

Docent Sheet for

# Creston

---

A Brief Overview and  
Suggested Walking Tour

## History

Prior to its annexation in 1891, this area was farmland, cultivated by Dutch immigrants. Creston became a working class streetcar suburb of Grand Rapids. Like many such suburbs around the nation, Creston got its start in the late nineteenth century with the introduction of the streetcar, which made it possible for people to live at a greater distance from the city center. The advent of a train depot at the corner of Plainfield and Leonard and a streetcar line running North on Plainfield and connecting to the bustling hub of downtown commerce known as Grab Corners attracted various hotels and small retail businesses to the area. The neighborhood became populated by Irish who started the St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, and French who worked as lumbermen or railway workers. Shortly thereafter they were joined by Polish, Dutch, English, Canadian, and Irish laborers who worked in the nearby furniture factories and lumber yards which capitalized on the proximity to the railroad line, the Grand River, and the Leonard Street bridge.

In 1906 local residents formed the first neighborhood organization in the city and held a name contest which resulted in the name “Creston” after the hills near Spencer Street and Plainfield Ave. The Creston Citizens’ Association, like its successor the Creston Neighborhood Association, organized neighbors and communicated with city hall for various improvements such as parks, street lights, increased police protection, and attraction of retail business. In 1914 the CAA petitioned an extension of the streetcar line up to Knapp Street, expanding the business district and settlement northward. In 1917 it established the borders of Briggs Park and Riverside Park (now the largest green space in the city of Grand Rapids) and petitioned for Creston high school to be established in the neighborhood.

In the 1920’s automobiles became steadily more popular, and after World War II, streetcars were replaced by automobiles as the primary mode of transportation. These developments fueled more expansion north on Plainfield, allowing for the establishment of a second (Cheshire Village) and later a third (North Park) business district along the avenue. These transitions and steady migration of well-equipped families northward was accompanied by degradation of housing stock and transience of residents in what is now known as Creston Grove.

Today the Creston neighborhood boundaries stretch north as far as 4 Mile Road after annexing two other neighborhoods in the 1990’s. Creston is now the largest neighborhood in the city of Grand Rapids with over 26,000 people, 430 businesses, 24 churches and 14 schools.

## Structure

The big historic dividing line in the way we put neighborhoods together is the Second World War. Before the war, neighborhoods were designed for people; after the war they were designed for cars. Pre-war neighborhoods are mixed-use, compact and walkable; they have a center and an edge, and the distance between the two is typically a 5-10 minute walk. Within that walking radius, people could typically find all they needed on a daily and weekly basis—a grocery store, a hardware store, a post office, a coffee shop, a flower shop, a bank, a library, a school and a church. And a transit stop: pre-war neighborhoods were typically served by a comprehensive public transportation system that enabled people to get around town without a car.

The target area of Creston is a typical pre-war streetcar suburb. Roughly one square mile, it is bounded by Knapp to the north, Leonard to the south, the Grand River to the west, and College to the east. It exhibits the structure of a classic walkable, mixed-use neighborhood. From the center, the old Creston Library at Plainfield and Quimby, it is no more than a 5-10 minute walk to its edge. At the center there was a complete range of retail and service stores; from there the neighborhood fans out to the residential areas. The blocks are laid out in a fine grid pattern; the blocks are typically no longer than 300-400 feet; and all of the streets connect, making it possible to get from point A to point B in many different ways by car, by bike, or on foot. Except on Plainfield Ave. automobile traffic rarely exceeds 30 miles per hour. From a certain Calvin Admissions Counselor's house on Page Street, you are within a ten-minute walk of the Choo Choo Grill, Graydon's Crossing, College Ave. Pocket Park, Creston High School, the Red Ball Jet, Brittany's Café, VanBelkum Branch of Grand Rapids Public Library, the Creston Neighborhood Association Offices, D'Amico's grocery store, Palmer Elementary School, Kent County Credit Union, Bumble Bee Ice Cream, Jim's Rib joint, churches representing at least five Christian denominations, and more.

