National Register of Historic Places

Nomination Documentation

Helena West Main Street Historic District

Helena, Montana

NPS Form 10-900 | OMB Approval No. 1024-0018 | Received January 25, 1996

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NPS Form 10-900 (Rev. Oct. 1990) | OMB No. 1024-0018
United States Department of the Interior — National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Helena West Main Street Historic District
Other name/site number: (*none*)

2. Location

Street & number: 500–600 blocks of West Main Street
City/town: Helena
State: Montana | Code: 075 | County: Lewis & Clark | Code: 049 | Zip code: 59601
Not for publication: n/a | Vicinity: n/a

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title: (*signature on file*)
Date: 12-18-95
Agency: Montana State Historic Preservation Office

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official: (*blank*)
Date: (*blank*)
State or Federal agency and bureau: (*blank*)

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

☒ entered in the National Register

Signature of the Keeper: Edson M. Beall (*signature on file*)
Date of Action: 2/22/96
Status: Entered in the National Register

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private
Category of Property: District
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: n/a
Name of related multiple property listing: n/a

Number of Resources within Property

Resource Type	Contributing	Non-contributing
Buildings	19	12
Sites	6	1
Structures	4	1
Objects	1	—
TOTAL	**30**	**14**

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions	Current Functions
Domestic: Single dwelling Industry/Processing/Extraction: Extractive facility, processing site	Domestic: Single dwelling Vacant/Not In Use

7. Description

Architectural Classification	Materials
Other: Gable-Front-and-Wing Side-Gable American Four-square Gable-front	Foundation: stone, concrete Walls: wood, brick, stone, stucco Roof: wood, asphalt, metal Other: n/a

Narrative Description

The Helena West Main Street Historic District consists of 31 buildings constructed within a narrow gulch on the southern outskirts of Helena, Montana. The district consists of 19 residences, 12 outbuildings, 4 lime kilns, two associated quarry sites, 6 foundation sites and one object (a barbecue). All of the historic-age residences were constructed between circa 1870 and 1895. Most are relatively modest working class dwellings with few decorative architectural details. The historic district, moreover, is located within Grizzly and Last Chance gulches; both are narrow declivities in the Elkhorn Mountains just south of Helena. The area was originally divided into mineral claims that were later converted into homesites when the mines proved unprofitable. The rock outcrop at the southern end of the district, however, provided an excellent quality of limestone that was processed into lime for use as a building material beginning in the late 1860s. Some of the dwellings in the survey area were originally occupied by employees of the adjacent lime kilns.

Because of their origins as mining claims and the constricted nature of the landscape, the building lots are small with not much space for expansion. To maximize the space allotted to them, builders in the district like Henry Hay, Ben Benson, Joseph O'Neill, William Fenn and Malcolm Boardman constructed their residences and outbuildings with the rear elevations dug into the hillsides. The four lime kilns are also constructed in this manner. Consequently, there are only three dwellings with full rear ground floor elevations (585, 639 and 668 ½ West Main).

Because of the working class occupations of the district's original inhabitants, the architectural styles in the area are relatively unpretentious. Most (63%) rest on rubblestone foundations; the stone was acquired from quarries in the adjacent hills surrounding the district. Eleven of the residences have walls composed of brick or brick veneer. The area's origins as a mining district are reflected in the presence of three log cabins (753, 620, and 668 ½ West Main) that were constructed in the 1870s and early 1880s when mining was a factor in the district's development.

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About 32% of the residences in the district can be classified as Side-gable dwellings (551, 573, 589, 664, 668 and 696 West Main). Other styles include Gable-front (585, 620, 610 and 630 West Main), Gable Front-and-Wing (574, 595, and 684 West Main) and American Four-Square (599 West Main). All except 599 West Main have gable roofs and most (57%) have brick or brick veneer walls, segmental window arches and rubblestone foundations. All but two of the residences in the district were constructed between about 1875 and 1890 (562 and 639 West Main). About one third of the twelve outbuildings consist of garages; others are a barn (684 West Main), a mother-in-law residence (also 684 West Main) and sheds. The function of one outbuilding at 562 West Main has, as yet, eluded identification.

