NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018

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NAT. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

913

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 an 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 AMERICAN HOUSE

other names/site number American Hotel, Evans Hotel, Ryan House

2. Location

street & number 116 Main Street [NA] not for publication

city or town McGregor [NA] vicinity

state Iowa code IA county Clayton code 043 zip code 52157

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] 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 [X] meets [_] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [_] nationally [_] statewide [X] locally. ([_] see continuation sheet for additional comments).

Powell J. Sorke July 11, 2001
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
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 the 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:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

ENTERED AUG 30 2001

American House
Name of Property

Clayton, Iowa
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.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

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

NA

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

NA

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/hotel
DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling
DOMESTIC/single dwelling

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/hotel
DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE
walls STONE
BRICK
roof ASPHALT
other

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

American House
Name of Property

Clayton, Iowa
County and State

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.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

TRANSPORTATION

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance
1854-ca. 1875

Significant Dates
1854

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 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.

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
NA

Cultural Affiliation
NA

Architect/Builder
NA

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

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 of additional data:
[X] State Historic Preservation Office
[_] Other State agency
[_] Federal agency
[_] Local government
[_] University
[_] Other
Name of repository:

American House
Name of Property

Clayton, Iowa
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one

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

1 [0]0] [6]4]8]7]8]0] [4]7]6]5]0]9]0]
Zone Easting Northing

2 [ ] [ ]]]]]] [ ]]]]]]]
Zone Easting Northing

3 [ ] [ ]]]]]] [ ]]]]]]]

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 Patricia A. Eckhardt

organization Eckhardt Research date March, 2000

street & number 514 N. Linn Street telephone 319-338-3386

city or town Iowa City state Iowa zip code 52245-1275

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the complete 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 SHPO or FPO.)

name W. E. and Patricia A. Eckhardt

street & number 514 N. Linn street telephone 319-338-3386

city or town Iowa City state Iowa zip code 52245

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine 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 (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including 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 Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

Summary Statement

The American House, constructed in 1854 in McGregor, Iowa, is an example of a small hotel built in the early years of settlement along the Mississippi River. The main block is a three story stone building with a brick veneer façade with the appearance of a commercial building. There is an addition on the southwest side now used for laundry and storage and sunrooms constructed in the 1970s and 1980s above it. An historic structure to the north was once connected to the building, but is now a separate property.

Detailed Description

Setting

The American House is located on Main Street directly across from the historic and present Mississippi River boat and ferry landing at McGregor, Iowa. It served travelers, migrants, and immigrants crossing the Mississippi from Wisconsin or arriving by steamboat. It served as a railroad hotel and ticket office after the railroad came to town in the 1860s as well.

The town of McGregor, named after Alexander MacGregor, is located in a ravine or small valley named the "Coulee De Sioux." The Coulee de Sioux runs at a 45-degree angle to the north-south axis and to the river, and Main Street runs down its center. All buildings are correspondingly 45 degrees off of the compass points. The space for the town in the Coulee De Sioux is limited and the river front area is small as well. The American House is backed to within 10 feet of the bluff on the northwest side of Main Street. Main Street is wisely placed to the northern edge of the Coulee de Sioux, the higher ground in the ravine, and flooding has been rare in the 20th century until recently (1993 & 2001). What flooding has occurred has mostly entered town from above by means of St. Ann Creek.

Main Block

Exterior

The three-story main block is constructed of rubble stone blocks, some of them quite large. It measures 24 feet wide by 61 feet deep. The stones are mostly limestone, but there are some sandstone as well, probably quarried on the spot, as the bluff behind the building is the rare

Mississippian sandstone. The twenty-four inch-thick walls are constructed in two wythes[1] with an approximately four-inch space between them. While rough in texture, they are quite straight.

The façade is three bays wide with a central entrance. There is blond brick veneer on the upper two stories called "local Brick," a name that might refer to a type of brick that is blond in color.[2] There are numerous buildings in this part of Iowa with a similar brick, and it is known that a brick of this type was made nearby at Clermont, Iowa. The brick façade is probably original as there is a reference to "the brick and stone store house" in the property abstract in 1859 when it was used for collateral for a loan.[3] The major windows of the building are on the façade with large windows in the storefront and three openings on each floor above. The windows throughout the building with the exception of the storefront are simple rectangular openings 30 inches wide and varying in height, usually with two over two lights. The original openings on the upper façade have arched tops. There are decorative shutters on the façade added by the former owner that were not original, but there are the remains of hardware on the upper windows, which indicate that there were shutters originally.

