



ARCHITECTURE in the Bluegrass represents a journey through time. From pioneer cabins to modern glass skyscrapers, buildings in Lexington reflect over 200 years of heritage. If you're interested in architecture, you'll enjoy exploring the downtown historic districts, including Gratz Park and South Hill neighborhoods, as well as the Bluegrass countryside with its many farms and country estates. The BGT plaques you will see signify historic structures and are awarded by the Bluegrass Trust for Historic Preservation. Contact the Visitors Center for more information about historic sites and historic houses open for tours.

A Real Taste of the Bluegrass

Southern cuisine takes on a distinctive local flavor in the Bluegrass. Many restaurants feature the Southern classic "Country Ham," or "Old Ham," usually cured for one to two years; the longer it's aged, the stronger the flavor. Kentucky hosts traditionally serve Country Ham with crunchy Beaten Biscuits. "Spoonbread" is a corn-based "bread" so moist that it must be spooned out. Kentucky Burgoo is a flavorful local stew. Many visitors to Lexington have never heard of, much less tasted, "Lamb Fries," but be sure to ask the waiter about this local delicacy before ordering.



THE CITY OF LEXINGTON traces its origin to 1775, when frontiersmen in the area received news of the first battle of the American Revolution at Lexington, Massachusetts, and named their campsite Lexington. It wasn't until four years later that the first log blockhouse was built, near what is now the corner of Main and Mill streets. In 1782, the town was officially established by the General Assembly of Virginia (Kentucky was part of Virginia until 1792). Retail commerce and the manufacturing of items such as paper, hemp and corn products fueled the town's early, rapid growth. By 1820, Lexington, Kentucky, was one of the largest and wealthiest towns west of the Allegheny Mountains, and so cultured was its lifestyle that it gained the nickname "Athens of the West."

Today, Lexington is Kentucky's second largest city. The merged Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government serves a population of about 323,000 people. The Lexington metropolitan area (Fayette County and five adjoining counties) has a population of about 517,000. The Bluegrass is famous for horses, tobacco, bourbon and Southern hospitality, but an increasing variety of products and services contribute to its healthy economy and continuing growth. Higher education, printers and automotive manufacturing are some of the major industries of the modern Bluegrass. For visitors and residents, Lexington offers the best of today and yesterday.

Insights

I Was Here

The I Was Here Project merges the arts and humanities with history. This on-the-street museum experience exposes the ancestral roots that exist within buildings, cities, and ourselves.



Brewgrass Trail

The Brewgrass Trail is one of Kentucky's most popular experiences, as it's home to some of the finest beers, ciders and sake in the Commonwealth.



Little Lex Scavenger Hunt

Take your little ones, or let your inner child lead the way through downtown to find ten sites. Once you find all ten, return to the Lexington Visitors Center and receive your special prize!

More Driving & Walking Tours

VisitLEX has additional online resources to help you explore the best of Lexington.

Scan the code to find more tours, both guided and self-guided, as well as mobile "passports" for your smartphone that will point you in the right direction.



Welcome to Lexington

Whether you have a few days or just a few hours to spend in Lexington, this helpful guide can put you on the path to a memorable experience here in Kentucky's beautiful Bluegrass region. Designed to be followed at your own pace, this self-guided tour can be adapted to your own schedule and interests. So take your time and have fun!

Lexington Visitors Center

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Lexington, KY
Historic Downtown Walking Tour



When It Comes to Tours, Lexington Doesn't Just Talk the Talk. We Walk the Walk.

There are so many things to see and do here that don't require any more than a spirit of adventure and a bit of curiosity. Get ready and start discovering.

Ask our Visitors Center staff about seasonal guided walking tours of beautiful Downtown Lexington. Or set out on your own with these fun self-guided options. We're here to help!

Mural Challenge

Connect with Lexington's creative culture on this tour of our iconic, thought-provoking street art. Check in at each location using the mobile passport to earn a free poster.



African American Heritage Tour

Researched, written, and narrated by Lexington historian Yvonne Giles, Lexington's African American Heritage Tour highlights the rich history of African Americans in Lexington and their contributions to the city.