Other buildings in the district include a garage converted into a residence (571 West Main), a Gable-front shop complex constructed in 1937 and a modern residence constructed in 1967 (the first home built in the district since about 1895). The dwelling at 562 West Main utilized a portion of an older home's foundation when it was reconstructed in the 1980s. The original dwelling was constructed circa 1887. The garage-storage facility at 590 and 596 West Main constructed by a local resident is stylistically compatible to the older structures in the historic district.

That the Helena West Main Historic District was once more developed is demonstrated by the presence of five foundation sites. Four are associated with existing historic properties (589, 610 and 630 West Main). The foundation adjacent to 630 West Main is the significant remains of a livery stable that operated from the 1870s to the 1890s. The site has slowly deteriorated leaving only one rubblestone wall pierced by arched windows. 589 and 610 West Main include foundations that once supported small chicken coops and other associated domestic outbuildings. The non-contributing foundation site consists of two poured concrete foundations located at 694 West Main that were constructed between 1910 and 1930. Today (1995) the foundation site is filled with wood debris (presumably from a razed superstructure) and by assorted metal debris including pull-tab beer cans dating to the 1960s. Nothing could be discovered as to its appearance, function or historic association and it therefore does not contribute to the historic district.

A barbecue with an oven and grill is associated with the Hay Homestead at 684 West Main. Henry Hay and his sons hauled the rocks from Montana City in the 1920s and constructed it themselves. Because this barbecue was constructed by the original homesteader, Henry Hay, with the help of his sons, it is an integral part of the homestead complex and even though constructed at a later time, it is a contributing element in the historic district.

Four lime kilns, the remnants of a possible fifth kiln and two quarries are located on the southeasterly-facing hillside of grass and rock on the west side of the road at the district's southern end. The lime produced in the kilns at Grizzly Gulch was used to construct many of Helena's substantial commercial blocks, residences and west side mansions in the late 19th century. The earliest kilns were constructed by Joseph O'Neill in the late 1860s, and subsequent kilns were added as late as 1885. Constructed of native limestone and granite, the four kilns are approximately 40 feet high and measure about 20 feet wide by 18 feet deep. The walls are four to five feet thick and are lined inside with firebrick. (The firebrick was imported from St. Louis at a cost of a dollar a brick.) On the north and south sides of each structure are fireholes for stoking the kilns. On the front, or east sides, are openings leading into an attached "cooling shed," where the chunks of processed lime were cooled. Each cooling shed measured about 18'×18'×10' high with a board gable roof and was also constructed of native limestone, granite or wood. Although it can be inferred that the fifth structure was a kiln, the remains (a partial corner wall only) are insufficient to allow it to contribute to the district.

The design of the kilns is similar to that displayed by other local kilns constructed at approximately the same time. Although later owned by James Kervin and James and Neil McKelvey at the turn of the century, the design of the lime kilns has not been modified and they remain excellent representatives of this type of industrial architecture.

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8. Statement of Significance

Field	Value
Applicable National Register Criteria	A, C
Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)	n/a
Significant Person(s)	n/a
Cultural Affiliation	n/a
Areas of Significance	Architecture; Industry; Exploration/Settlement
Period(s) of Significance	1870–1905
Significant Dates	1870, 1887, 1895
Architect/Builder	Joseph O'Neill; Ben Benson; Malcolm Boardman; William Fenn; Henry Hay

