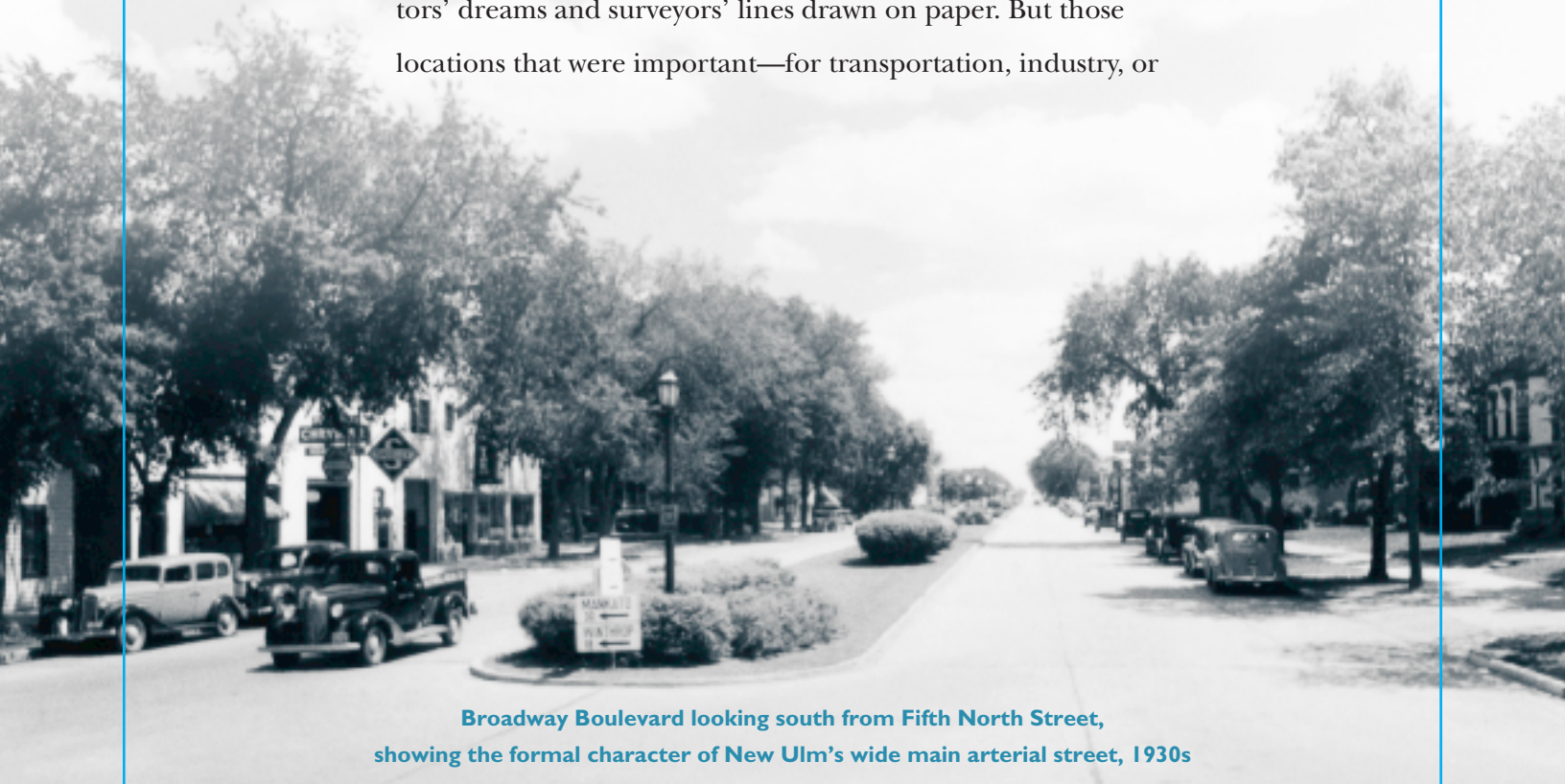


## TERRITORIAL SPACE

# Platting New Ulm

DENNIS GIMMESTAD

Many of Minnesota's cities trace their origins, layout, and organization to the state's territorial period. Indeed, the territorial legislature required that towns be platted before lots could be sold. Townsite "proprietors" subdivided their land into lots and blocks, streets and parks, river landings and building sites. While hundreds of towns had been laid out by the late 1850s, a good number never developed beyond their proprietors' dreams and surveyors' lines drawn on paper. But those locations that were important—for transportation, industry, or



