Nevada City Historical District
Design Guidelines for SIGNAGE

Introduction

Buildings in downtown Nevada City in the 19th century slowly evolved from canvas tents to logs to wood-frame to brick. Each time there was a major fire in town - and there were several in the 1850's and 60's - the architecture and building materials would change. As a result, the downtown business area - now the core of our designated historical district - developed a mixed use of materials and styles, and with it a unique architectural mix that we strive to respect and protect.

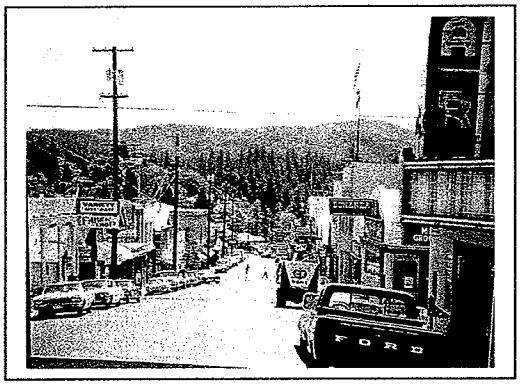
Before proceeding with a look at our current regulations, however, let's take a moment to consider how the town appeared a few short decades ago - before creation of the historical district and the resulting downtown betterment project of the 1970's and the early 80's.

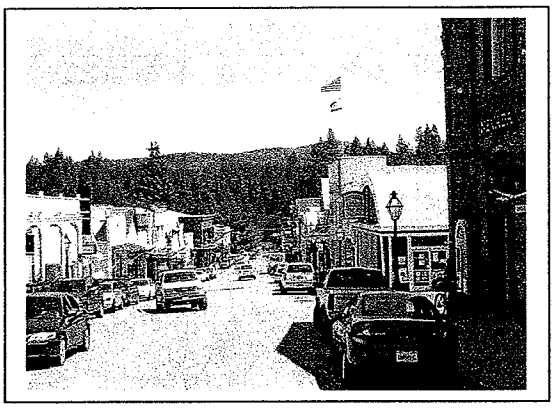
During the 1950's and 60's, mining and lumbering became the less significant as factors in local commerce. In addition, Interstate 80 was constructed over the Sierra. With fewer jobs for local residents, and a reduction in tourist-related automobile traffic resulting from the all-weather interstate to the south, Nevada City faced some difficult economic times. If the city were to survive as a municipality, and preserve an incorporation that dated back to the gold rush, it was necessary to make some significant changes.

Recognizing that Nevada City's greatest assets were its historic past, unique setting, and impressive inventory of 19th century buildings, community leaders decided to plan for the future with an eye on the past.

In 1968, the City Council and Planning Commission created and approved Ordinance 338 - now known as the Nevada City Historical Ordinance. The document served as the nexus to lead the town through a decade of major renovation and restoration. Utilities were undergrounded, gaslights were installed, neon signs were removed, new signs went up and Nevada City became the envy of every other gold rush community in the Mother Lode region. The City proved that a well-planned face-lift was not only possible, but also necessary.

Below is a photograph of Nevada City in 1960 and one taken in 2010.





While the historical ordinance has undergone some minor adjustments since its adoption in 1968, the essence of the original plan remains intact. From the beginning, the City recognized that the historic character and distinctive architecture of many buildings - and the historic district as a whole - warranted special protection.

Beginning in 1972, the downtown betterment project began to take shape within the Historical District. Although it meant a temporary inconvenience for many merchants and residents, the long-term positive effects would eventually outweigh the temporary disruption.

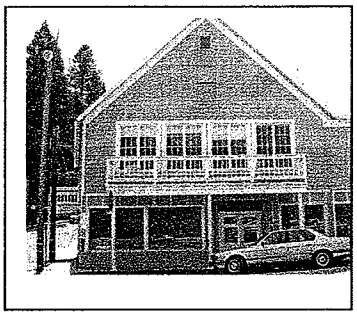
Soon, Broad Street began to look different. Dramatic changes were about to take place and the community's willingness to accept the changes played an important role in helping everyone get through a difficult period.

By implementing the Historical Ordinance, and proceeding with a downtown betterment project that eventually brought over ten million dollars in grant funds to the City, community leaders were affirming their belief that downtown was of great historic significance and was worth preserving. In fact, such preservation was essential to the town's economic and cultural stability.

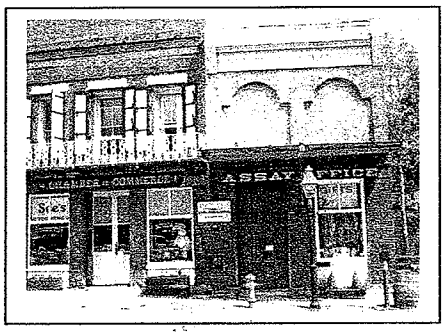
The City Council and Planning Commission noted that to permit a departure from the established type of architecture in the construction of new buildings or in the alteration of existing buildings within the historical district, or to permit the uncontrolled use of advertising signs, would be detrimental and would tend to depreciate the value of all property within the district.

The special character or special historical or aesthetic value of downtown buildings required protective measures to ensure that future generations would be able to enjoy the unique design features that make up what we now refer to as mother lode type architecture.

In stating its purpose of preserving the historical and aesthetic values of the historic district, the Historical Ordinance listed 19 places and buildings as examples of important historical exhibits and unique architectural specimens remaining in 1968 that were symbolic of the City's historical past as a mining town during the days of the California gold rush and thereafter. Below are photographs of those buildings (larger photographs of designated buildings are available for review at City Hall).