Narrative Statement of Significance

A well preserved collection of late nineteenth century houses, cabins, stone lime kilns and foundation remains line the narrow, crooked course of West Main Street as it wends up Grizzly Gulch at the southern edge of Helena. More than any other part of the city, the West Main Street Historic District has the capacity to evoke clear feelings and associations with the earliest phases of the town's development as a frontier mining camp. Several factors give this neighborhood a character distinct from other modest, working class sections of Helena. The physical links between the settlement of Helena and the ceaseless efforts of historic miners to fully exploit the area's mineral potential are clearly apparent. Virtually all dwellings within the West Main Street Historic District were built on actual mining claims, and most residents continued to dabble in placer mining literally in their backyards throughout the historic period. The residents' direct association with the area's natural resources is further illustrated by the practice of builders who used the steep walls of the narrow gulch to advantage by incorporating exposed surface bedrock as the back and sometimes side walls of building foundations. The practice of building directly into the hillsides is found in other sections of Helena, but not as consistently as in the West Main Street District. The close proximity of Helena's vital lime kiln industry adds a significant dimension to the district's individuality, with four major stone lime kilns standing largely intact at the southern end of the district and the two limestone quarries scoured directly on the hillside above. The social history of the West Main Street neighborhood also bolsters the strong sense of continuity with the historic period. Early immigrant families brought their distinctive ethnic traditions to the area and remained resident in the district for three or four generations, as was the norm in Old World communities. In short, all of the factors that characterize the West Main Street neighborhood also define early Helena: obsessive mining, booming industrial development, and an influx of diverse immigrant settlers. The historic identity of this district rests with the fact that the area has remained largely unmolested by modern development while its close proximity to the center of the city allowed easy access to employment for the many service providers who populated and sustained the neighborhood.

Historical Significance

The Helena West Main Street Historic District is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with the late 19th century settlement and industrial development of Helena, Montana. The area is highly significant not only on a neighborhood level but also as a very important reminder of the early historic period in the establishment of Helena on the Western mining frontier and the growth of important, sustaining industries that allowed the city to continue to grow after the placers played out. Most of the residents of the district were occupied in the support industries that were essential to the continued prosperity of Helena.

After gold was discovered along Last Chance Gulch in the summer of 1864, miners immediately staked claims up and down the narrow gulch. Soon there were no more profitable claims, as Joseph O'Neill discovered the following winter. He, like many of the earliest West Main settlers, had to be content with second-rate placers that were initially fairly profitable, but finally not as lucrative as other means of livelihood in the soon-to-be town of Helena. O'Neill was able to turn enough profit from his claim at St. Louis Gulch to invest in a freighting business and, when he settled down on West Main a few years later it was not to mine, but to take advantage of the rich lime deposits a short way up Grizzly Gulch. Helena was still a mining camp, but it had the makings of a permanent settlement. By the early 1870s, a building boom had assured O'Neill of a market for the product of his lime business.

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The Bensons and the Hays were among the early families to join Eliza and Joe O'Neill on West Main Street. Both Ben Benson and Henry Hay were miners first, but turned to other, more profitable business pursuits. Both Hay and Benson, and another neighbor (one of the Poads who lived to the north on West Main) realized the potential in supplying growing Helena with water and in the early 1870s formed the New Water Company which operated until 1888. At that time the city bought these and other local water rights. Ben Benson went into the fuel business, as did Henry Hay, supplying early Helenans with plenty of wood, not only for the cold Montana winters but for industrial and many other household purposes year-round.

With the exception of Joe O'Neill, who was born in Massachusetts, Eliza O'Neill, Anna and Ben Benson, and Alice and Henry Hay were all foreign-born immigrants. Eliza was Canadian, the Bensons Swedish and German, and the Hays English. They had in common the desire to settle in a new place, make the best of their new homes and build a solid foundation for their children. Evidence of the self-sufficiency of these West Main settlers can be read today in the homes and the remains of the outbuildings scattered about the various properties. Homes that these early residents built were mostly log, frame and stone as brick was not yet readily available. The practice of building into the natural hillside originated with miners like these and every successive builder on West Main followed the practice. No doubt the rooms so built were cool and even-tempered in all seasons, allowing excellent natural storage for perishable goods.

