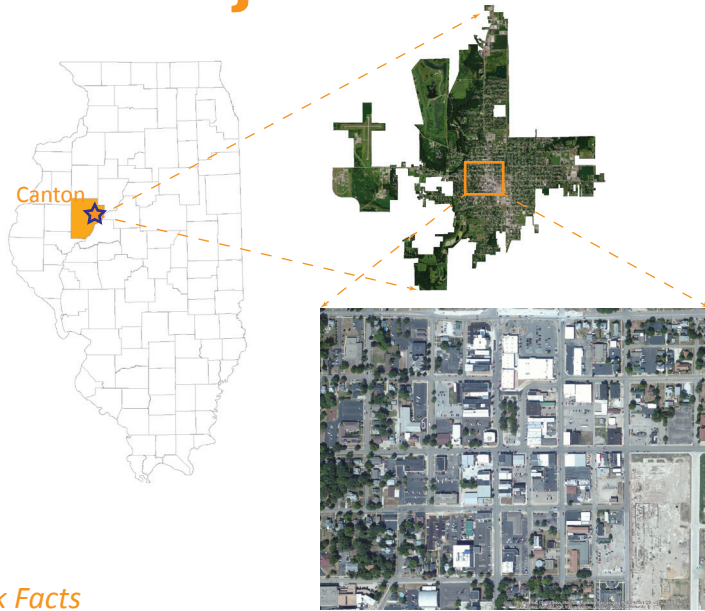


# Canton, Illinois



Downtown Canton

## Quick Facts

Population: 14,211 Housing Units: 6,168 Median Household Income: \$40,206 Median Age: 38.9

The histories of many small American towns converge around major themes: ascendance and economic opportunity through manufacturing and related industries, a distinct era of growth in prospects and population, eventual economic downturn due to a variety of global and local factors, a declining and aging population, and a search for a new economic niche or source of investments.

Canton, Illinois' recent history is not drastically different from that of many other small American towns. Canton's primary industries were for many years in manufacturing and raw materials production. The city was a center for coal mining and a locus for industrial transportation routes. Due in large part to changes in manufacturing and industrial restructuring, and demographic changes, Canton struggled to maintain its relevance in changing times.

However, the tide began to turn for Canton in 2008, when Cook Medical decided to locate a major plant in the town. A sense of hope and potential transformation spurred other investments and developments. The city's comprehensive plan was updated and serves as a guide for development.

## Lessons for Success

1. Broad-Based Engagement and Collaboration
2. Fluid and Open Communication
3. Established Business Community Mentoring New Entrepreneurs
4. Thinking and Acting Regionally
5. Building the Public Realm Through Programming
6. Recruiting Successful Former Community Members

The strength offered by major healthcare industry employers Cook Medical and Graham Health System, active and vibrant Spoon River Community College, and regional recreational draws have all combined to provide Canton with a vigorous economic base upon which to build the downtown community.

Over the last eight years, Canton has become a local and regional destination, created numerous jobs primarily in the healthcare industries, and built robust and resilient programs to encourage thriving businesses. Residents describe it as a friendly, close-knit, rural and safe community that is self-contained and a major asset to the region's tourism draws.

# What Makes Canton Successful?

## Collaboration & Civic Engagement

Canton civic leaders emphasized that the collaborative efforts of various groups and organizations are crucial in making the downtown what it is. A large handful of organizations participate in Canton. Spoon River Partnership for Economic Development, Chamber of Commerce and the Main Street Organization work together to support small business development and retention, enrich retail options, and offer professional development opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Public Works, and City of Canton employees play pivotal roles in developing and maintaining spaces for public events and programs. Countless service groups are integrated as volunteers into daily and seasonal programs, including the Girl Scouts, The YMCA, YWCA, and local high school. By involving many different groups of people in Canton activities, the benefits of seeing a job well done are shared among many. The sense of satisfaction widely spread contributes to a desire to continue investing in the town.

***“It’s not only the different groups of volunteers, but it’s how they all work and partner together.” Mayor Fritz***

Since relationships are strong between government and other organizational bodies, costs and resources can be shared across all groups. A willingness to collaborate means that while Public Works may be responsible for trash pick-up, if an event is planned for a particular day, volunteers can be recruited to pick up trash, allowing Public Works to devote their time to other functions. Individuals and groups contribute to Canton, and residents and city officials appreciate them as Canton's greatest assets. A sense of mutual investment and gratitude emanates from all that is happening in the downtown.