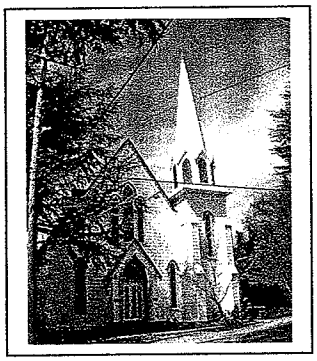


1. The Plaza
   101 Broad St

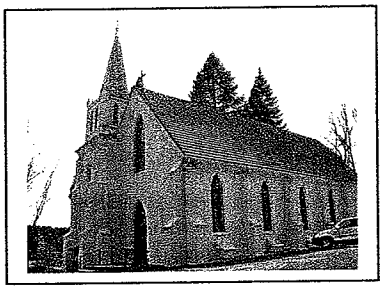


2. Ott's Assay Office
   132 Main St

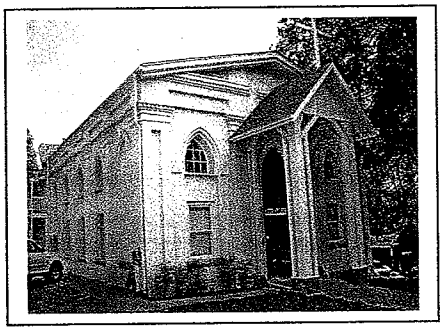
3. Methodist Church
   433Broad St



4. Trinity Episcopal
226 Nevada St



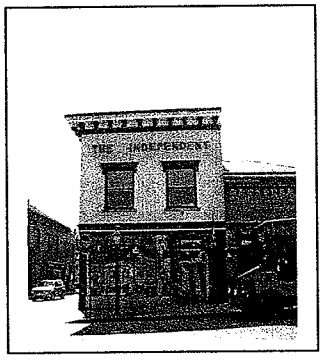
5. St Canice Catholic Church
317 Washington St



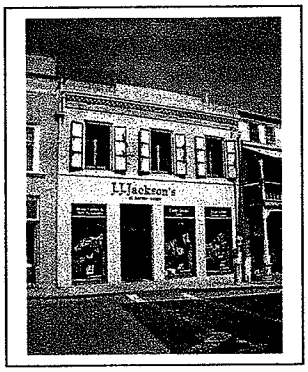
6. Baptist Church
300 Main St

7. New York Hotel
408/410 Broad St

8. Nugget Building
318 Broad St

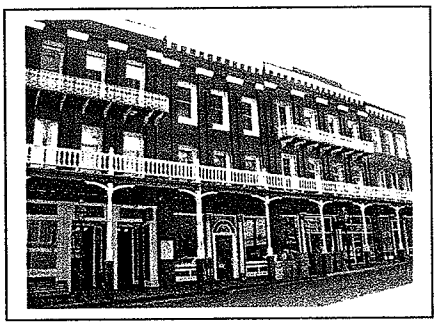


9. Union Building
301 Broad St

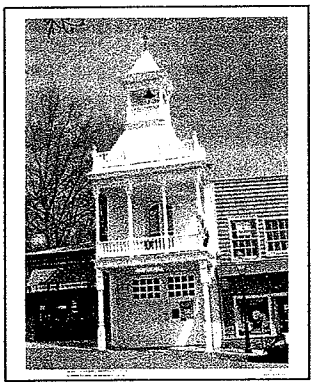


10. Osborn & Woods Bldg
244 Commercial St

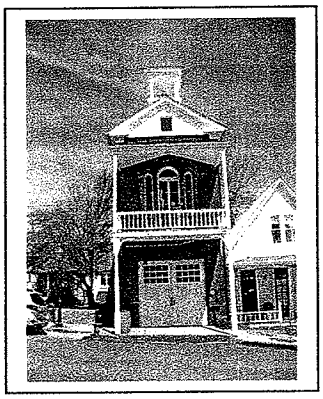
11. Old Chinese Laundry
312 Commercial St



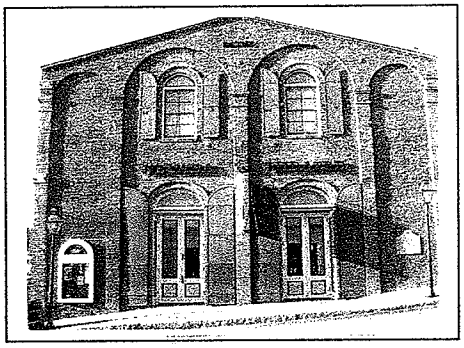
12. National Hotel
211 Broad St



13. Firehouse No. 1
214 Main Street

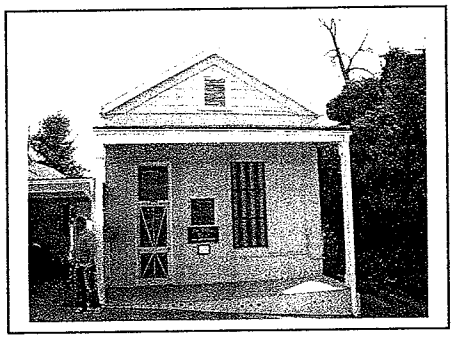


14. Firehouse No. 2
422 Broad St



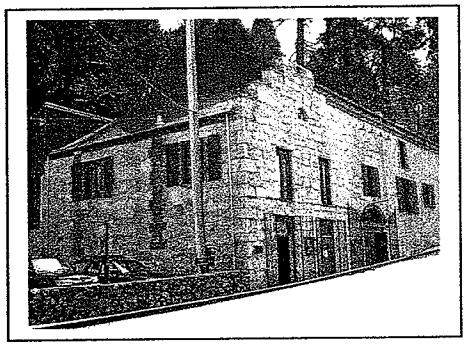
15. Nevada Theatre
401 Broad St

16. Masonic Temple
    110 No. Pine St



17. Searls Bldg
    214 Church St

18. The Red Castle
    107 Prospect St



19. The Old Brewery
    107 Sacramento St

It is a mixture of different but compatible architecture and signage that has evolved over the years that contributes to the historic character and distinctive architecture within the historic district of Nevada City.