A balcony is attached over the entrance at the second floor level. It is 20 feet wide by 4 feet deep. A centrally placed door opens onto this balcony. The iron balcony railing is original, as are the simple iron brackets that support the balcony. John Bickell thought the railing came from New Orleans, but it might be of a type readily available along the Mississippi River.[4] He found the exact same railing being made in New Orleans in the 1980s. Faint remains of graffiti can be seen on the walls behind the balcony.

The storefront entrance is mostly original. The 1885 photo shows the original front doors (page 25). These doors have been mounted as inner doors for the entrance. The present entrance is the one that appears in the 1966 photograph (see page 11). The windows on each side of the entrance are very large and are similar to store-windows of the period. The brick piers or walls of the lower façade have been painted many times and have suffered many scrapes and the attachment and removal of signs. They are covered with speckles of various colors of paint, but

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[1] This information comes from Mr. John Bickell and his wife Ruth, former owners and long-time residents of McGregor. They were interviewed many times about the American House from 1998-2001, and provided information we would not have without their first-hand knowledge.
[2] Villa Louis is an important Wisconsin Historic Landmark home built for the family of the fur trader and businessman, Hercules Douseman.
[3] Property Abstract for 116 Main Street, McGregor, Iowa.
[4] John Bickell, interview with Patricia Eckhardt, November 5, 2000.

beneath that there seems to be a glimpse of light brick. One pier on the northeastern side of the façade is red brick, probably a repair or replacement at some time.

Interior

The interior of the main block remains mostly original. The hotel had a lobby, hall, kitchen, parlor, ten sleeping rooms, and two commercial rooms on its three floors. The building had no running water originally and was heated by stoves. Present interior doors are a mixture of original and salvaged finds. The four-panel doors on the third floor are probably the original doors.

The ground floor consists of three areas. The space inside the entrance was originally a lobby, which held passengers and their baggage when arriving or waiting for the ferry, packet boat, or stagecoach. This space was made into an entrance and open kitchen in the 1960s. This modern kitchen has been reduced and enclosed in a screen wall with salvaged, period doors. The lobby function has been restored with the exception of the now reduced kitchen. The stairway to the upper floors runs along the northeast side of this lobby. This stair was an open one with a balustrade railing originally. It is now enclosed, but the handrail (without the balusters) is still attached. Built beside the stairs is a modern utility room to accommodate a modern furnace and water heater.

Behind the lobby is the hall, originally named "American Hall," a twenty-foot square room with a beautiful tin ceiling. This room is completely intact. There was a wide opening from the lobby, but that has been narrowed with panels and a transom light. A salvaged period door has been installed to make the room useful as a rental suite. Behind this room are two rooms, a bedroom and a storeroom with a rear exit. This area at the back of the building was the original kitchen. The bathroom opening off this room takes up space that was originally under the stairs in the lobby. It was in this area that the door between this building and 112 Main was located.

The second floor still retains most of its original configuration. The stairs open on a hall and the original hotel parlor or dayroom. One room on the northeast side was a business room, and the room where Lucy Hobbs, first woman dentist, had her office for a few years.[5] The modern kitchen could have been another business or sample room or a regular hotel room. It is counted in the 10 hotel rooms said to be in the American House. The other three rooms down the hall

[5] Lucy Beaman Hobbs Taylor had her dental office in the American House from 1862-1865. She was famous as the first woman in the world to receive the degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery. There are many articles about her published in professional journals, and she was a subject of a Ripley's "Believe It or Not" newspaper cartoon.

are all bedrooms, two large and one small. A modern bath has been was added in the wide hall, and a furnace room was added above the one on the first floor near the top of the stairs. One bedroom has a one-half bath in the corner. This room was the bathroom before the Bickells purchased the building in 1966 with "the biggest bathtub you ever saw" according to John Bickell. A rear door in the small bedroom at the rear of the building opens on a fire escape. It has been suggested, that at one period this door led to a bridge or stairway that led to outhouses on the bluff above. The outhouses can be seen on the 1897 photograph of McGregor (page 31). This part of town is no longer used and is overgrown with weeds and trees. This area of town may with further research have historic archaeological potential

The third floor had seven sleeping rooms. Until the Bickell renovation of this floor in 1987, it was not used. It was supplied with electricity or running water for the first time in 1987. Three of the original bedrooms at the front of the building were used to construct the modern kitchen and furnace room-laundry. (All furnace rooms are stacked one on top of the other.) Another was made into the dining room and a new opening cut into it from the kitchen. Two others at the back of the building were made into the master bedroom. The second bedroom is unchanged with the exception of closets. A bath and closet take up part of the original broad hall. A window at the rear north side of the hall was enclosed in order to make the bathroom and the bedroom closet.