Canton Farmer's Market



Music in the Park

## Partnerships Over Competition

Canton has made great strides to build programs that extend beyond municipal boundaries, work with neighboring communities, and recognize the role the town plays within the region. This boundary spanning is particularly the case in regards to recreational spaces and agri-tourism opportunities, as nature conservancies and other such areas do not adhere to political, municipal boundaries. Canton leaders express a commitment to working with other communities in the county to support their growth and enrichment. They recognize themselves as a leading community with a responsibility to buttress and support others. By participating in Extension programs, and opportunities to dialogue with mayors from other towns, Canton leaders share their ideas with neighbors and extend its success to the entire region.

## Small Business and Entrepreneurial Support

A thorough and complete network of programs exists to help support small businesses and aspirational entrepreneurs. The Spoon River Partnership for Economic Development acts as a resource for new business owners by providing individuals with mentors or ambassadors. These mentorships allow new business owners to learn from the experiences of seasoned entrepreneurs and navigate through Canton's administrative procedures. Close relationships between new entrepreneurs, business mentors, the Chamber of Commerce and the city ensure that no question will go unanswered. Finally, the Spoon River Partnership for Economic Development and the Chamber of Commerce disseminate information about professional development opportunities to their constituents, creating a space for learning and growth by all.

## Main Street Retail

A diverse variety of small specialty stores on Main Street sell items not found in big box stores. Local retailers in many cases try not to compete directly with chain stores; they offer gifts and specialty services. They are mostly family-owned businesses with few employees. Canton Main Street organization is responsible for business retention in the downtown.

Organizing and promoting public events on Main Street help increase traffic in the retail areas. Staff builds support for public events in the square by helping retailers take advantage of increased traffic rather than see it as pulling business away from their stores. For example, flyers are distributed to retailers before upcoming events with tips on incentives they can offer to encourage passers-by to make purchases from their stores. In addition to these strategies, other programs continue to encourage economic investment in the downtown including Small Business Saturday, Buy Local Canton, and the Chamber Bucks program.

## Maintaining Physical and Historical Character

Through the work that Canton leaders have done over the years, they have achieved great success in developing a vibrant, attractive and desirable downtown square complete with a park, and small specialty shops housed in historic structures. This city square is, to be sure, a major point of pride for Canton. While Canton does not have state or federal historic designation, they have maintained building historic character and transformed Jones Park and the main square into a major center for community activities.

Using funds from Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity grants, thirteen properties in Canton were enhanced with façade improvements. Community members and business owners cannot help but be inspired when they see the facades of older buildings improved and restored. These changes and upgrades to the streetscape go a long way in spurring other transformations.



Jones Park Square in Downtown Canton

## Public Events and Programs

According to Canton officials, the community's public events and programming are one of the most valuable assets to citizens and visitors alike. A diverse array of events are scheduled throughout the year including an annual arts festival (Art on Main), weekly farmer's markets throughout the summer and fall, music events in the park, a kids fest with an annual theme, and seasonal events for Halloween and Christmas. Sometimes specific groups are responsible for planning programs such as the Canton Police Department organizing films in the park. These events enrich and enliven daily life in the downtown and create memorable experiences for the public.

## Clear Communication: Website, Social Media, and Marketing

Canton staff go to great lengths to keep residents informed about events, programs, and other opportunities. The Canton website is kept up-to-date with detailed information about various organizational bodies, main points of contact, as well as bylaws and legal information. The organizational entities share the cost of the website. In addition to the site, Canton reaches many of its citizens through social media, but still emphasizes traditional media such as newspaper articles and radio spots. City staff also target larger regional newspapers, which allow the information about Canton to extend beyond the town itself.

Canton leaders take advantage of opportunities to engage and communicate with people. Public meetings are held which are also televised, thus not only including the group of individuals present at the meeting but making sure a larger audience has access to it as well. More innovative means for engaging people include downtown participatory programs such as a walk with the public where city officials hear about public perceptions and desires for the downtown. The city once implemented a much larger media campaign. While city officials see such campaigns as desirable, the costs

associated with them make them prohibitive as a regular occurrence. Even without such a campaign, Canton does an exceptional job connecting the community with the resources it has available.