West Main's development largely paralleled that of Helena's other modest neighborhoods in that many residents were miners first and then went on to other ventures. Historically there were no merchants or professional people among the early West Main residents, but rather miners-turned-self-employed service providers and laborers. During the 1880s, the number of West Main householders grew. Some of these were second generation West Main Streeters like Katie Reiss whose father, August Fowler, had opened Helena's first meat market back in the mid-1860s and who had grown up in the 400 block of West Main. There were also the Hay brothers who were teamsters for their father's wood business and the McKelvey boys who worked at the lime kilns.

Building on West Main during the later 1870s and early 1880s mirrors Helena's modest neighborhoods with the availability of brick becoming apparent. The rapid refinement of transportation modes, especially the coming of the railroad in 1883, had a direct effect on West Main in that Joe O'Neill's livery business grew by leaps and bounds, providing passengers quick conveyance between the depot and town. Many of his animals were stabled at his West Main facility and his carriages and hacks were also stored there.

The practice of residents dabbling in mining while working another job and/or being service-providers/laborers continued in the later 1880s and into the 1890s with men like Conrad Reiss (a miner/carpenter), William Fenn (a miner/boilermaker), John Schopfer (a carpenter, cooper and laborer), Flora Schopfer (a midwife), the Beaver brothers (blacksmiths) and Thomas Nagle (lime kiln worker). There were also, however, a few residents like Malcolm Boardman who persisted in listing always his profession as "miner." The vast majority of West Main residents at this time were either immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany, England or Ireland or second generation Main Street residents and children of immigrants from these areas.

The lime kilns and quarries at the south end of the historic neighborhood provided a prosperous livelihood for several of the most prominent West Main families. The kilns loom at the foot of Grizzly Gulch much as they did over a century ago, symbolizing the growth and subsequent building boom of the earliest permanent settlement as well as the building boom Helena experienced in the 1880s. The lime that resulted from the burning of the limestone quarried from the hillside above the kilns provided the basic component of the mortar and plaster that holds many of the city's historic buildings together. The first lime kilns in the district were put into operation during the late 1860s and early 1870s, and the industry experienced a second boom period shortly after the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1883 as the economy of the community expanded to meet the demands caused by easier access to regional and national markets. The rise and fall in the operation of the lime kilns coincided with the citywide building booms that characterized the historic period.

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The lime kiln business, begun by Joseph O'Neill and carried on by James Kervin and the McKelveys into the twentieth century, utilized "live" kilns, meaning that production ran on a 24-hour basis. Limestone was blasted from the quarries above the kilns and conveyed in hand cars to the top of the kilns and dumped in. Wood was burned in the two fireholes at the base. After eight hours of burning, which forced impurities out of the limestone, the fires were allowed to die down. As the rock cooled, it would contract and fall; it was then drawn into the cooling shed and piled ready for shipment. One kiln could produce approximately 20 tons of lime every eight hours.

The advent of economic depression in 1893 slowed the lime processing in the district as no substantial building programs were then being conducted in Helena. The exception was the building of the state capitol at the turn of the century. The lime for that building came from the McKelvey kilns. The end of the building boom coincided with the end of West Main's prosperity as its inhabitants looked elsewhere for work. Competition with Elliston Lime eventually forced the McKelvey concern to shut down. The McKelveys had to transport their lime to the railroad by horse and wagon, whereas Elliston, convenient to a railroad siding, did not have this extra expense. By 1900 Joseph O'Neill had abandoned his once-thriving livery business and moved to Lewistown. Through the 'teens, '20s and '30s, the West Main area remained a stable neighborhood, with the same families and their children or extended families still occupying the same homes. Today the Helena West Main Historic District remains largely a working class neighborhood.