**Broadway Boulevard looking south from Fifth North Street,  
showing the formal character of New Ulm's wide main arterial street, 1930s**

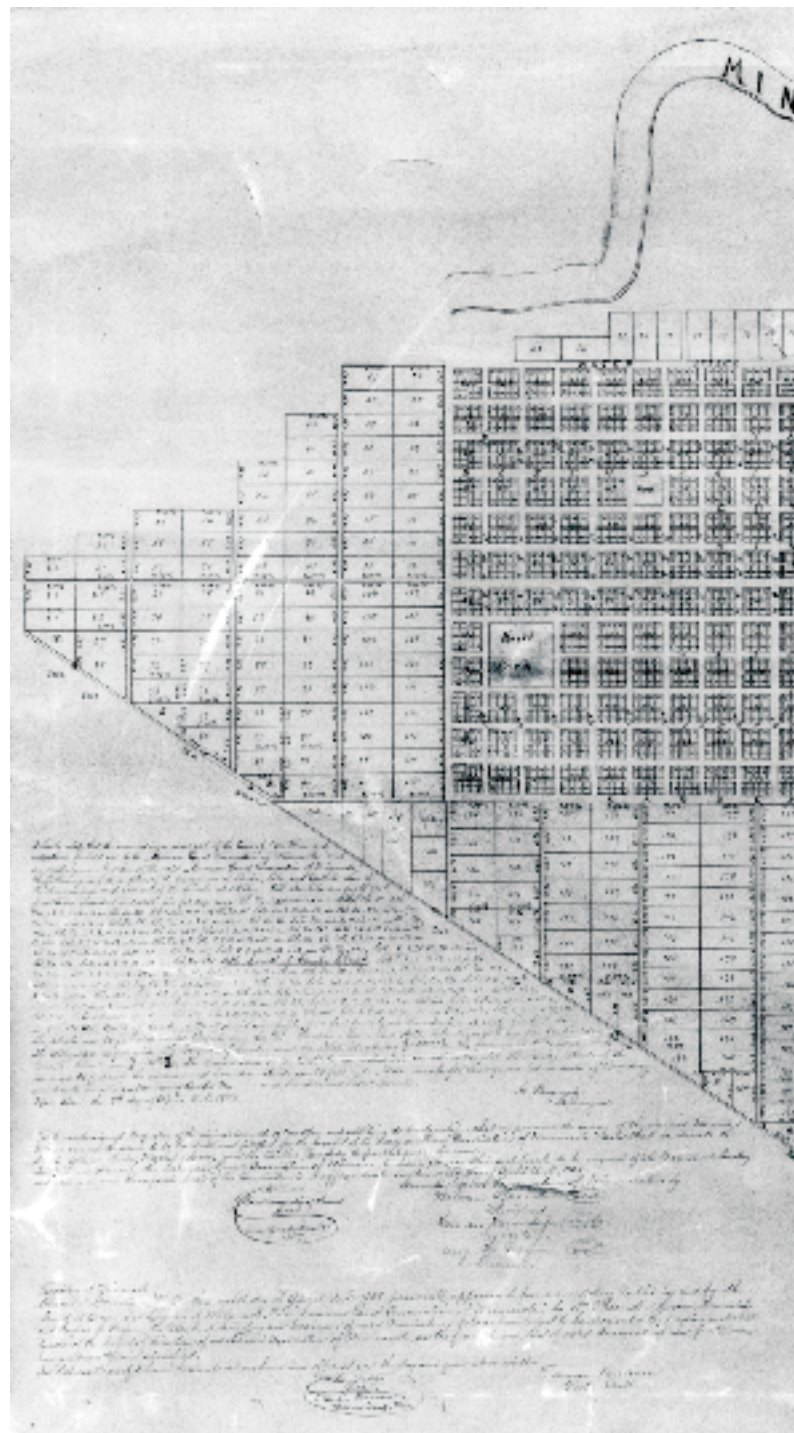
commerce—began molding the ever-changing face of Minnesota’s urban landscape.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most distinctive city-planning efforts during the territorial period occurred in the upper Minnesota River valley. Here, about 30 miles upstream from the big bend of the river that became Mankato, an immigrant group called the Chicago Land Society set forth to realize its dream of establishing a German colony in the West. Under the leadership of Frederick Beinhorn, an immigrant from Braunschweig, the group established claims for roughly 16 quarter-section parcels on the terraces above the Minnesota River in 1855–56. Two of these parcels—a total of 320 acres—were pre-empted as a townsite, and Ludwig Meyer, a member of the group, surveyed and filed a city plat bearing the name New Ulm, after the home of one of his fellow settlers.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, members of the Cincinnati Turner Society, a nationalistic German gymnastic group with socialist ideals, were exploring their own plans to develop a new German community farther west. Wilhelm Pfaender, an immigrant who had settled in Cincinnati, approached Beinhorn on a scouting trip to Minnesota Territory, and they formed a new group, the German Land Association of Minnesota. The members of the Cincinnati group added about 14 additional quarter sections of land to the original 16.<sup>3</sup>

