

TRAVEL



A family from Indiana explores Ashtabula Harbor on Hydrobikes. The harbor is the focus of one of Northeast Ohio's newest and most unexpected tourism destinations. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

ASHTABULA

From industrial powerhouse to tourist draw: 24 hours in the fun, funky Bridge Street district

More than a decade ago, business and community leaders brainstormed a way to reinvent the waterfront, then vacant and polluted.

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ASHTABULA — Paddling through ripples on the Ashtabula River, it occurred to me: Not too long ago, this would not have been possible.

The river was too dirty, the port too tough. And certainly, no one was renting tandem kayaks for \$40 an hour to visiting tourists.

Fast forward to 2022, and this waterfront destination — where the Ashtabula River meets Lake Erie — has become one of Northeast Ohio's most unexpected tourism success stories, with trendy restaurants, upscale retail, and a boutique hotel on the way.

It didn't happen by accident.

More than a decade ago, a group of local business and community leaders got together to brainstorm ways to reinvent Ashtabula's waterfront, which once was one of the busiest industrial ports in the Great Lakes. Industry had mostly pulled out of the small town, leaving a polluted river and blocks of vacant storefronts.

"It was nothing but bars and buildings that weren't being used," said Brandon Hart, who started Harbor Yak boat rentals on the river in 2017. "No one really spent time here. It took a couple of good restaurants to open, then some shops and more restaurants. Now there's not really any place that's not being used."

Among the occupants: brewery, coffee house, ice cream shop and speakeasy. There are shops selling art and kitchenware, gourmet popcorn and chocolate. There's even a restaurant that only serves fried chicken sandwiches (and they're fantastic).

And the river? Last year, after decades of clean-up efforts, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency removed the Ashtabula River from its list of most polluted Great Lakes tributaries (the EPA's so-called "areas of concern").

"It has been an extraordinary success," said Toni Carlisle, of the community effort to turn around the harbor district and make it into a tourist draw.

She and her husband, Ren Carlisle,



Ashtabula's historic lift bridge, constructed in 1925 and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.



Outdoor dining at Briquettes, one of numerous eateries in the harbor district.



Michael Cahill Bed and Breakfast in Ashtabula.

were among the early adopters, opening Carlisle's Home in the Harbor gift shop on Bridge Street in 2002, hoping to spark more development. And it worked.

"Over the years, we've shifted from serving locals to serving out of towners," she said.

It was all rather surprising — to me, anyway.

I'd been through Ashtabula numerous times before — en route to wineries in the area, touring the county's numerous covered bridges and overnighting at the nearby Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake. But I'd never stopped to really look around, not until this month, when I spent a full day eating, drinking and paddling my way through what has evolved into one of the region's most unique destinations.

The unlikely center of it all: a nearly century-old lift bridge, which pivots open every 30 minutes to allow boat traffic through, a popular photo op for visitors.

wanted to try were closed or had reduced hours. Rest assured, I didn't leave hungry, eating well at Rennick Meat Market, which opened in 2014 in the town's historic butcher shop, and Briquettes Smokehouse, with piled-high plates of barbecue served on a large patio overlooking the water. Lunch was terrific at both Fire! Chicken Sandwiches and Blended Smoothies and Ice Cream.

And beverages? I started the day at Harbor Perk, ended it at the 1035 Club speakeasy and enjoyed Cloven Hoof Brewing in between, with a flight of house-made brews, including a terrific IPA, coffee stout and something called Banana Baptism, which was much better than it sounds.

Before and after all that eating and drinking, I browsed the shelves at Bridge Street Art Works, filled with ceramics, jewelry, painting and more, mostly by local artists; wandered through the many temptations of Marianne's Chocolates, founded in Conneaut in 1963 and a Bridge Street staple since 2009; and chatted with the newest proprietor on the block, Gallo, who opened Harbor Gardens earlier this year, specializing in locally grown and Ohio-made food products, food demonstrations, classes and more.

The neighborhood's biggest, and likely most influential, new business is coming next spring — the new Riverbend Hotel, which had its groundbreaking in 2019, was delayed by financing issues during the pandemic, but is under construction now on Goodwill Drive, a half-block from Bridge Street. It will bring a 43-room hotel to the neighborhood, with a top-floor wine bar and views of the water.

SPENDING THE NIGHT

My bed for the night was a short walk from the harbor, at the Michael Cahill Bed and Breakfast, built in 1887, with a large front porch and four bedrooms available for overnight stays. The house, on the National Register of Historic Places, has been an inn since 1986, purchased in 2018 by Bob and Jo Anne Surbella, both Ashtabula natives.

Bob is a former executive chef for Stouffer's Top of the Town and other Cleveland restaurants; Jo Anne was a nurse and hospital administrator.