Architectural Significance

The West Main Street Historic District is also eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C. The residences located within the district are modest, vernacular dwellings. The buildings are composed of rubblestone foundations and brick or brick veneer walls with little architectural adornment. Most were (and remain) single-family dwellings. The district offers an excellent sampling of historic log cabins, constructed first to accommodate miners. Some of these were later incorporated into larger dwellings, like the Henry Hay, Sr. Residence at 684 West Main and the Fenn residence at 620 West Main. It is interesting to note that the prosperous early residents like O'Neill, Benson, Hay and the Reisses built exclusively on the west side of West Main where the sun exposure is more favorable. The east side includes residences of men like miner Malcolm Boardman and lime kiln worker Thomas Nagle who came to West Main a little later on in the 1890s. To compensate for the constricted landscape within the gulch, the residences are built into the hillside to make maximum use of the available space. The result is a neighborhood that blends in well with its surroundings. The setting of the district, moreover, has not significantly changed. Only two buildings have been constructed in the district since 1895. The houses all reflect the simple, practical design engendered by the people who originally lived in the area.

Of considerable architectural interest are the lime kilns located at the southern end of the historic district. These structures were built to the exacting specifications required by their industrial use. The location of the limestone on the steep hillside in Grizzly Gulch ultimately determined the physical placement of the lime kilns. Not only are the kilns a highly visible component, the large quarry areas where limestone was blasted from the hillside – in stark contrast with the well-built kilns – are harsh reminders of the intense industrial activity that was so vital in providing the very material for the construction of early Helena.

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Helena West Main Street Historic District Building List

Status codes: C = Contributing; NC = Non-contributing; P = Primary

Address	Name	Style	Date	Status (Contributing / Non-contributing / Primary)
551 West Main	Residence	Side-gable	c.1888	Contributing (C)
551 West Main	Outbuilding	—	c.1890	Non-contributing (NC)
562 West Main	Hibbard	Contemporary	c.1985	Non-contributing (NC)
562 West Main	Garage	—	c.1920	Non-contributing (NC)
562 West Main	Studio	—	c.1900	Non-contributing (NC)
562 West Main	Outbuilding	—	1887	Contributing (C)
571 West Main	Residence	Gable-front & wng	c.1888	Non-contributing (NC)
573 West Main	Boardman	Side-gable	c.1888	Contributing (C)
574 West Main	Benson	Gable-front & wng	c.1877	Contributing (C)
574 West Main	Garage	—	c.1920	Non-contributing (NC)
585 West Main	Nagle	Gable-front	1887	Contributing (C)
589 West Main	Freeze	Side-gable	c.1895	Contributing (C)
589 West Main	Foundation site	—	c.1895	Contributing (C)
590 West Main	Beaver's storage	Gable-front	1937	Non-contributing (NC)
595 West Main	Beaver	Gable-front & wng	c.1895	Contributing (C)
595 West Main	Garage	—	c.1900	Contributing (C)
596 West Main	Beaver's storage	Gable-front	1937	Non-contributing (NC)
599 West Main	Gill	Am. 4-square	c.1888	Contributing (C)
610 West Main	Schopfer	Gable-front	c.1885	Contributing (C)
610 West Main	Garage	—	c.1900	Contributing (C)
610 West Main	Foundation A site	—	c.1885	Contributing (C)
610 West Main	Foundation B site	—	c.1885	Contributing (C)
620 West Main	Fenn	Gable-front	pre 1888	Contributing (C)
630 West Main	O'Neill	Gable-front	1870–1875	Contributing (C)
630 West Main	Foundation site	—	c.1880	Contributing (C)
639 West Main	Topham	Modern	1967	Non-contributing (NC)
664 West Main	Mitten	Side-gable	1890	Non-contributing (NC)
668 West Main	Hay Jr.	Side-gable	c.1880	Contributing (C)
668 West Main	Cabin log	—	c.1870	Contributing (C)
684 West Main	Hay Sr.	Gable-front & wng	c.1870	Contributing (C)
684 West Main	BBQ	—	c.1925	Contributing (C)
684 West Main	Barn	—	c.1870	Contributing (C)
684 West Main	Mother-in-law residence	—	c.1895	Contributing (C)
694 West Main	Foundations site	—	c.1910	Non-contributing (NC)
696 West Main	McKelvey	Side-gable	c.1890	Contributing (C)
696 West Main	Outbuilding A	—	c.1890	Contributing (C)
696 West Main	Outbuilding B	—	c.1890	Non-contributing (NC)
Grizzly Gulch	Kiln A	—	c.1884	Primary (P)
Grizzly Gulch	Wall B	—	c.1884	Non-contributing (NC)