It is important to note that these guidelines are advisory only. One of the essential elements which define the Nevada City Historical District is the high degree of compatibility among the visual elements and the architectural relationship. Most buildings have retained much of their original integrity and are largely intact as originally constructed. The basic aim of these guidelines is to encourage the retention and rehabilitation of those elements which constitute the historical and architectural character of the District, and meeting the definition of Mother Lode architecture, while accommodating reasonable changes to allow new use and building upgrading.

SIGNAGE

Signs are a secondary design element to the building they are placed on and/or the surroundings they are placed within. When designing signs within the Historic District, the signs must fit within the environment. Signs have the ability to enhance, or detract from the qualities of designed architecture and environment.

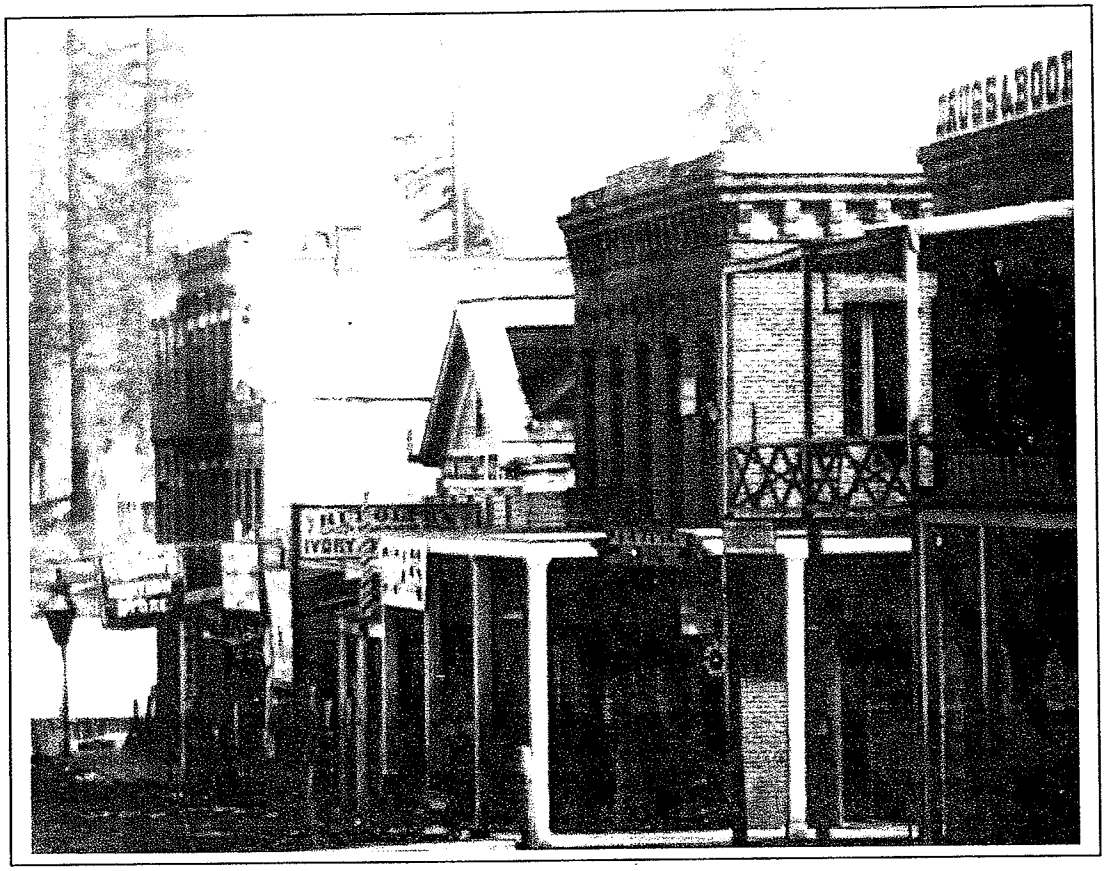
The following sign guidelines are provided for proposed signage within the "HD" Historical District of Nevada City. These standards also apply to any signage within the "OP" Office and Professional zoning district. Signs outside of these districts are approved by the City Planner and usually do not require design review.

The Planning Commission is the authority to approve signage in the Historical District. The Commission meets monthly and a Historic District Sign Application, along with color copies of the proposed signage and color chips, are required to be submitted to the City Planner. The City Planner will schedule the matter at the next available meeting and provide a staff report to the Planning Commission. The application forms are available at City Hall or on the City's website at *nevadacityca.gov* (Planning Department page).