Historic Downtown Lexington Walk

Walk through downtown Lexington and you'll not only discover a modern, busy metropolitan center, but you'll also get a sense of what Lexington was like 50, 100 or even 200 years ago. In total, the tour is a little less than two miles in length, with plenty of resting places along the way.

The tour begins at Triangle Park at the intersection of North Broadway and Main Street. Parking is available in numerous lots in the area, including the lot on High St. across from Rupp Arena at Central Bank Center, and an indoor parking garage on Short St. between North Broadway and Mill St. From High St. walk north on Broadway two blocks to West Main St. to reach Triangle Park.

1. TRIANGLE PARK. With its impressive rushing fountains and tree-lined promenades, Triangle Park is a favorite gathering spot for all ages. The park was built in 1981 with \$1 million in private donations and designed by internationally-known landscape architect Robert Zion.

At the intersection of Main St. and Broadway, cross Main St. to get a close-up view of The Square.

2. THE SQUARE. This block of late 19th-century and early 20th-century commercial buildings was given new life in the 1980s and houses a retail store, art galleries, restaurants and office space. The renovation and preservation of its historic façade won national and local awards. The Square is also home to the The Lexington Children's Museum and the Lexington Children's Theatre.

Continue west on Main St. looking across Main to see the Central Bank Center.

3. CENTRAL BANK CENTER/RUPP ARENA. Named for UK Coach Adolph Rupp, who reigned at UK for 42 years, achieving a record of 879 victories and 190 losses, Rupp Arena is the home court for the UK Wildcats. It is also used for major concerts. The surrounding 11-acre complex houses Lexington's Convention Center. Renovations completed in 2022 include a new façade, expanded meeting, exhibition and ballroom spaces, and an art installation by internationally renowned sculptor, John Henry.

Continue on Main St. toward Jefferson St. passing First Baptist Church, built in 1913, on your right.

4. MARY TODD LINCOLN HOUSE. Mary Todd, who became First Lady as wife of 16th President Abraham Lincoln, was born in Lexington in 1818. Her father and stepmother moved the family to this 16-room house on your left in 1832. It's said that during visits to the Todd home, Lincoln loved to spend time reading in his father-in-law's extensive library. Tours are offered seasonally; call (859) 233-9999.

5. MAIN STREET BAPTIST CHURCH. As with most predominantly black churches around the country and in Kentucky, the roots of Main Street Baptist Church start with a formerly enslaved man. The Independent Baptist Church was organized by Pastor Frederick Braxton with the help of Samuel Johnson in 1862. The property had been purchased in 1853 from the heirs of Eliza Todd, Mary Todd Lincoln's mother.

Turn right on Jefferson St. and continue straight for a variety of restaurants, or turn right onto West Short St. to continue your tour.

6. WESTERN SUBURB HISTORIC DISTRICT. West Short and nearby streets represent a typical middle-class neighborhood of the mid-1800s. (If you're particularly interested in residential architecture, turn left instead of right and explore the 600 block of West Short St., with its brick sidewalk, wrought-iron, picket fences, and small courtyards.)

Continue walking east (toward Broadway) on West Short St.

7. PARKER PLACE. The Italianate style brick house on the left was built in 1871 by a prominent Lexington banker, John B. Wilgus. It was an orphanage from 1907 to 1975.

The Parker name refers to Elizabeth Parker (Mary Todd Lincoln's grandmother), who lived in an earlier house at this address. A Parker family cabin from the late 1700s was moved here in 1988 from a location near the Lexington airport.

8. ST. PAUL ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH. This Gothic Revival style church, with its graceful 218-foot-tall spire, was dedicated in 1868. The clocks were added in 1883.

Turn left at Broadway and walk north towards West Second St.

9. LEXINGTON OPERA HOUSE. "The best one-night stand in America" was the reputation this hall gained shortly after its opening in 1887. Al Jolsen, Will Rogers, Fannie Brice, Lillian Russell and the Barrymores are among the stars who have graced its stage. An elaborate 1906 production of "Ben Hur" included an onstage chariot race. Local and touring drama groups and The Lexington Ballet have performed here since it was restored in 1975.