The association’s goals for its members included a secure livelihood, youth education, cultural distinction, and “German good fellowship,” while avoiding temperance interests, Sunday laws, and animosity against immigrants. Most members were freethinkers; indeed, the Chicago Land Society had excluded lawyers and clergy. And the Turners later gave funds to the schools with the specific condition that religious instruction and books be excluded.

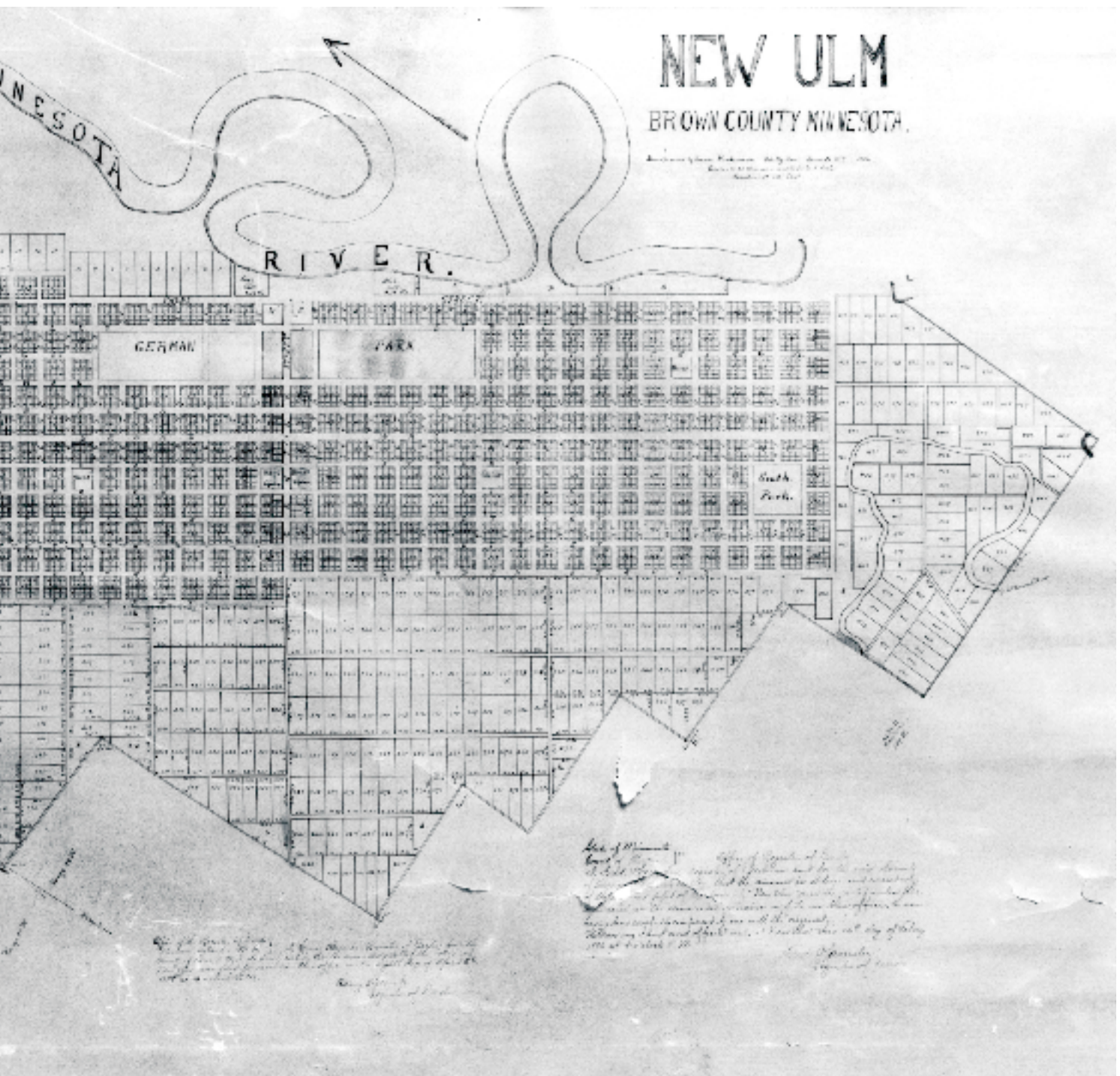
In April 1858 a greatly expanded town plat was recorded, signed by surveyor Christian Prignitz. The grid of the sprawling plat followed that established two years earlier by Meyer on a northwest-southeast axis parallel to the general direction of the Minnesota River. The streets running perpendicular to the river divide at Center Street, running from First South Street to Twentieth South Street and from First North Street