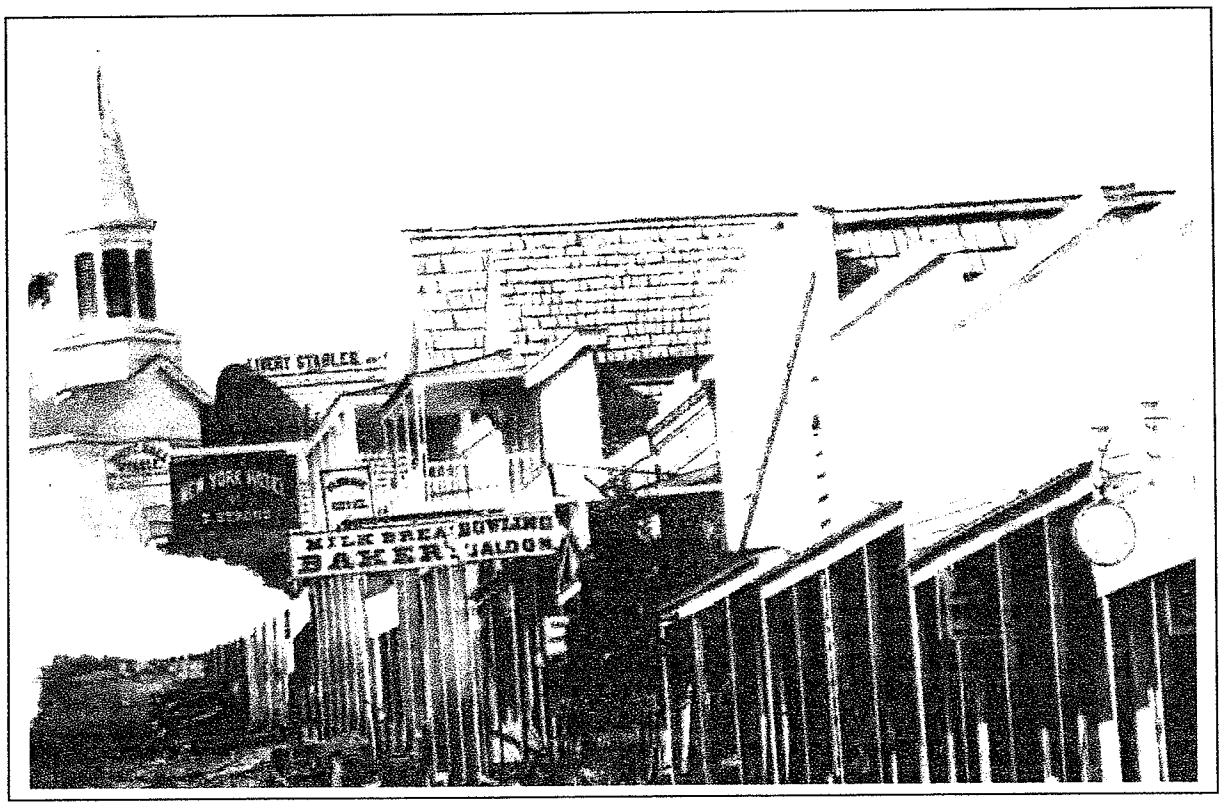
Signs and exterior lighting must meet all applicable provisions of the Nevada City Municipal Code. The City Planner will be happy to work with you to explain sign regulations and procedures. All exterior signs within the Historic District and within the "OP" Office and Professional zoning district are also subject to design review for compatibility. These Guidelines are intended to provide advisory assistance in the form of concepts, techniques and illustrations for sign design. They are intended to provide a range of design options that may satisfy policy objectives rather than prescribe specific design solutions. These Guidelines should be used and interpreted with some flexibility in their application to specific sites and projects, keeping in mind the overall objective of maintaining and preserving the Mother Lode appearance of the Historic District.

The statutory test for sign approval is whether the sign is, as to its exterior appearance, compatible with the Mother Lode type of architecture, which is defined as *"that type of architecture generally used in the Mother Lode region of the state of California during the period from 1849 and 1900... ".*

On the following pages are photographs of Nevada City during the Mother Lode era as defined above. The full size photographs are available for review at City Hall. Photographs are provided by Searls Historical Library.



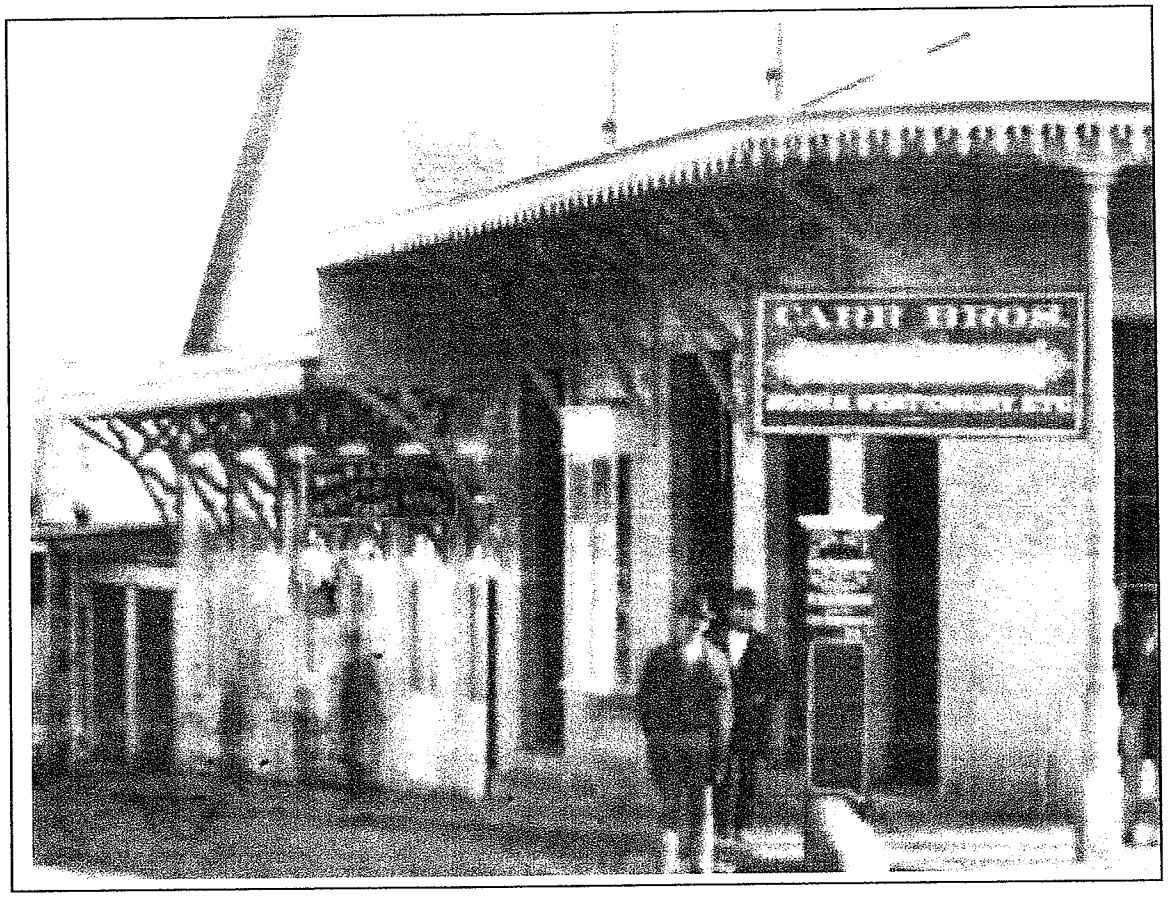
Broad Street 1857



Broad Street – 1857 Note business symbol of watch for "Hartung's Jeweler"