"Bob was happily retired until I surprised him with this," joked Jo Anne; he's now responsible for preparing the inn's terrific gourmet breakfasts, including the spinach quiche on the morning of my stay.

The two have witnessed their hometown's methodical evolution from an industrial focus to tourism. Industry, of course, has not gone away entirely; the harbor is still an active port, evidenced by Petmin USA's plans for a new pig-iron plant on the east side of the river.

"It's been a very slow process," said Jo Anne Surbella, of the city's transition. And it's not over yet. "I think in the next 10 years there's going to be a real shift in this community."

SEE ASHTABULA, K2

Ashtabula City Manager Jim Timonere admitted that locals and visitors have vastly different perspectives of the bridge, built in 1925 and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

"We know to avoid Bridge Street every half hour," he said, in an effort to steer clear of the inevitable traffic tie-ups. "It's something we take for granted."

EASY DAY TRIP FROM CLEVELAND

About 60 miles east of Cleveland, Ashtabula is an easy day trip for Northeast Ohioans. Spend the night, however, and you'll have enough time to check out a couple of history-focused small museums in the neighborhood, sign up for a fishing charter, stroll barefoot through the sand at Walnut Beach and rent water bikes at Harbor Yak. There's even ghost tours on select Friday evenings.

I was traveling on a Sunday and Monday, when several of the restaurants I



Sunset on Walnut Beach in Ashtabula. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

ASHTABULA

24 hours in the fun, funky Bridge Street district

Continues from K1

Indeed, recent neighborhood development features a residential component, including new townhomes on Bridge Street that opened in 2019, with more on the way. And there is talk of expanding the neighborhood east, across the lift bridge.

Not all of the city has been lifted up by the success of the harbor area, however.

The city's population, at about 18,000, continues to decline. And 30% of Ashtabula's residents live below the poverty line, according to recent Census Bureau figures, well above state and national averages.

Ashtabula's downtown — located about 3 miles south of the lift bridge — is marked by numerous vacant storefronts along Main Avenue.

Timonere, the city manager, said the downtown area presents a more significant economic development challenge than the harbor district, with larger buildings spread across a much bigger area. But several redevelopment efforts are in the works downtown, he said, including projects to rehabilitate the historic Castle Block complex and the original Carlisle's department store.

Downtown, however, lacks the one thing that makes the harbor area so special — proximity to the water.

In 2017, Brandon and Alexa Hart came up with the idea that visitors might like to get even closer to the water — on it, in fact. They started Harbor Yak rentals with a handful of kayaks and paddleboards and have expanded their fleet every year since.

The business recently moved into the old Coast Guard station on the east side of the river, and now offers 60 boats for rent, including trendy Hydrobikes and, new this year, a couple of pontoon boats.

"It was something that was needed here that nobody was doing," said Brandon Hart, a barber by trade, who still cuts hair in the offseason. "It is exceeding my expectations."



A conveyor, which once transported coal from one side of the Ashtabula River to the other, has been deactivated by Norfolk Southern Railway. The city asked the railroad to not tear down the structure because of its historic and aesthetic value to the community.

The company has also experimented with sunset tours, yoga classes and paddle-and-pints events.

My husband and I kept it simple, renting a two-person kayak on a quiet Monday morning.

Our first destination: the scenic Ashtabula Harbor Light, built in 1905, automated in 1973 and accessible only by boat.

We got close enough to inspect the seams on the steel structure, then headed east across the harbor to check out the moored MV Tecumseh, a Canadian-flagged freighter that's been in port for months, awaiting repairs. Then we paddled west again, toward an area known as kayak cove, a thin strip of water between the shore and breakwall that's perfect for small-boat exploration.

The currents here have created an almost-island, a sandy spit of land attached to the breakwall, where we

IF YOU GO: HISTORIC ASHTABULA HARBOR

For a list of restaurants, shops and activities: historicashtabulaharbor.com

Where to stay: Rooms run \$170 per night, including breakfast, at the Michael Cahill Bed and Breakfast, 1106 Walnut Blvd.; see www.cahillbb.com

docked our kayak and took a short beach walk — a true hidden gem.

We were headed back to the dock to return the kayak when I proposed one final detour — south, up the river and under the bridge.

We turned the kayak around just as the siren was sounding, alerting road traffic that the bridge was about to ascend. And I pulled out my phone and took photos.

Hotel project back on track, expected by spring

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ASHTABULA — Originally announced in 2019 but delayed by the pandemic, the new Riverbend Hotel in Ashtabula's harbor district is finally under construction, with a scheduled opening date in spring 2023.

The hotel will be larger than initially planned — five floors, instead of four, and 43 guest rooms up from 26, according to Todd Canter, an Ashtabula County native who is spearheading the project.

Canter, a former executive with LaSalle Investment Management Securities, said he approached the city back in 2018 with a desire to make a meaningful investment in the community.