## Inclusion and Diversity

While Canton leaders feel that the city is demographically limited in ethnic and racial diversity, they see this as a space for potential growth and future development. Despite a lack of ethnic diversity relative to state averages, there does exist diversity in age of Canton residents – families with small children, the elderly, and young adults can all be found in Canton. One of the ways Canton leaders intend on addressing cultural diversity is by programming and promoting events that would highlight other cultures, especially those already represented in the Canton community. Public events and programs can be organized with the help of community members who have expertise in other cultural practices, and used to build a more inclusive, cohesive community.

## Challenges and Hopes for the Future

While Canton is home to people of many different age groups, community leaders would still like to attract young people to the city and encourage them to participate in civic activities. They feel younger cohorts would spur faster and more dramatic changes to the downtown.

Some challenges still remain for Canton community leaders. For one thing, city officials do not currently have any authority to enforce strict standards for landlords who own residential properties downtown. This lack of jurisdiction over landlord practices means that city officials have limited ability to guide residential development options in the downtown. Furthermore, Canton leaders recognize that businesses on the square are prioritized while those set off from the main square receive less attention. As a consequence, some retailers aren't as well integrated into programs and communication as others. Despite these challenges, Canton leaders are committed to growth and addressing the shortcomings they face.

## Lessons Learned from Canton

### Broad-Based Engagement and Collaboration

The more people are involved and contributing directly to the downtown, the wider the sense of ownership is for the entire community. This broad-based participation makes all activities and goals easier and more possible. No participant is too small or too insignificant; people of all ages and abilities contribute some form of expertise. It is the role of downtown leaders to harness the knowledge and potential that exists within residents to contribute to a greater whole.

### Fluid and Open Communication

Communication is the cornerstone of Canton's success, whether that be transparency of city programs and incentives for the community, dialogue with other communities in the county, or discussions between city entities. Clear communication ensures that resources are used efficiently and that nobody is left out of the loop. It prevents misunderstandings that lead to lost opportunities and contributes to the smooth functioning of all programs. Specific avenues and strategies for ensuring clear communication – whether it be public meetings, websites, social media, or listservs – help make the transmission of information easy and accessible.



Canton "Buy Local" Campaign

### Established Business Community Mentoring New Entrepreneurs

Canton's comprehensive programs for supporting entrepreneurs are exceptional. Using the expertise and resources of existing business owners means that everyone is contributing to building the city's economic base rather than competing internally within it. Mentorships are an exceedingly powerful strategy for distributing responsibility across the community and recognizing the strengths that already exist in people. They are further a community development strategy, connecting people through practice.

### Thinking and Acting Regionally

Find ways that neighboring communities can be regional partners rather than competitors. Partnership is possible through sharing ideas and thinking deeply about what assets exist in the region as a whole. In this way, the growth of one community translates to the growth of all. One way to capitalize on regional strengths is to recognize the natural and cultural assets that exist in the county as a whole, especially when they span more than one municipality. Use these assets as the focus when working with other communities.

## Building the Public Realm Through Programming

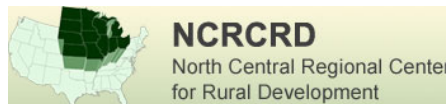
A downtown that thrives is one that is consistently active with residents and visitors. Create opportunities for people to come out of their homes and share space together, whether it is for a weekly farmer's market or to listen to music. Enlivening the public sphere sows the seeds for greater civic participation in other areas of the community. Consider your constituency when building programs so that events can be catered to the culture and desires of people who live there. Programming is a great way to build more inclusive and culturally-responsive environments. Reach out to under-represented populations, no matter how small the numbers may be, to find out what activities and events are important to them. Then build programs around this information so that the wider community can both enjoy and learn from other community members.

## Recruiting Successful Former Community Members

Undoubtedly, the major investments made by William Cook's medical plant have much to do with Canton's capacity to transform. Mr. Cook, having grown up in Canton, was compelled without a great deal of persuasion to make investments in the town. This strategy, to recruit previous community members with investment capital or to maintain alliances through alumni networks, is one that can possibly do as much for other small communities as it has for Canton.

### Look for These Other Resilient Downtown Case Studies:

Canton, Illinois  
Farmington, Illinois  
Galva, Illinois  
Silvis, Illinois  
Alexandria, Minnesota  
Lindstrom, Minnesota  
Mineral Point, Wisconsin  
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