to Twentieth North Street. Parallel to the river, the streets are divided at midpoint by Broadway; the other names are Water, Front, Valley, Spring, German, Minnesota, State, Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Payne, and Garden. The grid included more than 200 blocks typically containing 14 lots each, as well as symmetrically placed North German Park, South German Park, North Park, South Park, and four markets. Two public squares near the center of the plat were for the county courthouse and the school, and the block next

*Dennis Gimmestad of the Minnesota Historical Society State Historic Preservation Office currently coordinates the review of development projects in historic areas. He would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Darla Gebhard of the Brown County Historical Society in the preparation of this article.*





to the courthouse was for Turner Hall. Several hundred garden plots lay beyond Garden Street, North Twentieth Street, and South Twentieth Street.

Under the terms of the German Land Association, each member received a number of city lots and one of the four-acre garden plots. The association disbanded in 1859, and its activities—including a sawmill, communal store, and Turner newspaper—were short-lived.<sup>4</sup> Still, it had established a physical framework for the city, one still evident nearly a century and a half later.

**Copy of surveyor Christian Prignitz's 1858 plat (about 27 x 44 inches), drawn by an unknown surveyor in 1896 and certified as accurate by Fred Pfaender, son of Wilhelm Pfaender and Brown County register of deeds in 1896. The notes include 1858 certifications of the surveyor, townsite proprietors, and the register of deeds.**









**Top: Minnesota Street looking south from Third North Street, about 1895, where the commercial district developed parallel and one block from the central Broadway Boulevard**

**Bottom left: Aerial view, 1937, of the center of New Ulm, with public squares housing the Brown County Courthouse (left) and the New Ulm school (right) flanking the prominent Center Street.**

**Bottom right: German Park, divided into north and south units in the 1860s and later diminished by the construction of railroad tracks along its eastern edge, still provides the setting for New Ulm's most prominent historic homes along South German Street.**



IN PART, THE NEW ULM PLAT is distinctive due to its sheer size. By far the most common practice in Minnesota was to plat an “original town” of limited acreage and then append “additions,” often resulting in a patchwork of streets and lots. In New Ulm, except for minor revisions and additions, the original plat has accommodated development for more than a century. Blocks whose oldest dwellings are the brick cottages of early settlers abut blocks of ramblers and split-levels that housed baby-boomers. Even today, undeveloped lots in the original plat are for sale.

