

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable". For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

Historic name Mason City School

Other names/site number CU11-029

## 2. Location

Street & number 750 Main Street

Not for publication

City or town Mason City

Vicinity

State Nebraska

Code NE

County Custer

Code 041

Zip code 68855

## 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.)

Bos Reschendorf DSHPO  
Signature of certifying official

4/17/06  
Date

Deputy SHPO, Nebraska State Historical Society  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.

see continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.

see continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Elson W. Beall 5/2/06

[Signature]  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

Mason City School

Name of Property

Custer County, Nebraska

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- X Private
Public-local
Public-state
Public-federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- X Building(s)
District
Site
Structure
Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Table with 3 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing, and Resource Type (Buildings, Sites, Structures, Objects, Total). Values: Contributing (1, 0, 0, 0, 1), Noncontributing (1, 0, 0, 0, 1).

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Historic and Architectural School Buildings in Nebraska MPD, 2002.

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION/school

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION/school

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Colonial Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation Brick

Walls Brick veneer

Roof Conklin Polynate - urethane foam

Other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- X A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
X C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B Removed from its original location.
C A birthplace or a grave.
D A cemetery.
E A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F A commemorative property.
G Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Education

Architecture

Period of Significance

1935-1955

Significant Dates

1935

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

John P. Helleberg - architect

Oscar Almquist - builder

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 for additional data:

- X State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local Government
University
Other
Name of repository:

**Mason City School**

Name of Property

**Custer County, Nebraska**

County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of property** Less than 1

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	14	474809	4563063	3.			
2.				4.			

[ ] See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Jill E. Dolberg/Historic Buildings Survey Coordinator

organization Nebraska State Historical Society - SHPO

date November 1, 2005

street & number 1420 P Street

telephone (402) 471-4773

city or town Lincoln

state Nebraska zip code 68501

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name/title Mason City School Board

street & number 750 Main Street/ P. O. Box 88

telephone (308) 732-3461

city or town Mason City

state Nebraska zip code 68855

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

**Mason City School**

Name of Property

**Custer County, Nebraska**

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Mason City is located in the southeast corner of Custer County, which is located in the center of Nebraska. Mason City is found 208 miles west of Omaha and 155 miles northwest of Lincoln, Nebraska's capital city. The current population of Mason City, according to the 2000 census, is 178. Eleven students attend school at the Mason City School at this time.

The Mason City School is a Colonial Revival two-story brick veneer structure with a flat roof. The footprint of the building looks like a three-tiered wedding cake in profile. The bulk of the school building is housed within the largest rectangular portion of the building that lies nearest to the street and includes classrooms and hallways with lockers. The other two rectangular portions of the building comprise the auditorium/gymnasium space, and the stage. The school has a brick foundation and brick veneer walls. The building is embellished with a decorative blond brick cornice and belt course.

The symmetrical façade contains a central entrance with two six-light doors separated by a three-light sidelight and topped with a transom. The entrance is found under a two-story recessed arch of stepped brick, and is topped with a large arched, multi-paned window that provides light to the stairwell inside. The doors and transom is separated from the large arched window by a section of blond decorative brick. This central portion of the school projects out slightly from the rest of the building and is crowned with a cast concrete inset that reads "1935 PUBLIC SCHOOL." The primary façade has two bays on either side of the projecting entrance, with the two bays on either side of the entrance containing sets of windows and the outer bays consisting of blank walls. A set of five six-over-six double hung windows is found on each floor on either side of the entrance. A single six-over-six double hung window is situated on each floor on either side of the projecting entrance. The windows all have stone sills and lintels, and all are original.

The south elevation of the school is dominated by groupings of windows, two groups of five six-over-six double hung windows, a group of four, a pair, and three single double hung windows. On the north elevation, there are five pairs of double-hung windows on the second floor, and two sets of two windows flanking a central door that provides access to the main hallway on the first floor. An additional door is located on the northwest corner of this elevation. The west elevation of the building is comprised of the projecting portions of the building that include the auditorium/gymnasium and the stage. There originally were six windows that looked into the auditorium/gymnasium and stage area, but they were not weatherproof and let in too much light. They have all been bricked in. This alteration represents the only compromise to the building's historic integrity.