Compare this pre-war neighborhood structure to the way we build today. If you live in the suburbs, chances are you live in a purely residential area—just single-family houses, no retail, office, or civic buildings within walking range. That's because modern zoning laws prohibit mixed-use. Your work, your school, your church, your movie theaters and shopping malls will be miles away from you. So you'll have to drive to get there; and if you don't drive, someone else will have to drive to get you there. Separation of land uses marks post-war development. Second, consider the differences in street plan. Creston is laid out on a grid. The suburbs today are built around a different kind of street pattern, called a "Street Hierarchy," which is designed to keep through car traffic out of the neighborhoods. Development occurs in areas called "pods"—each with a single land use—and between these pods run the big four-lane arterials; the pods are served by wavy, unconnected cul-de-sac streets, which empty into collector streets, which in turn empty into the major arterials. The whole mode of development is based on the assumption that they only way to get from point A to point B is to drive a car. The other modes of transit—walking, biking and public transportation—have been left out of the picture (along with the 90 million Americans who don't drive because they are too young, too old, too sick, too poor). This kind of development has been strongly correlated to high levels of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. (Guess why.) This kind of development is also based on the premise of cheap and unlimited amounts of gas. That premise is about to be challenged in a big way.

## A Suggested Walk

*This walk takes about 45-60 minutes; it could take longer if you make more of it, and perhaps talk to some of the storeowners along the way. It starts and ends at the Creston Neighborhood Association. Basic urban design concepts are in boldface the first time they appear.*

The Creston Neighborhood Association serves an expansive area of the city's northeast side by organizing residents around key issues. Ongoing foci of CNA include healthcare, crime prevention, education, business, and housing. Its offices are here in the basement of the former convent of St. Alphonsus Church. Above the offices are apartments that house low-income elderly members of the neighborhood through the Creston Non-Profit Housing Association. There is a community room in this building where CNA holds board meetings and town-hall meetings, residents spend time together, and Calvin nursing students take their community nursing classes.

Across the street is St. Alphonsus Church (known as St. Al's), a church that has been a harbor of social justice to the neighborhood for many years. The church hosts Catherine's Care Center, a medical facility dedicated to providing health care for the underserved. CCC offers a variety of services including examinations, immunizations, counseling, testing and screening. Catherine's stresses preventive health and offers a number of programs that promote it, including a community walking program that meets at Riverside Park during the summer and a local elementary school during the winter.

St. Al's is also home to a K-8 Catholic school that serves many neighborhood children. The Catholic schools are facing many of the same challenges faced by the public and Christian schools and are facing school closures. On Thursday evenings, the school cafeteria becomes a restaurant of sorts when North End Community Ministries hosts its weekly Supper House, a free, nutritious meal offered to residents of the neighborhood. Local congregations partner with NECM in funding and serving these meals.

As you pass houses throughout the tour, what sorts of things do you notice about them, particularly as compared with houses in the suburbs? (Smaller, close together, close to the road, many run down, vacant, many for rent/sale, front porches, sidewalks.) The presence of apartment buildings, duplexes, and larger homes divided into smaller units shows that we could use more variety in **residential typologies**.

Head west toward Plainfield and point out Graydon's Crossing with the best imported beer selection in town. This building two years ago housed a liquor store and underwent a significant overhaul. Also note the Choo Choo Grill, the site of the original train station at Leonard and Plainfield. As the city of Grand Rapids plans for the future, the corner of Leonard and Plainfield is rumored to once again become a major transportation hub for the city. Just north on Plainfield is My Personal Credit Union. Ten years ago, the last bank in the neighborhood closed its doors. Creston residents did not like this idea and gathered together with the help of CNA to draw a bank back into the neighborhood. Neighborhood banking is very important because not all residents have access to transportation to reach the bank branches that have been relocated to mall parking lots and other suburban areas. Without access to branches, they also do not have access to loans, mortgages, or customer service for their checking and savings accounts. As a result of the efforts of Creston neighbors, My Personal Credit Union and Kent County Credit Union (farther up Plainfield) have come back into the neighborhood.

