Grinnell was founded in 1854 by Josiah B. Grinnell. Legend has it he was the person whom Horace Greeley was speaking when he said “Go West, young man!” Grinnell learned that the railroads would intersect here and established a community. The downtown developed initially along the east-west railroad and gradually moved to the north.

Route Scout: Grinnell Convention & Visitors Bureau  
Distance: 0.5 miles

1. Merchants National Bank  
833 4th Avenue  
Built in 1914, this building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. Louis Sullivan, legendary American architect and mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright, designed the bank. It is one of eight “jewel box banks” that Sullivan built in the Midwest. The building remained a bank, under various names, until 1999. It is now home to the Visitor Center and Chamber of Commerce.

2. The Phoenix Block  
Broad Street between Commercial & Fourth Avenues  
A fire started on this block at noon on June 12, 1889, while the downtown was deserted for dinner. There was a strong wind that day and most of the buildings were wood framed. Business owners raced downtown to save what they could. Businesses sold their goods in small wooden shanties in Central Park while the block was re-built. The block that rose out of the ashes of the fire became known as the “Phoenix Block.”

Buildings on this block have been wonderfully maintained. The building on the south corner of the block along Commercial Avenue was once city hall. It was also home to Merchants National Bank before Louis Sullivan was brought to town. Next door is the Proctor Building which was a jewelry store at the time.

3. Stewart Library Building  
(Grinnell Arts Center)  
926 Broad Street  
Joel Stewart, a local farmer, banker and state legislator funded this building. Originally the library, it is now the Grinnell Arts Center. Look across the street at the white stone buildings. They were built following the second major fire in Grinnell. This fire, in 1891, wiped out much of this block north of 4th Avenue. These buildings marked a significant northward movement away from the railroad tracks.

4. Old Grinnell Register Building  
937 Broad Street  
Once upon a time, Grinnell had two newspapers—the Herald and the Register. They merged in 1936. This was the home of the Register, and the building dates back to 1914. The owner of the paper had an apartment upstairs for his family. This building has similarities to Merchants National Bank down the street, which was built that same year.
5. McNally's Foods
1026 Main Street
This building was originally a Ford dealership. Built in 1920, it is a good example of an early showroom, service and parts business. This is among the best-preserved auto showrooms in the area. The art deco “winged wheels” are meant to project an appearance of prosperity. They allude to the Greek god of speed and commerce, Mercury. McNally's Foods, an iconic downtown business since 1902, moved into this building in 2013. There are historic photos displayed inside.

6. Masonic Temple Building
928 Main Street
Built in 1917, this is one of a number of buildings downtown that show the prominence of fraternal organizations at the turn of the century. The Masons needed a revenue source to keep up the building, so they built street-level retail space to rent to tenants. The two terra cotta globes symbolize the terrestrial world and celestial world.

7. Victor Appliance & Mattress
913 Main Street
This is another early 1900s building that was built for commercial purposes. The second floor was once used for laborers who would come into Grinnell from the country to work at the Glove Factory, Spaulding Factory or other manufacturers. Workers would rent a bed and a night table during the week and go home on the weekends. There were 20-30 units for rent on the second floor.

8. Fourth Avenue Block Between Main & Broad Streets
The north side of this block features commercial buildings with retail storefronts at street level and apartments above. These buildings were built between 1875 and 1890. The oldest commercial building in the downtown is at 807 4th Avenue.