Upon entering the building through its main entrance, the student is at the base of a short set of stairs that lead to the main hallway. The floors of the hallways on both floors are terrazzo. A window ticket booth for the auditorium is directly across from the central stair. There are two doorways that provide a ground floor entrance into the auditorium/gymnasium. The gymnasium floor is just large enough for a regulation basketball court, but the close walls preclude a player from actually throwing the ball in from out of bounds. All of the seating is accessible only from the second floor. Two locker rooms and a coach's office are situated under the bench seating on the first floor. The auditorium/gymnasium space is all brick, and the bricked in windows are visible from the inside. The small stage is only approximately twenty-five feet wide with a gold velvet curtain and the original black velvet valence over the stage. There are cabinets under the stage that allowed for the storage of additional seating for the floor or perhaps sets or sports equipment.

The classrooms are found on the east side of the hallway. They are entered through arched plaster doorways with nine-light wood doors. The classrooms all have blackboards, hardwood floors, and closets with "Evans Vanishing Doors" of Washington, Indiana. The doors are hung on brackets that swing them into the closet space itself and allow the teacher to use more of the floor space. The windows are all full height, and provide excellent light into the classrooms. Each is equipped with a set of blinds for the upper and lower sashes of the windows.

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The classrooms on the first floor were for the elementary grades, while the classrooms on the second floor served the high school students, and are more specialized in nature. The science room has a long counter at the front with two sinks, and a long counter along the wall that served as laboratory space. Gas jets are still present that provided gas for the Bunsen burners. A closet to the side still contains specimens in formaldehyde, microscopes, test tubes and other equipment. The south end of the hallway has smaller classrooms, while the north end comprises one large room that used to house the library in a glassed in space and the study hall. The hallway upstairs is lined with sixty-six original lockers for the high school students. The small principal's office and anteroom are located at the top of the stairs.

The school building is located on a large plot of land on the south side of town. A set of playground equipment, including slides, swings and merry-go-rounds are located south of the school. They are considered to be minor objects and are not included in the resource count. There is also a frame one-room rural schoolhouse that has been moved onto the property. The schoolhouse is rectangular in shape with a gabled roof. It sits on the same block as the school, north of the Mason City School, and has been used for storage. The building is considered noncontributing as it was moved in from its original location, and was not historically associated with Mason City's school.

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### Criterion A:

While the stock market crash in October of 1929 created a crisis in America's business and industry, agricultural areas throughout the United States had been in a depression for most of the decade of the 1920s. Farm prices that spiked during and after World War I fell as drastically as they had risen. As prices fell in mid-1920, farmers were faced with debts they were unable to pay. Farmers' incomes did not keep pace with inflation, and a devaluation in land prices contributed to their financial problems. Suffering in the agricultural economy caused economic problems for the rest of Nebraska at large. Black Tuesday was simply another devastating blow to an already depressed economy. As the authors of *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* described the Depression,

"The condition of the farmers affected Nebraska merchants, lumber dealers, realtors, school teachers, laborers, and artisans. Housewives stocked their pantry shelves with the simplest essentials; construction lagged; school administrators curtailed their programs as tax receipts went down; day laborers, formerly sure of a place on Nebraska farms and in Nebraska industries, began the long trek of the unemployed."<sup>1</sup>

By December of 1932, farm prices were the lowest in Nebraska history. In addition, Nebraska, and the rest of the Midwest, was suffering from a severe drought that caused valuable topsoil to erode, damaged crops and reduced agricultural production. Nation-wide, there were more than 12 million people unemployed and in need of assistance. Twenty-five percent of the American labor force was jobless.<sup>2</sup> State governments were incapable of supporting the vast numbers of destitute citizens who required help. The Federal government was forced to intercede, and with the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, the New Deal was instituted. At his inauguration, Roosevelt stated,

"The greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. It can be accomplished in part by direct recruiting by the government itself, treating the task as we would treat the emergency of a war, but at the same time through this employment accomplishing greatly needed projects to stimulate and reorganize the use of our natural resources."<sup>3</sup>

Roosevelt's New Deal policies came in many manifestations, from the Social Security Act that provided monthly pensions to the elderly to direct relief payments from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and perhaps most importantly public work relief projects that provided jobs to America's able-bodied unemployed. Some of these projects took the form of road construction, sewer repair, ditch digging, reforestation projects, and the construction of public buildings, among many other projects.<sup>4</sup> Throughout much of the Roosevelt administration, from 1933 to 1940 when public assistance was most required, billions of dollars were spent on projects intended to provide the working man with an opportunity to work. Under the Public Works Administration, programs administered by various administrations including the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, led to the construction of 11,000 public buildings, including courthouses, firehouses, hospitals, gymnasiums, auditoriums, and schools, as well as over 100 airfields and 800 parks. They made repairs and improvements on more than 30,000 other pre-existing buildings, laid out 40,000 miles of public roads and repaired 150,000 miles of roads. They constructed 1,400 athletic fields and 1,800 swimming pools, and reforested 20,000 acres with trees and bushes.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Works Progress Administration, *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* (1939; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 67; quoted in James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 313.