Broad Street – 1890 *See enlargement of photo below*

Enlargement to show various lettering styles



Corner of Broad and South Pine Streets - pre-1893

Broad Street – 1900 (Note car on roof as creative signage and stand-alone "S" sign in foreground)

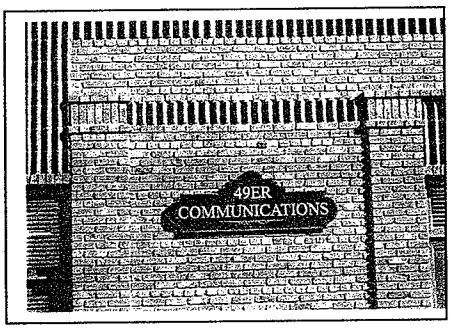
SIZE
In addition to complying with the size requirements and restrictions in the Municipal Code, the following considerations may be helpful.

Even though the ordinance permits up to 24 square feet per sign, the Planning Commission reviews the sign design to the scale of the building. Several signs approved in the past are significantly less than 24 square feet and result in effective and historical signage.

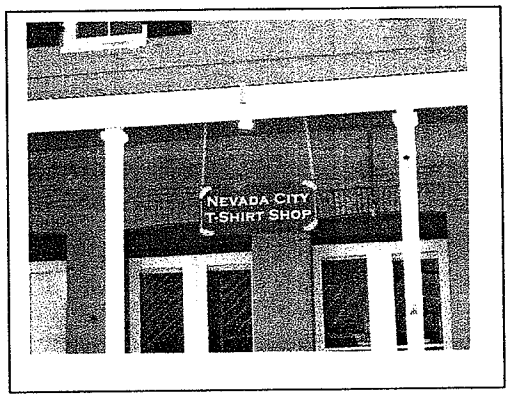
The City Council, in 1987, clarified the zoning ordinance as to signage relative to building entrances and they unanimously voted "that each public entrance on each street may have 24 square feet of signage. Multiple businesses would share the 24 square feet and the design must be located on the side of the business entrance."

PLACEMENT
Signs shall be affixed to a building, unless the building is unique and set back from a reasonable view, in which case the sign can be approved in another location by the Planning Commission.

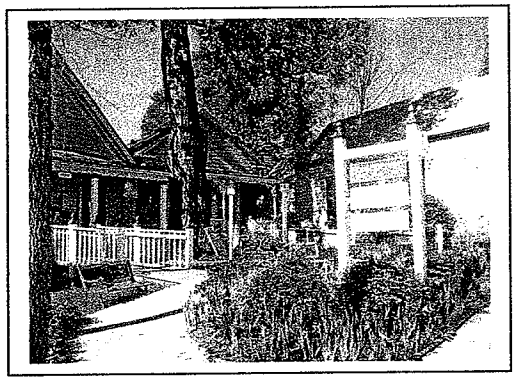
Examples of sign placement



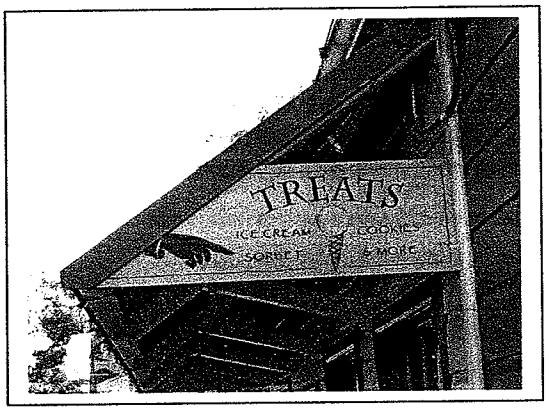
Sign on Building



Sign above sidewalk



Signage for building that is setback



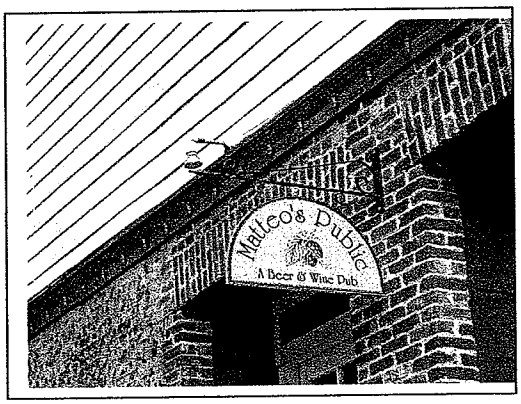
Sign under roofline

LIGHTING

The dependence on gaslights as the primary downtown illumination, combined with indirect lighting for business signs, creates a look and feel that separates Nevada City from other communities. A walk down Broad Street in the evening will confirm the reasonableness and need for sign regulations.

Indirect lighting of signage is permitted and exterior lighting fixtures should be compatible with the Mother Lode era, and be down-directed and shielded. Any lighting proposed with signage should be included in the application. Small Christmas tree lights are encouraged during the holiday season but, for safety reasons, are required to be removed by mid-January.