Turn right onto Page street just past St. Vincent De Paul Thrift store and head east to Buffalo and turn north. Cross Plainfield at Spencer and head east. The large yellow house near the end of the block is the future Project Neighborhood house connected with Creston CRC (Lord willing). Two houses up you can see the Creston CRC ministry center, where Calvin Accounting students help with Volunteer Income Tax Assistance for neighbors who cannot afford to have someone prepare their taxes for them. At Spencer turn left, back towards Plainfield. Here are two local churches: Creston CRC and Plainfield United Methodist Church. Creston, founded in 1917 is the first CRC in Grand Rapids to offer services in the English language. PUMC is home to NECM's food pantry. The parking lot across the street serves the business district throughout the week and the churches on Sunday and is a good example of **shared use**.

Cross Plainfield and head north. Note the bus stop on Plainfield, which connects many residents to other parts of the city by way of the down town transit center ten minutes south of here. Public transportation in Grand Rapids is up for a millage on May 8<sup>th</sup> which will help to increase frequency on the most popular routes, expand the hours of operations, extend several routes (including the number six which will now be able to take students directly from Calvin's campus to the airport), and create some new routes to serve more of the city.

The Creston Corridor Initiative is funded by AmeriCorps LISC to help bolster the strength of the business district. It participates in this work through beautification projects, such as planting flowers during Creston in Bloom, placing park benches decorated with tiles created by local students throughout the business district, and welcoming local artists and student apprentices to paint storefront windows during the holiday season.

The businesses across the street demonstrate several key elements of good urbanism: storefronts on the sidewalk, a **continuous streetwall** not broken up by driveways, with parking in the back, mixed use with apartments above the stores. CCI also offers façade improvement grants to businesses in the business district to improve signage and the look of the district. Graydon's Crossing and Sun Title are a great example of this improvement. In urban retail buildings, **transparency** is important. It creates a lively communication between the street and the interior of the building—inviting people inside—and it renders the street visible to those who work and shop inside the building. Called "**eyes on the street**," this form of informal surveillance is very effective in reducing opportunistic street crime. Unfortunately this is often violated by solid walls, darkly tinted windows, and signs or opaque displays.

Stop at the old Library branch. Originally a neighborhood bank, this beautiful building that is often seen as the cornerstone of the Creston neighborhood was vacated by the library several years ago, but residents did not want to see it stand vacant. The space was used for a short time as part of a gallery exhibit, but neighbors wanted to see more and wanted to see it once again as a gathering place for the community. In collaboration with CNA and the Creston Business Association, the neighborhood sought investors who would renovate the space. Gilmore of the Gilmore collection purchased the property and is in the process of renovation to open a new restaurant called the Red Ball Jet, which will serve Gilmore's signature wood-fired pizzas. This is a classic example of **adaptive reuse** and **historic preservation**, two of the ways urban structures change with the times.

Continue north past the Brittany, Quin & Tuite's, and the VanBelkern Branch of the Grand Rapids Public Library. These all provide what some urban theorists call "**Third Place**." The first place is home, the second is work—and the third place is where you can hang out with your neighbors and meet people. These are people who are "civic acquaintances"—people from whom you share friendly greeting and casual conversations, catching up on the local news. Third Places

foster the creation of a network of civic acquaintances, which in turn builds up civic trust and social capital. Other places where this happens: local bars, restaurants, grocery stores, libraries, sidewalks, parks, and front porches (all missing from the housing subdivisions we build today—which can be very lonely places).

Stop at the VanBelkum Branch at Creston of Grand Rapids Public Library. For many years, a library branch office was located farther south on Plainfield, when it pulled out, Creston neighbors again raised their voices and requested that a branch of the library remain on Plainfield to serve neighborhood patrons. Their voices were heard and the VanBelkum branch opened in its current location. As a card-holder at GRPL one can visit the local branch and request any item from not only GRPL, but the entire Lake Library Cooperative including all of Kent and Ottawa counties. At no charge to the patron the requested item will be delivered to the local branch and held for pick up. (My wife and I have not rented a video from Blockbuster in the two years we've been married...it saves a lot of money!)