City manager Jim Timonere suggested a small hotel in the city's historic harbor neighborhood, which has developed in recent years into an entertainment district, with new restaurants and retail.

"We have a lot of people who come here



Rendering of the new Riverbend Hotel, under construction in Ashtabula's harbor district.

for tourism," Canter said he was told. "But there's nowhere for them to spend the night."

That will change next year, with the first new hotel to open in the city in more

than a century.

The hotel will feature an enclosed rooftop bar, with retractable glass and steel garage-style doors that will be open during nice weather.

The hotel is being built at the corner of W. 6th Street and Goodwill Drive, a half-block from Bridge Street, with views of the Ashtabula River and historic lift bridge.

Canter, who lives in Maryland, partnered with local investors Larry Laurello of Laurello Vineyards and Pete Huggins, with Iten Industries, on the project. The development received a 10-year, 75% tax abatement from the city.

The hotel will be part of the Trademark Collection by Wyndham, a network of independent, stylish hotels.

It is the first hotel to be built in Ashtabula since 1920, when the six-story Hotel Ashtabula opened downtown. That hotel closed in 1985, and is used as a medical office.

Explore Hubbard House, maritime museum

Take a historic look at the city's role in the underground railroad, and its industrial background.

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ASHTABULA — Ashtabula's prime location on Lake Erie played a pivotal part in the city's history, from its role in the underground railroad to the industrial revolution. Two small museums near the lakefront highlight that history — the Hubbard House, where escaped slaves were sheltered en route to Canada; and the Ashtabula Maritime and Surface Transportation Museum, inside the former lighthouse keeper's house.

Both are within walking distance of the city's Bridge Street entertainment district, for those who would like to add a local history lesson to their waterfront fun.

HUBBARD HOUSE 1603 Walnut Blvd.

Built by William and Catharine Hubbard in 1841, the house was a northern terminus on the underground railroad, the vast network of safe houses that assisted escaped slaves on their way to freedom in Canada. It was known by code names Mother Hubbard's Cupboard and the Great Emporium.

When a cargo ship in Ashtabula harbor was preparing to depart for Canadian ports across Lake Erie, the slaves in hiding at the Hubbard House would make their way down Walnut Boulevard to the river, said guide Jim Spencer. "I can't tell you how many slaves came through here," he said. "They didn't keep records."

The slaves sometimes helped the Hubbards around their farm, at least until 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed by Congress, allowing for the capture and return of runaway slaves throughout the United States.

Members of the community certainly didn't object to the Hubbards' work, Spencer said. "This is abolitionist country. The only friction William would get would be coming from slave-catchers."

He added, "People in the community would give them as much misinformation as possible."

Hubbard was charged twice with breaking the law, and was fined \$5,000. "The important people he knows keep him out of jail," Spencer said.

The house passed out of the Hubbard family in the late 1870s. It faced the wrecking ball a century later, when the city of Ashtabula stepped in to save it.

Tours of the restored Greek Revival home include first- and second-floor rooms, furnished with period pieces, as well as Civil War-related exhibits. The backyard is on a bluff, overlooking Lake Erie.

Tours are by reservation only, on Saturdays and Sundays through early September. Admission is \$5. Information: hubbardhouseugrrmuseum.org

ASHTABULA MARITIME AND SURFACE TRANSPORTATION MUSEUM 1071 Walnut Blvd.

The maritime museum also occupies a prime piece of real estate, on a bluff just to the west of the harbor, with sweeping views of the river. The museum is a treasure trove of Ashtabula memorabilia, covering everything from beach glass to the city's connection to the Titanic.

The house was built in 1871 for the keeper of the Ashtabula Harbor Light, which was constructed in 1836, rebuilt in 1905 and then moved in 1916 to its current location at the entrance to Ashtabula Harbor.

Among the artifacts here: the fourth-order Fresnel lens that illuminated the lighthouse from 1915 through 1995.

The museum also offers exhibits on:

- ▶ The Ashtabula Train Disaster, one of the worst railroad accidents in U.S. history, occurred during a blizzard on Dec. 29, 1876, after a bridge over the Ashtabula River collapsed, killing 92 passengers en route from Buffalo to Cleveland.

- ▶ Hulett ore unloaders, the massive machines that transformed the steel industry in the early 20th century, invented in Conneaut and used extensively in Ashtabula Harbor through the early 1980s. The bucket from one long-dismantled Hulett is on display near the museum at adjacent Point Park.
- ▶ The pilot house from the Thomas Walters, the Great Lakes freighter built in 1911 for Cleveland's Interstate Steamship Co.

The museum is open noon-4 p.m. Friday through Monday in August, then noon-4 p.m. Saturday through Monday in September and early October (closed Labor Day).

Admission is \$9.
Information: ashtabulamaritime.org