Address	Name	Style	Date	Status (Contributing / Non-contributing / Primary)
Grizzly Gulch	Kiln C	—	c.1867	Primary (P)
Grizzly Gulch	Kiln D	—	c.1875	Contributing (C)
Grizzly Gulch	Kiln E	—	c.1875	Contributing (C)
Grizzly Gulch	Quarry A site	—	c.1884	Primary (P)
Grizzly Gulch	Quarry B site	—	c.1867	Primary (P)

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9. Major Bibliographic References

See Continuation Sheet (Section 9)

Previous Documentation on File (NPS)

- ☐ Preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ Previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ Designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary Location of Additional Data

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☒ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other – Specify Repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 18

UTM References

Point	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	12	419210	5158480
B	12	419680	5158960
C	12	419760	5158890
D	12	410300	5158380

Legal Location (Township, Range & Section(s))

The Helena West Main Historic District is located in the NE¼, SW¼; the NW¼, NW¼, SE¼; and the SW¼, ¼, NE¼ of Section 36, T10N, R4W.

[Remediation note: Legal description reproduced exactly as written in the original document. The double 'NW¼' (i.e., NW¼, NW¼, SE¼) appears to be a probable typographical error in the original. The map confirms the district is in Section 36, T10N, R4W. The legal description has not been corrected in order to preserve the original record; consult the original document or county records for verification.]

Verbal Boundary Description

From the south edge of Quarry A which is located in Mineral Survey 1519A (also identified as Mineral Survey 788, Lot 53) of Section 36, Township 10 North, Range 4 West proceed from West Main Street (Grizzly Gulch Road) 520 feet in a northeasterly direction to the top of the quarry at elevation 4450', proceed 400 feet and drop down 60 feet to elevation 4400'. Follow the contour line for 600 feet, drop down 80 feet to elevation 4250'. Follow that contour for 1000 feet. At the north property line of 630 West Main, drop down 40 feet to elevation 4225'. Proceed 800 feet to the north property line of 562 West Main or Block 1, lot 3, proceed for 160 feet across West Main Street, then proceed south following elevation 4200' for 900 feet to the south edge of 639 West Main Street. Proceed 140 feet across West Main Street to its west side, follow West Main Street 1075 feet to the starting point.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes a single row of houses, outbuildings and sites lining Grizzly and Last Chance Gulches. Approximately 95% of the buildings in the Helena West Main Street Historic District were constructed between circa 1870 and circa 1895. Some were associated with the operation of the lime kilns and quarries that delineate the northern boundary of the historic district. The topography defines the district on the east and the west. It is delineated on the south by the existing Helena Historic District.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Jon Axline, Private Consultant
Address: 907 8th Avenue, Helena, MT 59601
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and: Ellen Baumler, Private Consultant
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Property Owner
Name/title: Multiple

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Figure 1: Helena West Main Street Historic District — Property Map