Continue north on Plainfield, to the office of the NEW Development Corporation, this non-profit organization is an affordable housing developer, which we'll learn more about when we see some of their sites later on the tour. NEW also provides home-buyer education and Individual Development Accounts to save for home buying. The Sit-N-Spin Laundromat is a recent addition to the neighborhood as well. It is convenient to have one close by...my wife and I will be here tonight doing our laundry! The power at Sit-N-Spin is partially fueled with recycled engine oil.

Go up past KKCUC and zig zag up to go north on Lafayette and note the slight difference in housing stock as you go farther north in the neighborhood. Turn right on Palmer Street and walk past Palmer Elementary School. Palmer is a wonderful example of a neighborhood school, many of the students walk to school, but some are bussed from around the city because Palmer is a language center. Palmer is home to CCC's annual children and families' health fair, which is provided by Calvin senior nursing students (and service-learners). Twelve years ago parents and community members came together to raise funds to replace Palmer's windows, which were very old and didn't let much light in any more. Their efforts saw fruit when in 2006 millage dollars were used not only to replace windows, but to renovate the entire school, construct a new gymnasium, and install a new media center/library. The beautiful school reopened its doors in January of 2007 and is a great example of the community coming together to see the best for their children.

Just two blocks north of Palmer school is Briggs Park, which was set aside as a recreation area in 1914 along with Riverside Park. The park doesn't have much of a parking lot because most people walk to it. Briggs has a football field where the Creston Polar Bears practice and neighbors walk the track for exercise, another example of shared use. It is also home to one of the only three neighborhood pools that were open last summer in the entire city of Grand Rapids. As families and home-owners leave the city the tax base goes down so basic services like Parks and Recreation receive huge cuts in funding. Continue west on Palmer and take a moment to note D'Amico's a locally owned grocery store that is within walking distance for many Creston residents and provides all of the basics.

Cross Plainfield and walk around the parking lot of Creston High School, one of five Grand Rapids Public High Schools. It is home to two small school programs where students experience a rigorous and relevant curriculum that is organized around career pathway themes, and can expect a strong communication bond with teachers who know their students well. Grand Rapids Area Pre-College Engineering Program and the school of Business Management, Marketing and Technology draw students to Creston from around the city. Over the years, GRPS has seen an

overall decline in student enrollment as families move to the suburbs and charter schools pop up around the city. The schools are still a strong choice for residents of the neighborhood.

Walk up the Sweet Street hill to the T with North Avenue. The softball diamond for Creston High School was renovated this past fall and provides a nice place to walk to and watch the sunset while consulting the notorious weather ball. Point out the pocket park at College. This small park provides a space for neighborhood kids to play; CNA is working towards a grant to improve the park with new paint, new equipment, and new landscaping. Note: again no parking lot, people just walk here. It is adjacent to the Country Club which stretches north to Knapp St. and is unfortunately not very connected with the neighborhood.

Go south on North to Page and turn east, pausing near the T with Maude Ave. and point out the yellow house on the far corner (217) the yellow house near the T (342) and the green house up the hill on North. These three houses have been purchased and renovated by NEW Development Corporation. This organization purchases homes that have been in foreclosure or vacant for some time (as is the case of the green house, which was burnt out in the summer of 2005). The houses are completely remodeled and brought up to date with appliances, roof, furnace, etc. then sold to low- to moderate-income families. NEW has invested significantly in this block of Page St. with hopes that increased home-ownership, pride in the property, and connections between residents will build community on the block and encourage other investment. Point out the Habitat for Humanity project at the end of the street as well.

Continue on Page Street to Lafayette, cut south one block and head east on Carrier, where you'll find yourself back at the CNA parking lot.