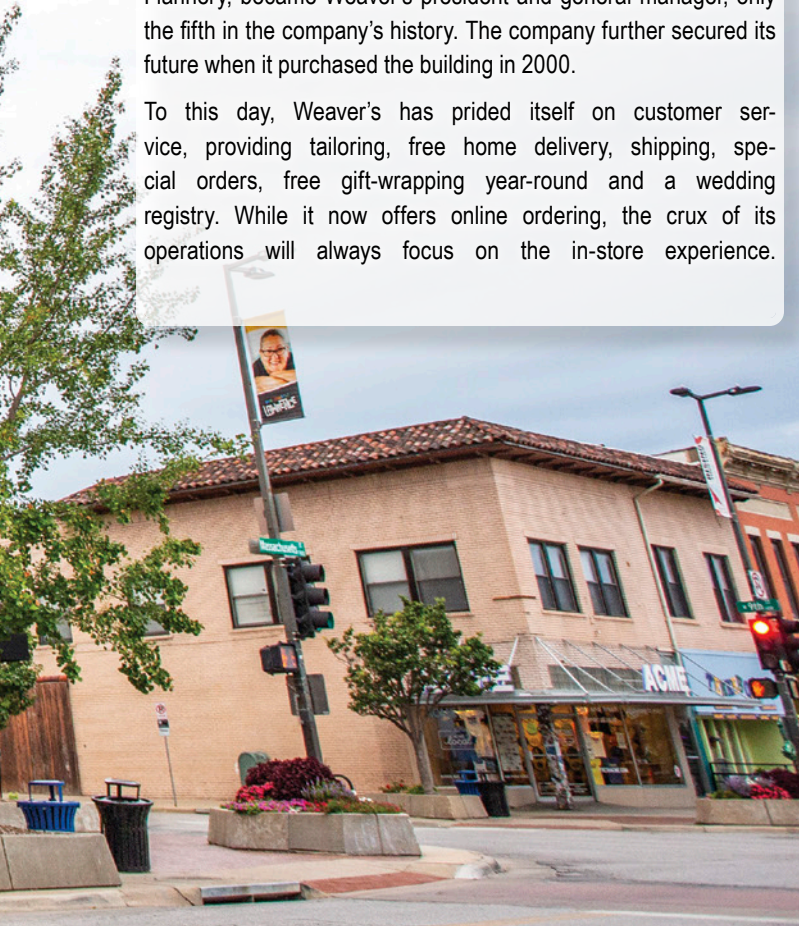
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Johnny's, was originally a pharmacy



Johnny's as it looks today



Johnny's Tavern

The two-story brick building at 401 N. Second St. that houses the original Johnny's Tavern dates back almost as long as Lawrence itself. In 1910, Charles Robinson, the founder of Lawrence and first governor of Kansas, purchased land from the Delaware Native Americans along the Kansas River where the tavern sits today. Bowersock, the businessman who renovated Liberty Hall and owned the mill across the river, built the building and originally made it into a grocery store and hotel.

Over the next 20 years, the site evolved from grocery to pool hall and back to grocery, then into a gin joint. In the 1940s, Slim Wilson, "Johnny's" father, became proprietor of a tractor and farm implement store, with the pouring of cold beer and gambling as a sideline.

In 1953, Slim Wilson's son, John Wilson, took over the business and created Johnny's Tavern. It was a haven for the working man, with plenty of cold beer and country-western music on the jukebox. It was the beginning of the longest-running tap in town. The original red arrow sign still hangs outside the establishment to this day.

In 1978, two rugby players and bartenders, Rick Renfro and Doug Hassig, took over the establishment, added a grill and began serving up Johnny's world-famous burgers. The bar was well-known for its 7:30 a.m. opening time, which allowed shift workers to whet their whistles after work.

In 1982, the old hotel rooms above the bar were renovated into a private club, called the "Up & Under." It remained private until 1987, when Kansas adopted liquor-by-the-drink laws. Six years later, "Betty's," named for a woman whose gravestone washed down the river during a flood, was added to the north end of the bar.

The dawn of the 21st century brought great expansion for the Johnny's Tavern brand, as franchises opened in West Lawrence, Topeka and the Kansas City area. Today, there are 13 Johnny's locations serving customers great spirits, food and cheer.



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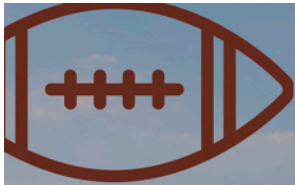
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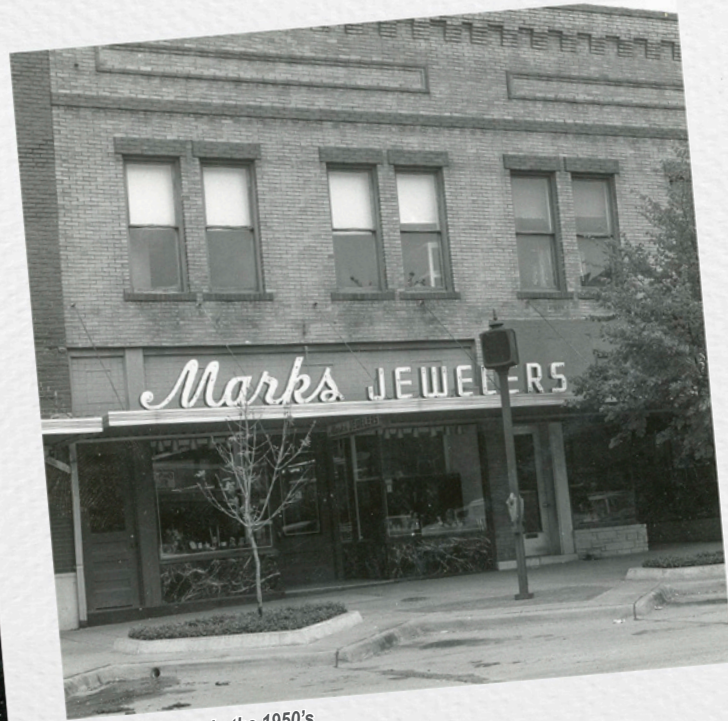
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Mark's Jewelers in the 1950's



Mark's Jewelers as it looks today



Marks Jewelers

Marks Jewelers has been a mainstay on Mass. Street for nearly 150 years. The rich history of the business actually dates back nearly 170 years, to 1855, when Sol Marks was born in Albany, New York. He moved west searching for new adventures in 1869 and landed in Lawrence, joining a brother in his jewelry business, which then was located at 633 Mass St. They ran that business together for 14 years, even surviving Quantrill's Raid and the strife of the Civil War.

Sol Marks founded Marks Jewelers in 1880, led by a strong belief system that included being polite and honest. He voraciously instilled these attributes in all of the employees and associates who would work behind the counter in the ensuing years.

Sol's son, Julius Marks, assumed ownership of the business in 1934 following the death of Sol at his Lawrence home at the age of 78. Julius operated Marks for the next 27 years before retiring because of health reasons. He sold the business to Delbert Eisele, a watchmaker who worked for both Sol and Julius. When the store was sold to Eisele, Marks Jewelers was believed to be the oldest family-owned jewelry store in Kansas.

In 1982, Eisele entrusted the business to Lawrence natives Brad Parsons and Rich Yeakel, and to this day, they continue to strive for the best in customer service, quality and integrity, the same qualities Sol Marks passed down for generations.

Marks Jewelers is the 14th-oldest jewelry store in the United States. ▲

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