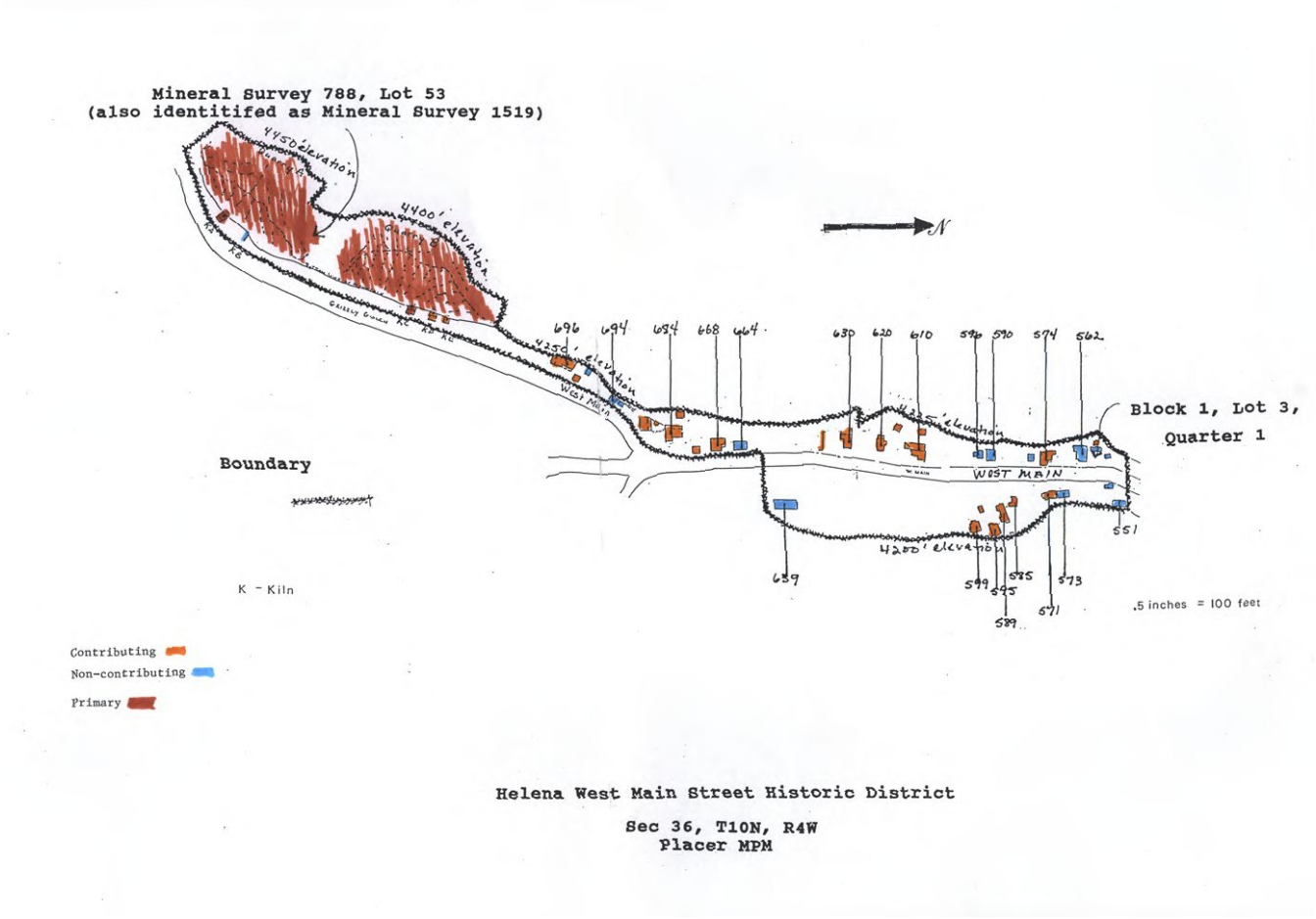


Figure 1: Helena West Main Street Historic District, Sec 36, T10N, R4W, Placer MPM. Hand-drawn color-coded property map. Scale: 0.5 inches = 100 feet. North arrow upper right. Orange = Contributing | Blue = Non-contributing | Dark Red = Primary | K = Kiln