



Fox Cities Chamber Comprehensive History 1874 - 2024

- August 1874 – **A group of Appleton business leaders met at the Waverly House (which later became the Elks Club) to consider an official Chamber of Commerce for the city.** As a result, the Appleton Chamber of Commerce was organized in September 1874 – 38 years before the national Chamber of Commerce. A.L. Smith, mayor of the city and founder/president of First National Bank, was the first board president.
 - 21 men signed the Chamber’s first charter, and plans were laid for a membership campaign. The member fee was \$3, and soon membership swelled to 82.
 - The original Chamber had a board of arbitrators, whose job it was to keep harmony among the members and “not let the green-eyed monster of jealousy rule.”
 - Records show that this group of men worked diligently to bring new industry to the growing city, further waterpower on the river, and improve shipping facilities in those days of brisk steamship commerce and early railroad freighting. They fought consistently for legislation, advocated the municipal water works project and took active interest in city development.
 - However, the Chamber didn’t fully take off. In 1875 cotton growing was attempted in Outagamie County, and the Chamber campaigned to establish a cotton mill in the city. The project was dropped when cotton proved to be an unsuitable crop for the climate of northeastern Wisconsin. The Chamber was reinvigorated in 1891 and again in 1892, but without gaining much momentum.
 - It was believed that there was no physical office space for the Chamber from 1874 – 1920
- April 1912 **The U.S. Chamber of Commerce was organized** when President Howard Taft identified the need for a “central organization in touch with associations and chambers of commerce throughout the country and able to keep purely American interests in a closer touch with different phases of commercial affairs.”
- 1919 (approximately) - **The Menasha Chamber of Commerce was organized.**
- 1919 **The City of Neenah formed the Neenah Civic Association.** In the spirit of cooperation, the Menasha Chamber extends an invitation to the new organization to attend their monthly meetings, because “harmony, cooperation and mutual understanding can be strong factors in the production of mutual benefits.”

- During the first half of the twentieth century, there were several businessmen's associations that started in Neenah, but none of them existed for more than a few months or a few years, due principally to lack of proper organization for sustaining their activities.
- March 11, 1920 – **The Appleton Chamber of Commerce was reorganized**, but this time amid much fanfare and with great success. On March 11, 16 business leaders met in The Sherman House to organize the Appleton Chamber of Commerce, with W.C. Wing as its first chairman. Later in the month, on March 29, the Appleton Chamber of Commerce was officially launched in the Appleton Elks Hall with 612 enthusiastic members signing up immediately.
 - It was reported at the time that “An outburst which threatened to push out the walls of the building greeted the announcement ... that in organizing its Chamber of Commerce in one day probably established a record in the United States.”
 - The Chamber offices were on the second floor of the AAL building, which was located on the corner of Superior and College Ave.
 - The first active committees were organized in June 1920, including the industrial group, retail trades, publicity and conventions, community welfare, rural affairs, finance, and the committee to pass on advertising schemes.
- 1920s The Chamber worked for a new freight depot and secured better express service and faster train service to Chicago.
- 1926 Chamber establishes a **Traffic Bureau Division** for manufacturers and a **Credit Bureau** for merchants.
- 1931 A Post Crescent newspaper report recounted an annual Chamber meeting where the work of the Vigilance Committee was lauded for securing stone instead of a brick post office in Appleton. Later that year the Chamber’s Rural Affairs committee helped facilitate the relocation of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad Company’s stockyards in Appleton.
- 1940s Neenah had an active Junior Chamber, which became the Neenah Jaycees. One of the first projects adopted by the Neenah Jaycees was the establishment of a Retail Committee to promote local business. This committee was very active and highly respected by Neenah merchants. **It was this committee that laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Neenah Chamber of Commerce**, at which time it turned over its records and funds to the newly formed Chamber.
- May 1940 – **The Neenah Chamber of Commerce was formed** by a group of Neenah merchants and businessmen, with Otto Lieber elected as first president. Within this group was to be set up a post-war planning group, following the freezing of all building and expansion during the war years.

