The Look West Historic District is part of Janesville’s old First Ward, a neighborhood in the heart of the city which has always existed closely with the city’s rail and manufacturing interests. In the nineteenth century, railroad workers, businessmen, carpenters, clerks, mayors and judges shared the area, and the architecture of Look West reflects its original occupational and social diversity.

The Historic District currently contains 15 blocks and 375 properties. It was listed on the National Register in 1987 after architectural surveys made in 1975 and 1981. Listing on the National Register gives national recognition to the special character of the area, and provides properties with limited protection from any federally-funded, licensed, or permitted actions. National Register listing also makes rehabilitated income-producing properties eligible for federal investment tax credits established by the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, as amended.

A portion of Look West is perched on a bluff on the west bank of the Rock, and the District lies just north of a section of the river once lined with mills and factories. Rail lines first laid in the 1850s, and a four-lane highway (U.S. 51) separate it from the city’s business district. The streets of Look West were platted as additions to the original plat of Janesville made in the 1840s, but no dwellings appear to have been constructed here until the 1850s.

From its beginnings in the mid-1830s, Janesville grew to a settlement of 3,100 by 1850, and was incorporated as a city in 1853. A nineteenth-century historian noted that of 157 houses in Janesville in 1845, only 4 were situated west of the Rock River. However, the construction of bridges and mills brought increased development to the west side and it surpassed that of the east side by 1850.

Janesville’s nineteenth-century residents were primarily native-born, with the largest group from New York and New England. Look West’s population reflected that of the rest of the city, and included a small concentration of Norwegians as well.

In addition to its early houses, the railroad tracks, relics of depot buildings, and tobacco warehouses are testament to Look West’s beginnings and growth. Between the arrival of the railroad in Janesville in 1853 and the Civil War, 101 houses were constructed here, primarily in the eastern portion of the neighborhood. Although North Chatham, Pearl and Terrace Streets are shown as laid out on early maps, with few exceptions these blocks were not fully subdivided or built up until the 1880s.

Cover: the Oliver Van Kirk house, 206 Madison Street.
Prior to the Civil War, the high wedge of land nearest the bluff, including North Washington, Madison, North Academy and North Jackson Streets was built up with stylish houses. Some were architect-designed, and many belonged to doctors, attorneys, and businessmen. The William M. Tallman house, built between 1855 and 1857, was instantly acclaimed as one of the region's finest residences. Interspersed between expensive, high-styled Greek Revival, Gothic Revival and Italianate style dwellings were those of skilled workers and tradespeople. The exterior of many of these simple vernacular houses showed few references to a particular style in design or ornament. Most are of frame construction, are clapboard covered and have an "L-plan," consisting of a main two-story block with a one-and-one-half or two-story wing. Many variations can be seen, however.

The prominent bluff, views of the river and proximity to the center of the city were attractive to the next generations of residents. In the late 1870s and 1880s, the rest of the neighborhood was filled in with vernacular houses, as well as a number of stylish Queen Anne, Craftsman and Colonial Revival style examples.

265 of 375 buildings in the District were constructed by 1900, and the diverse mixture of residents continued until the turn of the century. However, the introduction of convenient transportation—the streetcar—encouraged the growth of residential subdivisions outside the central city. One result was the dispersal of many prominent families from Look West. The bluffs around Courthouse Hill, on the east bank of the Rock, were also being built up with handsome houses better removed from the noisy railyards and industries which bordered Look West.
Vernacular houses: 332, 326, 320 N. Jackson Street. Photograph 1888.

City Brewery, River Street near Mineral Point Avenue. Photograph 1888. This brewery at the edge of Look West was owned by Louis Knipp, who resided at 485 N. Chatham between 1890 and 1909. Knipp was one of three brewers who lived in the District.

Among the last additions to the District were two large tobacco warehouses built along the railroad tracks on Academy Street. They were both constructed in 1900. Over the next decades, many of the large single-family houses of Look West were divided into apartments. This housing appealed to the many new workers employed by Janesville’s growing manufacturing industries. Population density in Look West increased significantly with the subdivision of houses. Ownership patterns changed; with many houses sold to non-resident owners. Between 1910 and 1987, stucco, asbestos, asphalt, aluminum and vinyl siding was applied to the exterior of nearly sixty percent of the clapboard-covered houses. Other changes have included the removal of porches and the removal or alteration of original features such as doors, windows, and decorative trim.

Today, however, Look West is a target area for renovation of housing. "Attempts to revitalize the neighborhood have resulted in many of the fine high-style and vernacular houses in the district being brought back to life by both resident and non-resident owners," noted the 1987 National Register nomination for this area. Renovation efforts have resulted in dramatic "before and after" stories. Assisted by public and private efforts to improve the area, Look West remains a highly interesting collection of both elegant houses and vernacular architecture, reflecting the diverse history of its nineteenth and twentieth-century residents.

Look West is a recent name for this district. It reflects the desire of its neighborhood group to encourage the city to "look west" beyond the downtown.
Green Brothers Leaf Tobacco House, 207 N. Academy Street. Photograph ca. 1904.

Norwegian Evangelical Church (now a private studio), after restoration. Photograph 1987.

Before restoration.