10. BROADWAY. Until the mid-1800s, Lexington's main north-south street was named Main Cross. Lexington's first courthouse was built in 1782 at the northwest corner of Main and Broadway, and this area was the city's early commercial center. Hotels stood at the intersection of Broadway and Short during the mid-1800s.

11. WEST SECOND STREET. A church has stood at the southwest corner of Second and Broadway since 1808. The Broadway Christian Church building now located here was built in 1917. Many of the houses on Broadway between West Second and West Third were built before the Civil War. (To view other residential architecture from 19th-century and early 20th-century Lexington, take a side excursion west on West Second or West Third streets.)

Cross Broadway and continue north toward West Third St.

12. LEXINGTON HISTORY MUSEUM. Originally established in 1998, the Lexington History Museum – now known as LexHistory, is dedicated to telling the stories of Lexington's rich heritage. In the fall of 2023, the museum reopened to the public in the historic Thomas Hunt Morgan House. Dr. Hunt Morgan was the 1933 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine and was the first in Kentucky to receive the honor. Tours and hours vary seasonally, admission charged.

Turn right at West Third St.

13. TRANSYLVANIA UNIVERSITY. "Transy," established in 1780, is the oldest college west of the Allegheny Mountains. Among its graduates have been 50 U.S. Senators, 101 Representatives, three Speakers of the House, 36 governors, and 34 ambassadors. Famous alumni include Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, and Texas settler Stephen Austin. Campus tours are given by appointment; call (859) 233-8242.

14. PATTERSON CABIN. Built around 1783 by Robert Patterson, one of Lexington's founders and a Transy trustee, this cabin was moved from Lexington to Dayton, Ohio, in 1901 by Patterson's grandson. In 1939, it was brought back and placed on the Transylvania Campus.

15. OLD MORRISON. Transylvania's second administration building was built between 1830 and 1834 to replace an earlier main building that burned. Architect Gideon Shryock, who also designed the original state capitol in Frankfort, is credited with introducing the Greek Revival style to Kentucky.

Continue walking on Third St. and turn right onto North Upper St.

16. ST. PAUL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH. This location has been used for worship since around 1820, when black members of a local Methodist church decided to form their own congregation. They first met in a stable located on this site, a portion of which may still exist in the foundation of this building. The eclectic style reflects expansions and additions made in 1850, 1877, 1906, and 1986. St. Paul A.M.E. is the oldest of African Methodist Episcopal churches founded in Fayette County in the years after the Civil War, when many freed rural slaves moved to Lexington.

Turn right onto Mechanic St.

17. GRATZ PARK. Originally the campus lawn of Transylvania University, this park was the focal point of one of Lexington's most prosperous early 1800s-neighborhoods. The park is named for 19th-century hemp manufacturer and Transy trustee Benjamin Gratz, who bought the house at 231 North Mill St. in 1824. The house remained in the Gratz family for 160 years. The fountain at the north end of the park was built in 1933, with funds left for "a gift to Lexington's children" in the will of best-selling 19th-century Kentucky author and Lexington native James Lane Allen.

18. THE KITCHEN. The one-story structure in the middle of Gratz Park is the only surviving building of the original Transylvania University campus. It is known as "The Kitchen" by students and locals. Historians believe it probably was not a kitchen because the fireplaces are too small for cooking.

Walk south on Market St. toward downtown.

19. BODLEY-BULLOCK HOUSE. Early Lexington civic leader General Thomas Bodley paid \$10,000 in 1814 for the house on your left at 200 N. Market St. During the Civil War, this house was headquarters for Union troops; troops camped in the park. Prominent physician Waller Bullock and his wife bought the house in 1912. Today the house is headquarters of the Junior League of Lexington.

Turn right onto Second St.

20. OLD LEXINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY. Lexington formed a library in 1795, but the books were housed at various locations around town until this building was completed in 1905. The building was partly financed by an Andrew Carnegie gift of \$50,000. This was the city's main public library until 1989, when a new library opened on Main St. The building now houses the Carnegie Center for Literacy.

21. HOPEMONT. Built about 1814 by Kentucky's first millionaire, John Wesley Hunt, this brick house with an elegant fanlight window over the front door is a lovely example of Federal-style architecture. According to local legend, Hunt's grandson, Confederate General John Hunt Morgan, once rode his horse through the front steps of the house, paused in the hall to kiss his mother, then galloped out the back door with Union troops in hot pursuit.

