The Benton Avenue Historic District is an urban oasis of small bungalows on Janesville's northeast side. These small but well-built houses are symbols of the rapidly created neighborhoods that were developed during the decade of economic development following World War I. One of the city's earliest tract house developments, the area was developed in response to the need for low-cost housing which accompanied the growth of Janesville's General Motors tractor factory. Benton, Blaine, and Sherman Avenues contain more examples of the Bungalow style than any other area of the city.

Janesville has long been a center of agricultural implement manufacture. Early firms such as the Janesville Machine Company were founded in the 1850s. The Samson Tractor Company, a division of the General Motors Corporation, purchased Janesville Machine in 1918. In 1919, a new factory was erected on Industrial Avenue for the manufacture of tractors. By 1922, however, tractor production proved unprofitable at this south side plant, and the facility was converted to automobile assembly. (It became and remains the city's most important employer.)

As the new Samson Tractor plant was being planned, many of Janesville's leading citizens became concerned about the lack of affordable housing for the expected influx of new workers. There were also concerns that outside speculators would flood the city with cheap, undesirable housing. Therefore, the Janesville Chamber of Commerce formed the Janesville Housing Corporation to raise funds for the construction of good quality, affordable housing. Workers at the new Samson Tractor factory were the primary market.

In early 1919, the sale of $300,000 worth of stock in the Janesville Housing Corporation was begun. General Motors made a purchase of $100,000 in the corporation. The proceeds were used to purchase lots and construct modestly-priced housing for workers, particularly those at Samson Tractor; by the summer of 1919, 26 houses near the factory were almost completed.

One of the objectives of the Janesville Housing Corporation was to discourage outside speculators from entering the working-class housing market, but the houses in the Benton Avenue Historic District were nevertheless created by an outside developer with previous experience in this market.

In 1919, the Chicago real estate firm of Matteson and Landstrom
The Benton Avenue Historic District

purchased a portion of the undeveloped land in the Scofield Addition. Among this firm’s previous experience was a Flint, Michigan housing development for auto workers. In Janesville, Matteson and Landstrom platted the area into 110 small lots ranging in width from 40 to 45 feet. By the end of 1920, 79 houses were completed, and all 84 were finished within a few years. The National Register of Historic Places nomination for this area notes that “while there is little doubt that Matteson and Landstrom built their tract house development in hopes of attracting the workers of the new Samson Tractor factory, tax rolls and city directories indicate that their development was less than successful in attracting these workers.” Few tractor factory employees settled here in the 1920s, possibly because the area was a fair distance from the factory, and because of competition from the Janesville Housing Corporation’s development.

Through the 1920s, a number of Matteson and Landstrom houses were unsold and were rented by the developer, and others were held by absentee owners. City directories show a high turnover of occupants in all of the houses through the twentieth century.

The developers chose an economical but handsome building type for the Benton Avenue area. Following a national trend very popular in California, the Bungalow style was popular in Wisconsin between about 1910 and 1940. While the general term can be used to describe any small one-story house, the Bungalow style usually represents a one- and one-half story house with wide, often sloping roofs, large porches, and simple trim. Typical exterior details such as knee-brace brackets and exposed rafters and beams are concentrated at the roofline. Bungalows are typically clad in clapboard, brick or stucco; some examples have stone or brick trim. A prominent chimney mass is often found on even simple examples of the style. The Bungalow interior typically has an open plan and includes an abundance of hardwood trim, built-in cabinets and bookshelves; the interior could be richly or simply detailed depending on the budget. Builders also deviated from the standard California bungalow exterior into Swiss, Colonial, and Tudor variations.

In the Benton Avenue Historic District, there are several varieties of bungalow design. The 1994 National Register nomination identified the “one-story front gable bungalow,” the “one and one-half story front gable bungalow with side wall dormer,” the “one and one-half story bungalow with hipped roof and front dormer” and “the one and one-half story side gable bungalow.” The primary types illustrated on the opposite page can be seen elsewhere in the city, but nowhere in such concentration.