The size of the plat acted as a hedge against speculation and resulted in New Ulm’s orderly growth pattern. German geographer Rainier Vollmar, in an address to the Brown County Historical Society in 1991, saw the Turner ideal of equality embodied in the symmetry and similar lot sizes of the plat. He also noted the significance of siting Turner Hall immediately adjacent to the central blocks dedicated to the county courthouse and the school. That building is clearly visible in an early view of the city that is notably devoid of church buildings.<sup>5</sup>

The founders’ goals created a community persona that sets New Ulm apart from the Minnesota towns founded by land speculators or railroad companies. These cities were typically entrepreneurial developments focused on land sales and the production and transportation of goods. These practical factors were certainly part of New Ulm’s formative years. Yet, like the leaders of utopian communities such as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Bishop Hill, Illinois, or Salt Lake City, Utah, the New Ulm founders aspired to establish a town with a defined philosophical, economic, and social character. Even though New Ulm did not develop exactly as planned, its founders’ strong community vision stimulated a planning effort whose effects have endured.<sup>6</sup>

Today’s visitors to New Ulm often comment on the city’s neat appearance and distinctive character. While scores of the lots originally intended as four-acre gardens have been lost to new schools, housing, and other developments, the original plat’s parks, avenues, and building lots survive.<sup>7</sup> Walking the streets of the Turners’ city plan, one can subtly, but ever so surely, gain a very real sense of the territorial ideology that birthed a city. □

## NOTES

1. *Public Statutes of the State of Minnesota, 1849–1858* (St. Paul: Pioneer Printing Co., 1859), 369–71.

2. For a good visual survey of Minnesota city plats up to 1874, see A. T. Andreas, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1874).

3. Here and two paragraphs below, see Hildegard B. Johnson, “The Founding of New Ulm, Minnesota,” *American-German Review*, June 1946, p. 8–12; F. W. Johnson, “New Ulm—Acquisition of the Townsite,” typescript in Brown County Historical Society, New Ulm; Noel Iverson, *Germania, U.S.A.: Social Change in New Ulm, Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 53–71; Alice F. Tyler, “William Pfaender and the Founding of New Ulm,” *Minnesota History* 30 (Mar. 1949): 24–35.

3. Comparison of the earlier Meyer plat in the Brown County Historical Society and the Prignitz plat reveals that Meyer established the basic armature of the city—including the grid orientation, street-naming scheme, and reserved land for German Park—which Prignitz later embellished. The unfinished edges of the Meyer plat suggest that he had drafted a larger scheme but only filed the two quarter-sections originally pre-empted for the townsite. The original Prignitz plat seems to have been lost, but an 1896 copy survives at the Brown County Courthouse, New Ulm.

4. Iverson, *Germania*, 62–66.

5. Rainier Vollmar, “Ideology and Settlement Plan: Case of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and New Ulm, Minnesota,” address to the Brown County Historical Society, May 18, 1991, tape

recording, Brown County Historical Society; J. Berndt, *Ansicht von New Ulm, Minnesota, 1860*, lithograph, in Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) map collection. For a counterpoint to Vollmar’s comments on equality, see La Vern J. Rippley and Robert J. Paulson, *German Bohemians: The Quiet Immigrants* (Northfield, Minn.: St. Olaf College Press, 1995), 143–59, which discusses the Turners’ elitism toward the German-speaking Bohemians who also settled in the area.

6. On speculative, railroad, and utopian city planning, see John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America: A History of Urban Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 349–413, 439–74. Iverson, *Germania*, 3–22, discusses how the higher social status and isolation of the Turners led the initial ethnic community to develop into a status community. The expansive gridiron plat foreshadows its non-ethnic, aspiring nature.

7. Indeed, New Ulm’s Heritage Preservation Commission planning study recommends that “the town plat is of major significance and should be an important focus of the H.P.C.”; Daniel Hoisington, “New Ulm’s Historic Contexts,” 1998, p. 57, on file at the State Historic Preservation Office, MHS, and at the City of New Ulm.

*The photos on p. 345 and 348–49 (bottom) are courtesy the Brown County Historical Society; p. 346–47 is by Eric Mortenson, MHS, from the plat on loan from the Brown County Recorder’s Office; and p. 348 (top) is from MHS collections.*



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