Turn left and walk south on North Mill St.

22. HENRY CLAY LAW OFFICE. Many modern historians consider Henry Clay the greatest U.S. Senator of all time. Known as a brilliant orator and mediator, The Great Compromiser was one of Lexington's most beloved and colorful citizens of the early 1800s. He came here as a 20-year-old lawyer in 1797; and used this office from 1804 to 1810.

23. ARTSPLACE. This 1904 Beaux Arts-style building is headquarters for LexArts, greater Lexington's premier cultural development, advocacy and fundraising organization. The first floor houses an art gallery open to the public.

24. FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. Popular 19th-century Lexington architect Cincinnatus Shryock (Gideon's younger brother) designed this Gothic-style church, completed in 1872. The spire rises 180 feet.

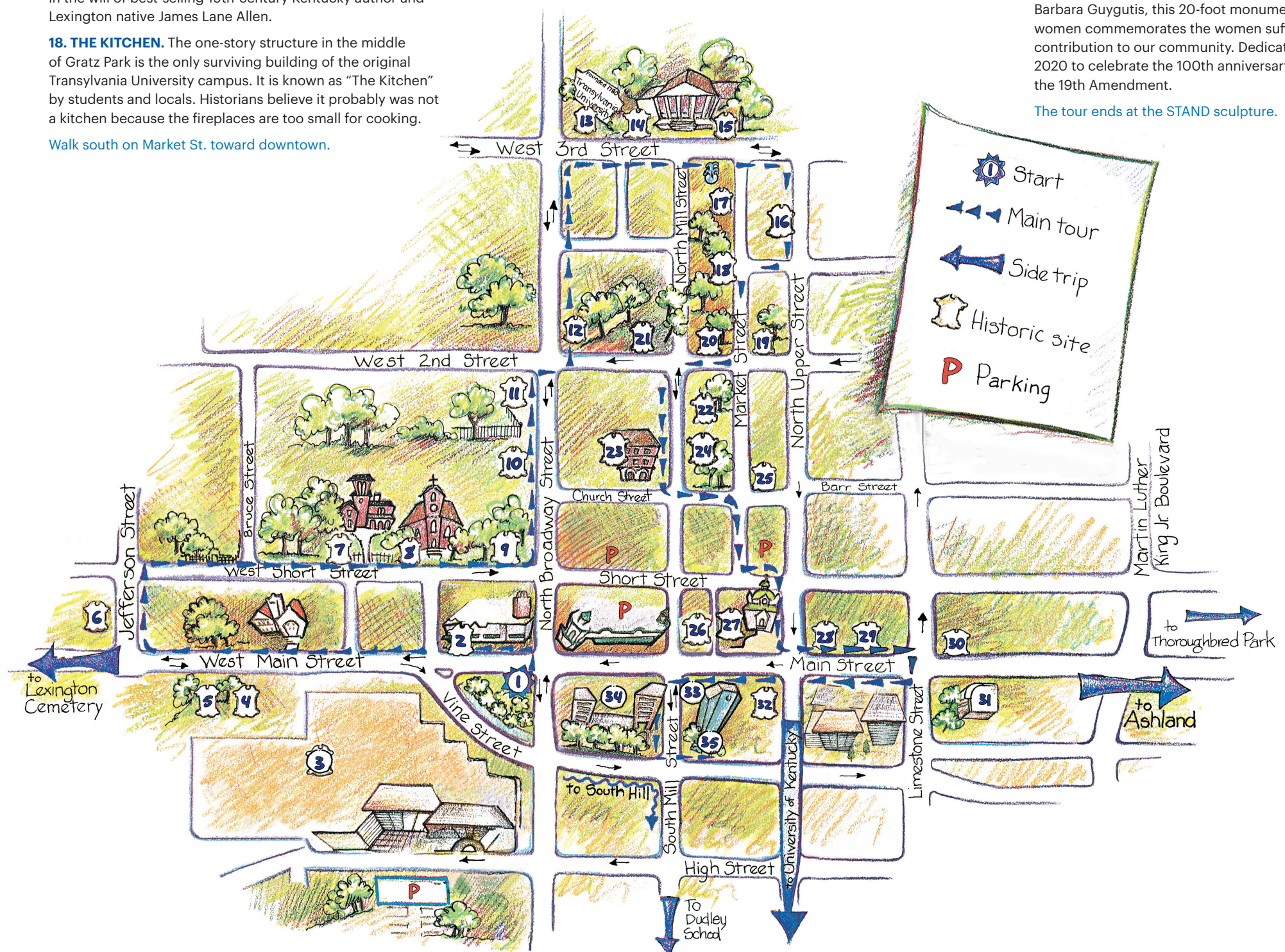
Turn left at Church St. and go one block.

25. CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL. Another lovely example of a Gothic Revival style church, this 1840s building is the fourth at this site. Christ Church, organized in 1796, was the first Episcopal church west of the Alleghenies. Henry Clay attended this church; a bronze tablet marks his pew.

Turn right on Market St., go one block to Short St., cross Short to continue.

26. HENRY A. TANDY CENTENNIAL PARK. The small park at the west side of Courthouse Square was originally a wide street and has been the site of slave auctions, abolitionists' passionate speeches and horse trading. The covered pavilion, erected in 2010, is the focal point for live music events, festivals and the Saturday farmers' market.

Turn left toward Upper St.



27. COURTHOUSE SQUARE. This Richardsonian Romanesque stone courthouse built in 1899 was Lexington's fifth, the fourth located at this address. In 2018, it was lovingly renovated and is now home to the Lexington Visitors Center, VisitLEX administrative offices, Breeders' Cup headquarters, a restaurant and a special event facility.

Turn right on Upper St., go one block, and take a left on Main St.

28. FIRST NATIONAL BUILDING. Lexington's first "skyscraper," designed by the distinguished New York firm of McKim, Meade and White, was "the tallest building between Cincinnati and Atlanta" when completed in 1914. The 15-story tower remained the tallest in town for nearly 60 years and is now home to the 21c Museum and Hotel.

29. HIGGINS BLOCK. The area next door to the First National Bank building, at 145 West Main, is the only remaining part of the 1872 Higgins Block which has a partial cast iron façade designed by John McMurty to resemble similar details found on Renaissance buildings in Europe. This beautiful façade has been restored and incorporated into the 21c property.

Continue east on Main St. to Limestone.

30. FAYETTE CIRCUIT AND DISTRICT COURTHOUSES. The buildings you see facing North Limestone are nearly identical. The Robert F. Stephens Courthouse Plaza is the site of many community festivals and features two dramatic fountains.

Cross Main St. at Limestone, or for a short side trip, continue east on Main St. to see the Downtown Arts Center and Lexington's only surviving grand movie theater from the Golden Age, the Kentucky Theatre.

31. LEXINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY. This state-of-the-art library features a five-story rotunda with the world's largest ceiling clock and Foucault pendulum, an auditorium, art gallery and spacious reading rooms with panoramic views of downtown. The adjoining Phoenix Park occupies the former site of the Phoenix Hotel, which "arose from the ashes" of a tavern that burned in 1820. The nomad and camel marker at the corner of the park was Lexington's "zero milestone," originally erected to serve as the starting point for measuring distances from Lexington.

Turn west on Main St., going back the way you came, and pass the newly developed City Center block.

32. McADAMS AND MORFORD BUILDING/MELODEON HALL. Built in the 1840s by the Norton family, the handsome cast-iron façade was added in the late 1850s. A drugstore operated at the site from the late 1700s to the 1990s.

33. LEXINGTON FINANCIAL CENTER. Lexington's tallest building, this 30-story blue glass office tower was completed in 1988. Locals refer to this building as "Big Blue."

Turn left onto S Mill St. towards Vine St.

34. VINE CENTER. This office/hotel complex on your right, completed in 1983, stands on the site of the city's first log blockhouse (1779).

35. STAND. A sculpture by nationally renowned artist Barbara Guyguit, this 20-foot monument of five women commemorates the women suffragists and their contribution to our community. Dedicated in August of 2020 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment.

The tour ends at the STAND sculpture.