<sup>2</sup> Phoebe Cutler, *The Public Landscape of the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>3</sup> President Roosevelt's Inaugural Address, 4 March 1933, as quoted in the Mason City Transcript, 9 March 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Page Smith, *Redeeming the Time: A People's History of the 1920s and the New Deal* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987), 598.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, 814.

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The Mason City School is one such project. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 created the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works for the purpose of giving employment and enabling local and state governments to undertake public construction works that had been on hold during the early depression years.<sup>6</sup> According to a study of work relief projects completed at the close of the Great Depression, public works projects were provided

“...Not primarily as a test of willingness to labor but rather as a means of conserving the skills, work habits, and morale of the able-bodied unemployed. Work-relief projects...are not conceived of merely as a means of frightening off applicants for relief. True work-relief undertakings therefore, cannot be selected in a haphazard fashion, emphasis is placed, rather, on securing projects which when completed will be of value to the community.”<sup>7</sup>

Roosevelt was convinced that public works projects were far better for America’s morale than public relief, or “the dole”, because such projects were not simply handouts to the needy. They were a means of providing the unemployed with a way to help themselves. The project, as it was intended to do, provided not only employment for a group of deserving men, but also bolstered Mason City’s citizens with civic pride and a renewed self-confidence.

FEAPW, under the Public Works Administration, provided grants to local governments for public works projects. In mid 1933, they offered a 30% grant for the public building project, and would offer a loan for the remaining 70% at a mere 4% interest rate. Nationally, the FEAPW would assist in financing 70% of all school buildings constructed between 1933 and 1937.<sup>8</sup>

The Mason City School Board was interested in availing themselves of this opportunity as early as 15 August 1933, according to School Board minutes.<sup>9</sup> Enrollment in the Mason City school had risen for several years, and the community was rapidly outgrowing the 1907 school it was currently using. During the fall semester of 1933, 103 students were enrolled in the high school alone. In addition, the school was also educating 106 grade school students.<sup>10</sup> In addition to space considerations, it was generally felt that the present school house is “old, inadequate, unsafe, worn out, unsatisfactory and out of repair.”<sup>11</sup>

The secretary was charged with writing for information and presenting it at a later meeting. The interest of the community was gauged through a petition and editorials in the *Mason City Transcript*.

“The Federal government is advancing money for public works and public buildings all over the United States for the purpose of relieving unemployment and bolstering business. Shall this community get its share? ...Right now material and labor are lower than they can again be expected to be for years to come. This, coupled with the fact that the district cannot possibly build a large enough building without outside help, makes it seem a logical time to give the proposition serious thought... Contractors are required under terms of the grant to use local labor where it is available, thus a double purpose is served.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Arthur E. Burns and Edward A. Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), 70.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Historic and Architectural School Buildings in Nebraska*, National Register Multiple Property Submission, Prepared by Mead & Hunt Inc., August 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Mason City School Board Minutes, 15 August 1933, unpublished.

<sup>10</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 7 September 1933.

<sup>11</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 14 December 1933.

<sup>12</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 12 October 1933.



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By November, the board expressed interest in contracting with architect John P. Helleberg of Kearney, Nebraska.<sup>13</sup> In December, Helleberg presented a plan for the building, and quoted an estimated cost of \$46,426, which would require the issuance of bonds in the amount of \$32,500.<sup>14</sup> The petition was circulated that authorized the special election that was necessary if the community were to commit themselves to a significant amount debt, and the election was scheduled for 29 December 1933. After much politicking and opining in the newspaper, the voters consented to take on this municipal debt at a vote of 200 to 30.<sup>15</sup> The application was submitted to the federal government, and months of waiting ensued.

In June 1934, the *Mason City Transcript* announced that the PWA board at Washington D.C. had approved the requested allotment for the construction of a new schoolhouse, but cautioned that the money was not yet available.<sup>16</sup> Hopes for having a new schoolhouse in time for the 1934-1935 school year were dashed, but the community resigned themselves to the use of the old school house during the interim.