- 1946 The **Appleton Chamber of Commerce** moved its offices to 527 W. College Ave., in upstairs quarters, a building shared with the Production Credit Association.
- In 1946 the **Directors of the Neenah Chamber invited Menasha businessmen and firms to join with them**, and, early in that year, reincorporated the Chamber into a Twin City organization, changing the name to " The Chamber of Commerce of Neenah-Menasha." The Chamber operated with an equal number of businessmen and firms from each city on its Board of Directors and alternated the presidency from one city to the other.
 - Its activities from 1946 to date have been on a true Twin City basis, in the belief "we are one community, and should work to the best interests of all concerned."
- 1946-1948 A "post war" planning group of the Neenah-Menasha Chamber of Commerce organized itself into an informal **Twin City Plans Committee**, raising their funds privately, employing a qualified planner, and endeavoring to assist the cities and townships of Neenah and Menasha in revision of their outworn zoning statutes, resurveying their intercity street systems, and in other ways endeavoring to assist their hard-pressed councils and town boards to look ahead ten to twenty-five years.
 - Faced with barriers and a lack of cooperation from the municipalities, the committee submitted its resignation in the hope that "a new approach may be found to carry forward this much-needed activity of city and area planning." But this eventually led to the formation of a regional planning commission in the mid-fifties.
- In a 1948 "Tribute to Business" it states that *the Appleton Chamber of Commerce has grown up in its 28 years of existence. Today its organization is complex with a large and active retail division, industrial division, and communities that function on memberships, legislation, conventions, stress and highways.*
- 1950s – An undated brochure from sometime in the 1950s describes the Chamber as *Men and ideas at work building a better community. It has been very aptly said that Chamber of Commerce membership does not cost, but in the long run pays many fold.*
- 1955/56 Following the efforts of the Neenah-Menasha Chambers' Twin Cities Plan Committee, the elected heads of the 14 Fox Cities municipalities met in Kaukauna. Many subsequent meetings were held up and down the Valley during 1955 and into 1956, culminating in a climactic meeting in Little Chute on May 3, 1956. On that day the following nine municipalities became charter members of the **Fox Valley Regional Planning Commission**:
 - Cities: Appleton, Neenah, Menasha, Kaukauna
 - Villages: Kimberly, Little Chute, Combined Locks
 - Townships: Menasha and Neenah

- 1958 The Appleton Chamber advocates for the **construction of the Oneida Street Bridge** to link the south side of Appleton to the downtown, providing more efficient movement of people, goods and services. The bridge was completed in 1959.
- 1965-1972 Records show that throughout its history the Chamber (and its early “Aviation Committee”) has been an advocate and partner in growing the current **Appleton International Airport**, including:
 - 1965 Opening of the new **Outagamie County Airport** and start of Air Wisconsin.
 - 1967 Assisting the Outagamie County Board in developing the new airport, including a 7,000 foot runway
 - 1972 Removal of the Appleton-Oshkosh label from North Central Airlines flight routes from Outagamie County, separating the two air markets and allowing Air Wisconsin to serve the Fox Cities.
- 1966 **The Appleton Chamber completes construction of a new office building at 100 E Washington St**, now the site of Valley Transit Center. The new building had a “host of modern features, with the most striking being the 12 columns which suspended the building 12 feet above the ground.” These 12 pillars symbolically represent creativity, voluntary effort, faith in the future, dedicated citizens, farsighted projects, active membership, intelligent leadership, integrity, programs for people, service to many, balanced growth, and cornerstone for prosperity.
 - Excerpt from a Post Crescent article at the time, “To be Effective, a Chamber Must be a Strong Unit” - *Many of the things that the Chamber is doing now – today – will be necessary and evident for the next 50 or event 100 years. All of the plans that we make and the decisions we effect must be predicated on sound, well-conceived development programs that meet not only our immediate requirements but must be useful for years to come.*
- 1966-67 – An “action plan” from that timeframe identified several priority projects the Appleton Chamber was working on, many that came to fruition:
 - **Reconstruction of College Avenue**, as part of the downtown Appleton rejuvenation project 1967
 - Assist in the establishment of an area technical and vocational school in 1968 (the former Fox Valley Technical Institute, now **Fox Valley Technical College**)
 - Development and creation of the Appleton Redevelopment Authority
 - Supporting the formation of a transit authority
- 1967 – The Fox Valley Regional Planning Commission becomes the **Fox Valley Council of Governments**.
- 1972 – The Fox Valley Council of Governments morphs into the **East Central WI Regional Planning Commission**, a 10-county regional agency.