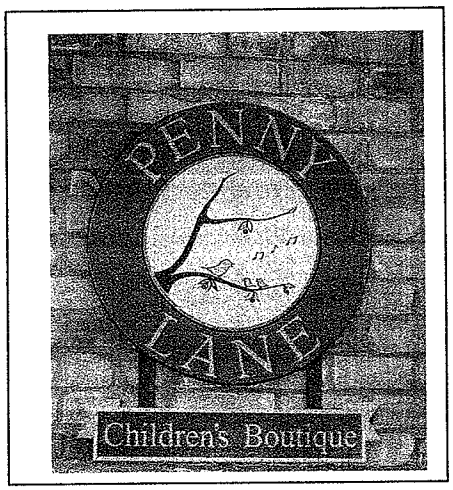
Indirect lighting



DESIGN ELEMENTS

Shape

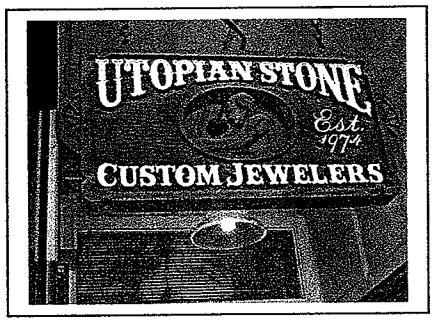
When determining sign size for individually raised letters on a building surface, or when the sign includes some irregular design, the square footage is determined by "creating the smallest imaginary rectangle, which can fully contain the letters and design." Below are examples of signs that are irregular in size and subject to the aforementioned method of measurement:

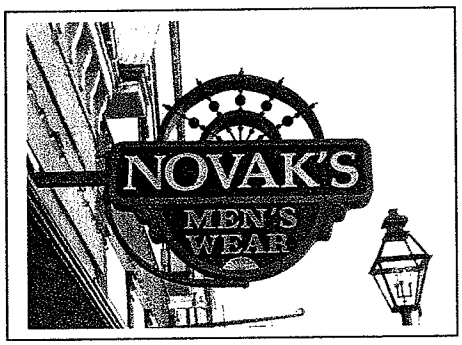


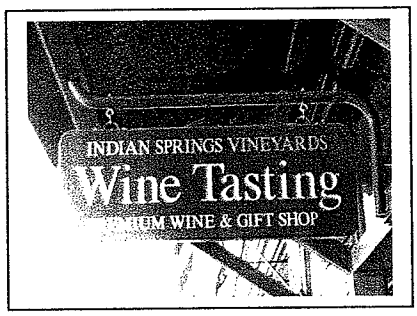
Materials

The majority of signs in the downtown area are constructed of wood and painted. However, several carved signs exist in the downtown area as carving of signs would most likely have been found during the 1849 to 1900 era.

Pictures of carved signage:





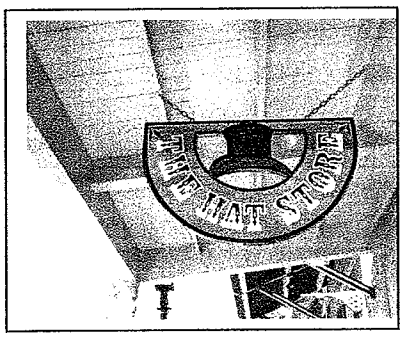


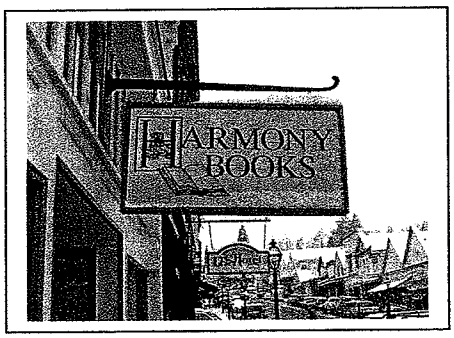
Colors

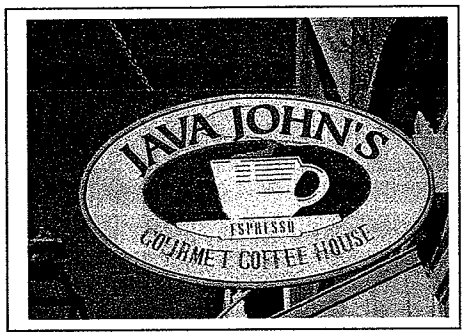
Several signs have been approved with colors taken from the Benjamin Moore Historical Color Collection as these colors have been deemed to be compatible with Mother Lode era architecture, and they do not detract from the Historic District's overall appearance. A copy of this collection is available at City Hall for review. Colors do not have to be chosen from this specific palette. However, if an applicant finds a similar color or chooses a color not on this palette, then color chips will be required to be submitted with the application.

Graphics

Signage in the 19th century was very basic, and often included easily understood symbols. Attorneys, pharmacists, barbers, and others included objects of their signs and on the side of their buildings that reflected their professions. Such graphics are now referred to as historic "business symbols" and examples are listed below.



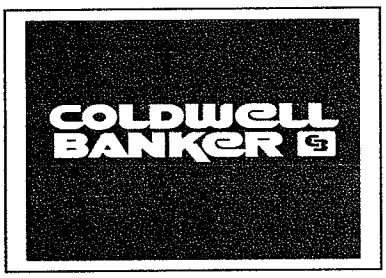


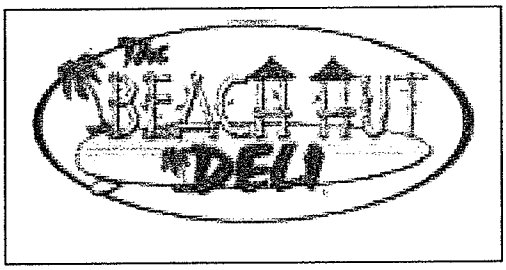


New signs should emulate and be compatible with the design elements of those historic signs so as to retain and protect the cohesive mining town appearance of the Historic District. The question to be asked is ***"Would it fit in or would it stand out as being out of place?"***

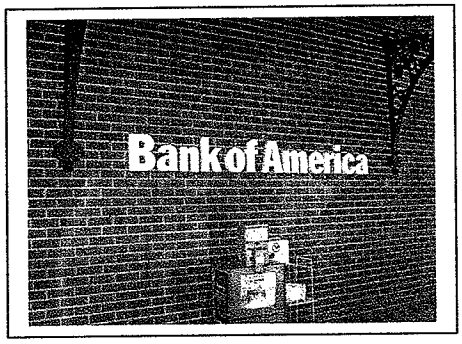
The Planning Commission has appreciated how corporate businesses have modified their signs to conform to the City's Historical District standards. Below are such examples:

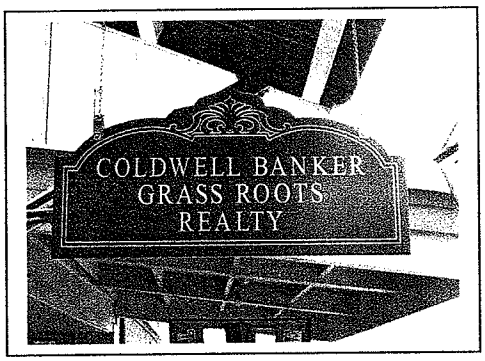
BUSINESS:

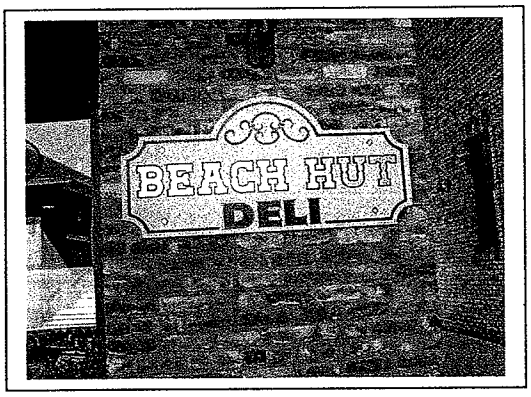




NEVADA CITY APPROVED:







Lettering Styles

The Planning Commission has selected some basic lettering styles which typically were used during the Mother Lode era (1849-1900). **These examples are provided for informational purposes only and applicants are not required to select a lettering style from this list.**

AbileneFLF

ABC ABC 123

Blackwoodcastle

ABC abc 123

URWWoodTypD

ABC ABC 123

Gismonda

ABC abc 123

True Golden

ABC abc

Belwe Bd BT

ABC abc 123

Belwe Cn BT

ABC abc 123

Benguiat-Lite

ABC abc 123

Benguiat-Bold

ABC abc 123

AArdvark Cafe

ABC abc 123

New Yorker

ABC ABC 123

Exotic 350 DmBd BT

ABC abc 123

Exotic 350 Bd BT

ABC abc 123

Exotic 350 Lt BT

ABC abc 123

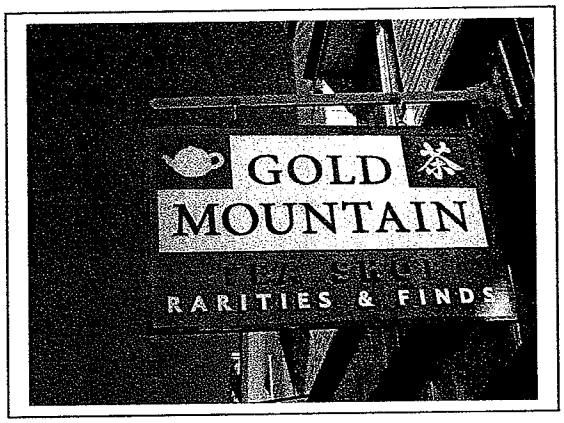
OneWorldOneFuture

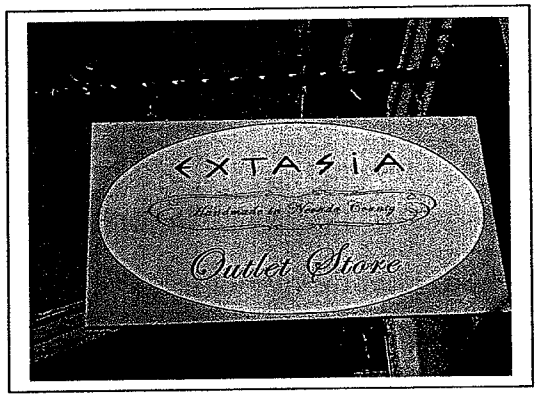
ABC ABC 123

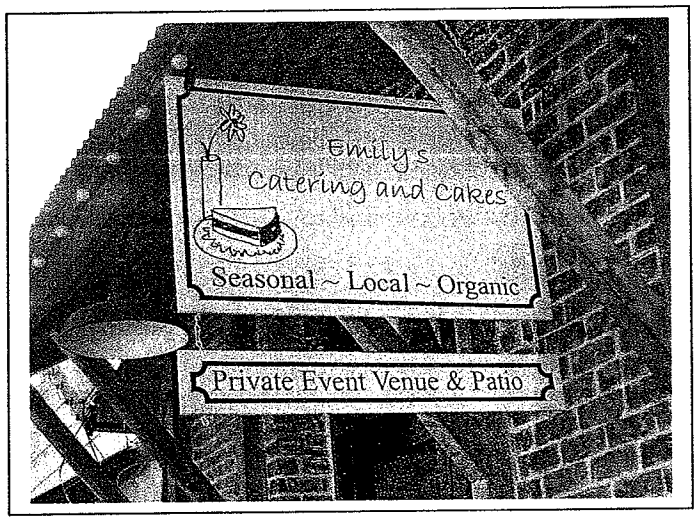
Bernhard Bold Condensed

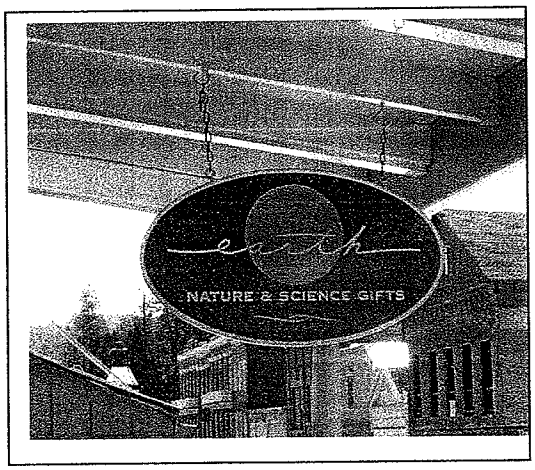
ABC abc 123

Modern lettering styles are discouraged. However, the Planning Commission also encourages creativity and acknowledges current businesses' sign needs while still conforming to the Mother Lode era styles. Below are various signs that were approved because of their simplicity, colors, and how the sign complemented the building's architecture.