Sherman Avenue streetscape, 1994.
One-story front gable: 821 Blaine Avenue. This example illustrates how affordable housing could be stylish with details from the popular Bungalow style.

One- and one-half story with side wall dormers: 875 Sherman Avenue. Original exterior features including narrow clapboards and wood shingles have been maintained. Knee-brace brackets and exposed rafters are prominent decorative features.

One- and one-half story with hipped roof and front dormer: 956 Benton Avenue. A porch supported by battered piers at the base is a typical feature of this bungalow type.

One- and one-half story side gable: 950 Benton Avenue. This small house exemplifies the practical designs seen in neighborhoods throughout Janesville.

Knee brace bracket
The Benton Avenue Historic District 

The Bungalow Style and 
American Arts and Crafts Design

The bungalows of the Benton Avenue Historic District have their distant roots in the California work of brothers Charles Sumner Greene and Henry Mather Greene, Pasadena architects who practiced together from 1893 to 1914. The Greenses' exceptional buildings—which were nationally publicized in periodicals such as *House Beautiful* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*—fused English Arts and Crafts and oriental motifs. Between about 1901 and 1940, the bungalow and the larger Craftsman house were popularized across the United States through many pattern books and periodicals. Among them was *The Craftsman*, a periodical published by Gustav Stickley between 1901 and 1916, and *Craftsman Homes*, published by Stickley in 1909.

Stickley (1858-1942) was a native of Osceola, Wisconsin. In the 1880s he settled in Binghamton, New York and at various times was in the furniture business with his two brothers Charles and Albert and Elgin A. Simonds. Stickley traveled to England in 1898, where he saw the work of Arts and Crafts designers such as C.F.A. Voysey and Charles R. Ashbee. The Arts and Crafts Movement in England was devoted to reconnecting the relationship between art and daily life, one that proponents felt had been severed by the Industrial Revolution. After his trip to England, Stickley promoted the unity of the bungalow (or the larger Craftsman house) and its furnishings. In America, Arts and Crafts devotees were focused on restoring comfort, convenience and simplicity to middle-class domestic life. Artistically conceived household products could satisfy consumer needs while bringing artistic quality into the household. Even the economical bungalow could be furnished with handsome, widely available oak furniture, rugs, and lighting as well as decorative ceramics and needlework inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Just as the pattern books of the early twentieth century provided models of exterior and interior taste, the current revival of interest in the Bungalow and Arts and Crafts topics has resulted in a new collection of books and periodicals. One, *American Bungalow*, a magazine published bi-monthly "in the interest of preserving and restoring the modest American Bungalow and the rich lifestyle that it affords" includes illustrations of restored interiors and exteriors. Sources for further reading include:

*American Bungalow*. Subscriptions through P.O. Box 756, Sierra Madre, CA 91025-756. Toll free number (800) 350-3363.


Bungalow plan from Henry L. Wilson's *Wilson's California Bungalows* (exact date of publication unknown). Wilson's catalog, which provided complete plans and specifications for the bungalow interior and exterior for $10.00 per set, was typical of many of the teens and twenties. Wilson also began the publication of *Bungalow Magazine* in 1909.

While companies such as Wilson's offered only bungalow plans, between 1908 and 1940 Sears Roebuck and Company was among suppliers of complete pre-cut houses available by mail order. Sears' *Modern Homes and Building Plans* was the source of many bungalows built between 1925 and 1937. One model, the "Oakdale," which was similar to some of the houses built in the Benton Avenue Historic District, was described in *Modern Homes*:

One of the most popular types of home is the five-room bungalow. When it is as pretty and homelike as the Oakdale, it commands a good rental and selling price in any neighborhood. And when its rooms are of such comfortable size and arrangement as these with a convenience in almost every corner, it makes a home to which a family becomes more attached as time passes.

Left: Interior details including fireplace, bookcases and closet from *Wilson's California Bungalows*. Many bungalow interiors featured built-in cabinets to maximize floor space.

Above: Craftsman chairs like those originally found in many Bungalow Style houses.