- 1974 **The Chamber builds and moves into new offices** at 227 S. Walnut.
- August 1976 – **The Appleton and Neenah-Menasha organizations consolidated to become the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce and Industry**, creating a broader geographical service base and range of business interests.
 - At the time, the Appleton Area Chamber of Commerce had 749 members, and the Chamber of Commerce of Neenah-Menasha had 210.
 - John Bergstrom of Neenah was elected president of the newly formed Chamber, which made its headquarters in what had been the offices of the Appleton group.
 - The combined organization initially maintained offices on Walnut Street AND an office at 325 N. Commercial St., in Neenah.
- 1977 – Chamber forms the Appleton Downtown Retail Association
- 1980 – The Chamber helped form the regional **Fox Cities Arts Alliance** . At the time, Chamber president Rue Johnson took the ball and ran with it to help create the alliance, and was named its first president. It was housed at the Chamber.
- 1981 – **Appleton’s Octoberfest is founded between the Chamber & the Appleton Downtown Retail Association** (now Appleton Downtown Inc.) as a way to promote business, improve community image, and showcase downtown Appleton.
 - The License to Cruise car show was added in 1990.
 - Today both events draw more than 300,000 attendees and are strong economic drivers for the community. They also give back to the community through grants and nonprofit vendor partnerships.
- June 1982 **The Future Neenah committee joins the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce** for fund raising purposes. They became a separate incorporated entity in 1983.
- 1983 **The Chamber forms its first economic development committee**, to address economic stimulation.
- 1985 – Because of a growing regional focus on destination marketing, the Chamber’s tourism committee morphed into the **Fox Cities Convention & Visitor’s Bureau**.
- 1986 - **Metro Marketing** was organized as the predecessor to the Fox Cities Economic Development Partnership.
- 1988 The Fox Cities Chamber was instrumental in the planning and development of **highway 441**, a beltway designed to relieve traffic on US 41 and open up access to the eastern part of the city and surrounding towns.
- 1991 – The Chamber reinforces its commitment to building strong leaders in our community by **launching its first Leadership Fox Cities program**. Today LFC annual

graduates 40+ professionals from around the Fox Cities. It has expanded to include LFC 2.0, LFC Alumni Group, and new in 2024, a new training program called Leader Lab: Bridging culture and leadership development.

- 1992 The Chamber has always had an active retail division, and in 1992 its Appleton Downtown Business Association folds into the newly formed **Appleton Downtown Inc.**
- 1993 - **Interstate 441** opens, initiating huge retail, commercial, and home growth on Appleton's south and east sides.
- 1994 - **Career Connections** opens at Valley Fair Mall to provide 12-21 year olds with career exploration services and resources.
- 1999 - Metro Marketing becomes the **Fox Cities Economic Development Partnership.**
- 2003 – The Chamber starts a new networking and professional development group specifically **for young professionals called PULSE.** Today the group has 600+ members.
- 2004 The **Fox Cities Chamber moves to its current location at 125 N. Superior St.,** the site of the former Thrivent Financial Bank.
 - The building, constructed in 1981, has more than 10,000 square feet upper and lower. It was remodeled just prior to moving in and again in 2020-21.
- 2008 –A feasibility study for an exhibition center is conducted by the Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce and others finding that the **Fox Cities Exhibition Center** would bring in 28,000 hotel room nights annually, in addition to \$8.4 million of economic impact annually — or \$105 million over 20 years.
- 2012 – The Chamber identifies a need for a division solely focused on economic development and **launches the Appleton Regional Partnership** as its economic development arm. It was later renamed Fox Cities Regional Partnership; then Fox Cities Chamber Regional Partnership.
- 2014 – The Chamber supports name change of airport from Outagamie County Regional Airport to **Appleton International Airport**
- 2015 – To increase awareness of STEM careers, the **Chamber holds its first annual Smart Girls Rock! event.** Today it has become one of the Chamber's most successful talent programs.
- 2017 – The **Fox Cities Exhibition Center** officially opens.
- 2020 – When an unprecedented **COVID-19 pandemic** swept through the world, the Chamber coordinated efforts and resources to continually keep the business community

informed and help them survive this health crisis that shut down the world economy. This helped the Fox Cities economic recovery greatly outpace that of the state and nation.

- **2021 Allegiant Airlines Hub:** The Fox Cities Chamber worked with the Appleton International Airport to bring an Allegiant Air permanent aircraft crew and base to our community.
 - They continually partner with the Appleton airport to bring in more direct flights, to enhance business travel and efficiencies for our business community
- 2022 – Fox Cities Chamber became **the first Chamber in Wisconsin to roll out a free membership level** for small businesses called Connect Free
- 2023 – After years of discussion between ATW and American Airlines, as well as a helpful push from the Fox Cities Chamber, FCCVB and East Central Regional Planning Commission, **the airline announced they selected Appleton for their regional direct flight to Dallas**, greatly enhancing business travel in the area.
- 2024 – The Chamber’s guidance and support for **Fox Commons in downtown Appleton** has helped the project move forward. Fox Commons, a joint project of Dark Horse Development and Boldt Company will be an urban hub in the heart of downtown to reinvigorate the City Center Plaza.