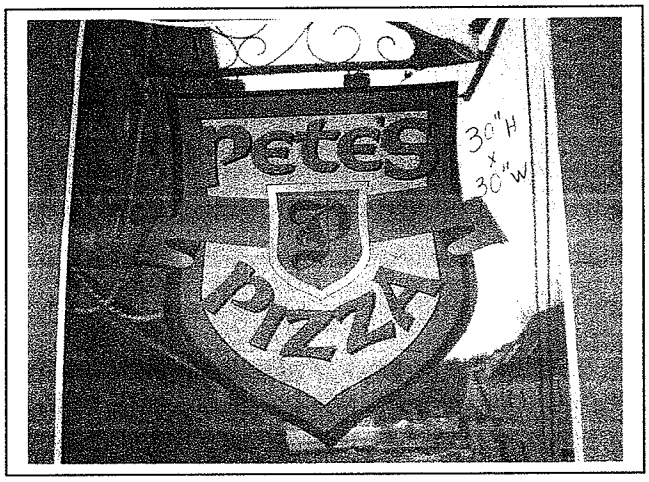


EXAMPLES OF SIGNAGE REVISED BY THE COMMISSION

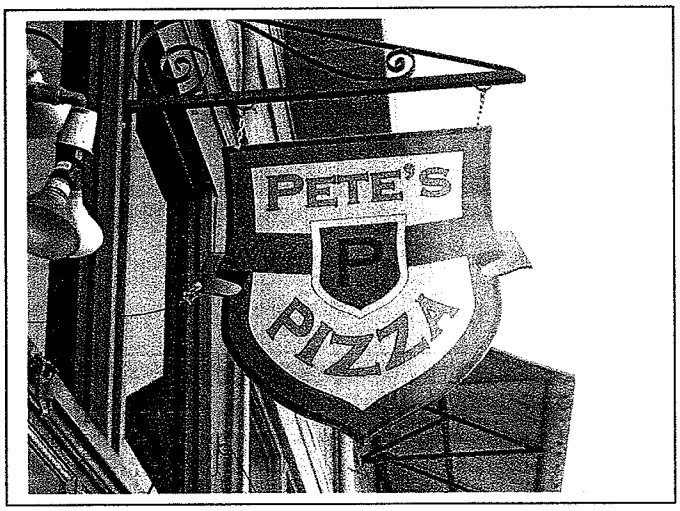
The Planning Commission works with the applicants to ensure proposed signage is in compliance with the with the Historical District standards. Below are two examples of signage that show how the Commission assisted in ensuring the Historical District standards are met:

1. ***Stik-It Kabob Restaurant*** – The picture on the left is the applicant's first submittal and the picture on the right is the final approved sign. The approved sign includes a business symbol of the 'kabob' being incorporated into the sign and the lettering is a more traditional (and less modern).

Another example of a sign approved by the Commission for a pizza shop is below. On the left is the applicant's submittal. The Commission approved the modified sign on the right which reflects more traditional lettering and the addition of the wording "Nevada City" on the banner, and the colors are less bright.



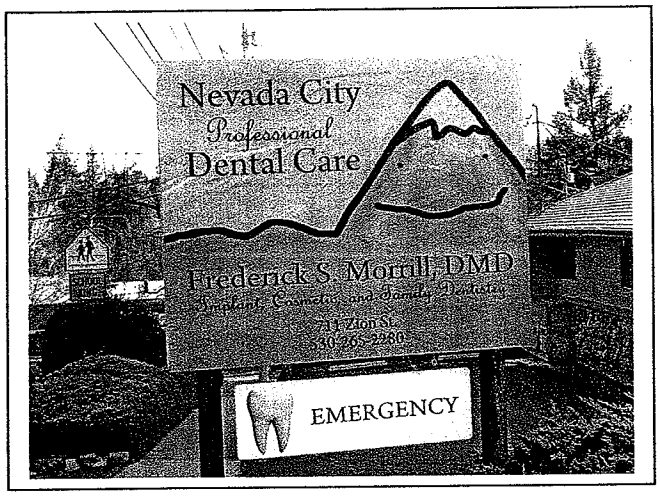
First Submittal



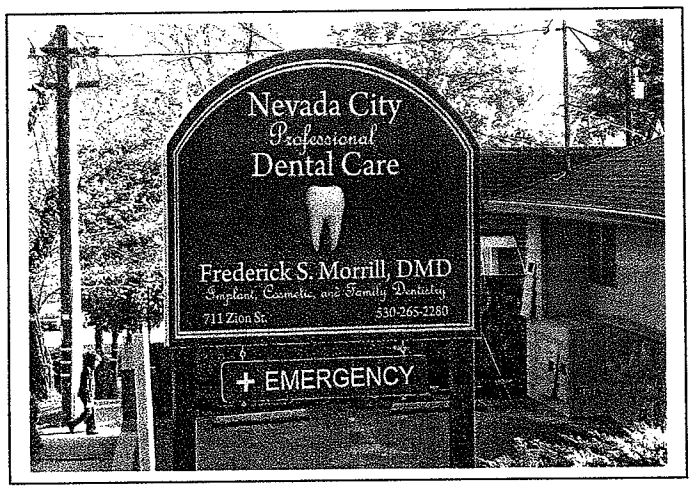
Approved Sign

SIGNAGE OUTSIDE HISTORICAL DISTRICT IN 'OP' ZONE

The sign regulations for businesses within the "OP" Office and Professional Zoning District are the same as for the Historical District. The following sign for a dentist underwent revisions, and the final result is a perfect example of how to incorporate a business symbol into a sign and also a great example of Nevada City signage:



First submittal



Approved sign