William B. Price, State Auditor, eventually approved the school's bonds in early January 1935, more than a year after the bonds were originally voted upon and approved by the electorate.<sup>17</sup> This freed the community to advertise for bids on the construction, plumbing and heating, and the electrical work for the school, which were selected in February. Oscar Almquist of Central City was selected to be the general contractor, the North Platte Plumbing and Heating Company signed on for plumbing and heating, and P. E. Malmquist of Omaha agreed to do the wiring.<sup>18</sup> By March 1935, Mr. Almquist appeared before the School Board requesting permission to begin demolishing the old school building and clearing the grounds for an early construction date. The board agreed to move students to "such rooms as could be secured until the close of the school year," but it is unclear where the students attended classes during the remainder of the year. Furthermore, the school was not completed by the commencement of the next term in September; the *Transcript* is reticent regarding the solution to this difficulty. A single ad for Peterson's Furniture Store indicates that while the school was not yet ready, other favorable conditions for the beginning of a new school year exist including a large enrollment and talented teachers, but that the store can help supply students in any case.<sup>19</sup> The announcement for start of term did not give any additional information regarding the location of the students meeting for classes. All that is ever mentioned afterward is that the new school was dedicated on 3 January 1936 with Assistant State Superintendent Herbert L. Cushing attending and a program by the children.<sup>20</sup> Although the newspaper indicates that the event was well attended and the new school building highly regarded by one and all, at no point is there a mention of the delay in the construction of the building.

### Criterion C:

The school is a fine example of PWA construction, being made substantially and expensively of brick with numerous windows and fine woodwork. It is an attractive example of Colonial Revival architecture with its symmetrical façade and prominent central entrance. The presence of symmetrically placed double hung windows is typical of Colonial Revival as well.<sup>21</sup> The historic integrity of the building is exemplary, with only minor changes to windows on non-primary elevations.

<sup>13</sup> Mason City School Board Minutes, 6 November 1933, unpublished.

<sup>14</sup> Mason City School Board Minutes, 1 December 1933, unpublished.

<sup>15</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 4 January 1934.

<sup>16</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 14 June 1934.

<sup>17</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 10 January 1935.

<sup>18</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 14 February 1935.

<sup>19</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 12 September 1935.

<sup>20</sup> *Mason City Transcript*, 9 January 1936.

<sup>21</sup> Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 321.

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In the 1920s, schoolhouse design changed markedly in several regards. First, the importance of a library grew from a bookshelf in a corner of each classroom to a separate room full of books, well lit and well ventilated for students to study in.<sup>22</sup> The Mason City School has just such a room for a library. The room has numerous windows for excellent lighting, and bookshelves along every wall. It has since been repurposed as the State has since required that the library must be accessible directly from a hallway, rather than through another classroom.

An additional change that became common in schools in the 1920s was the use of single purpose rooms that students would shift through, as opposed to staying in one room for the entire day.<sup>23</sup> These rooms may include a special music room, art room, science room and gymnasium. In the Mason City School, this is seen particularly in rooms for the high school students, but even the grade school students went to a separate room for music classes and had physical education classes in the gymnasium.

The Mason City School is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under criteria A and C. It is historically significant for its association with education in Nebraska as well as public works projects of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. The construction of the building provided a modern educational facility that the community sorely needed yet could not afford, as well as jobs for Mason City's unemployed. The community has been able to use the building not only as a school but also as a meeting place for seventy years.

The building is also architecturally significant as a fine, intact example of Colonial Revival architecture. The majority of Nebraska's schools have had numerous alterations to the physical form of their buildings, whether that is an addition to accommodate a growing student population, or alterations in the original fenestration of the building. Most typically, the upper sashes of the windows are closed up or the windows replaced altogether. This is a rare example of a school still in possession of its original windows. In addition to the fenestration, the building has been changed very little over seven decades. The honey colored woodwork, arched plaster doorways and drinking fountains in recessed arches in the walls are all still in place. The only change the building has ever seen is the bricking in of six windows in the auditorium/gymnasium space. These windows were reportedly not of the same quality as the windows on the other elevations, and leaked air and water. The location of these windows on the back of the building and their relative small number minimize the effect of their removal and in no way diminish the building's eligibility for listing. The relocation of a rural, one-room schoolhouse to the site of the Mason City School represents a change to the setting of the Mason City School. Since the smaller schoolhouse is not original to the site, it is considered noncontributing.

<sup>22</sup> *Historic and Architectural School Buildings in Nebraska*, National Register Multiple Property Submission, Prepared by Mead & Hunt Inc., August 2000.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

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**Verbal Boundary Description:**

Parcels of the southeast quarter of the southeast quarter of Section 31, township 15 north, range 17 west, in the village of Mason City.

**Boundary Justification:**

The Mason City School sits on the entirety of a vacated block that has never been assigned a block number. The block is bounded by Main Street on the east, Clay Street to the north, Bennington Street to the west and Calhoun Street on the south. This is the land that has been associated with the Mason City School since the block was originally vacated and the first Mason City School was built.