Laundry Addition, Sun Rooms and Porches

The Laundry Addition was first a one-story addition. It is a wood-frame building with stucco surfacing. There was a one story building on this location in the 19th century, and it appears on the 1886 fire insurance map of McGregor (page 26). But the former owner, Mr. John Bickell, born in this area, said he thought the present building was constructed in the 1930s. It is divided into two rooms, one used for the laundry and a second storage room. There is no heat in these rooms. Above this addition were constructed two sunrooms, one above the other, each 14 feet wide by 24 feet deep. The second floor sunroom was constructed in 1967 and the third floor one in 1987 (See photo on pages 12), which shows this wing as it evolved.

The John and Ruth Bickell Renovation

The American House was mostly unused except for an apartment on the second floor. It was dilapidated and neglected when John and Ruth Bickell purchased the building in 1966. They used the building as a vacation home and renovated the floors one at a time. They began by

installing the furnace room and kitchen on the first floor. Soon they moved up to the second floor where they added the first sunroom/living room above the storerooms on the first floor and the porch and rear stairs. Finally, in 1987, they took on the third floor. They said that they hardly even opened the door to the stairs up to third floor before then. On third floor, they reconfigured the rooms to create the third floor apartment independent of the rest of the building. They created the kitchen and furnace room, master bedroom, bath and closet and added the second sunroom/living room above the one on the second floor. They also added the rear exterior stairs, porch and a small elevator.

Mississippi River Floods

There appears to be no flood line on the American House, and modern floods have just come to the door. However, a building inspector said there had been water in the crawl space. The flooring of the first floor appears to be much newer than that of the upper two floors, and probably replaced one that might have been damaged in a flood before the lock and dam system was installed on the river. Upper flooring is wide boards mostly hidden today by inlaid carpet.

112 Main Street, the Ryan House

The American House and the Ryan House, a frame building next door to the northeast, are the only structures to have survived that are associated with McGregor's early Mississippi Ferry Boat Landing days. After 1878, the American House and the Ryan House were used as one hotel. The 1886 Fire Insurance Map (see page 26), shows that the two buildings are joined. There was a doorway between the buildings beneath the stairs of the American House on the first floor and possibly one above that on the second floor. One can see this rectangular opening in the stone, about seven feet tall and three and one-half feet wide, now refilled with stone from the Ryan House side.

Erasmus D. Ryan came to McGregor in 1860. He was engaged in the grocery business, a toy store and news depot until 1875, when sources say he opened his hotel.[6] His biography goes on to tell that the hotel was called the Railroad House and it had 30 rooms. This biography, written in 1882, probably refers to the number of rooms at that time, and this would include the 20 said to be in the Ryan House, and 10 in the American House.

[6] *History of Clayton County, Iowa,* Chicago, Inter-state Publishing Co., 1882, p. 999.

Mr. Ryan probably started his hotel in the frame building alone at first. It is probably 1878 before the 30-room Railroad House was opened. In August 14, 1878, an entry in the Property Abstract, notes the transfer of the American House to a new owner with the exception of one-half of the wall on the northeast side. This transfers the SW or left 24 feet of lot 16 with the exception of the right to use the American house wall as a party wall.[7] In addition it grants the use of the American House's right wall to "erect, keep and forever maintain an entrance with stairway immediately east of wall." In exchange for this right, $874 was paid to the new owner. This opens the way for the expansion of the Ryan House although Ryan's name is not mentioned as seller or buyer. He probably leased the property.

This transfer seems to indicate that until 1878, there was a space between the American House and the Ryan House, and this looks likely from the image on the Bird's eye view (see page 22). There were very few spaces in the growing business street to access the back of the block or to get to the public latrines on the hill above. There was probably access to the rear door of the American House, the kitchen door, through this space.

The Iowa State Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1882-1883 lists Erasmus D. Ryan as a saloon owner only.[8] By the 1884-1885 Gazetteer, however, Erasmus D. Ryan is proprietor of the Railroad House. By 1887-1888, the name listed is the Ryan House. John Bickell said that the Ryan House was a house of "Ill Repute" beginning in about 1887 or 1888, when the name was changed to the Ryan House. It was quite famous during its time.[9] He said the main customers were river men and raft men who passed on the river. This use lasted only about 10 years.

Ads still continue for the Ryan House until the 1901-1902 State Gazetteer. The two buildings were still part of the same establishment it seems until the Ryan house closed about 1903. After that time, the two buildings were separated and the door was filled in. The buildings were used for apartments. In 1911 the property was transferred to George Freeman. Freeman ran a saloon

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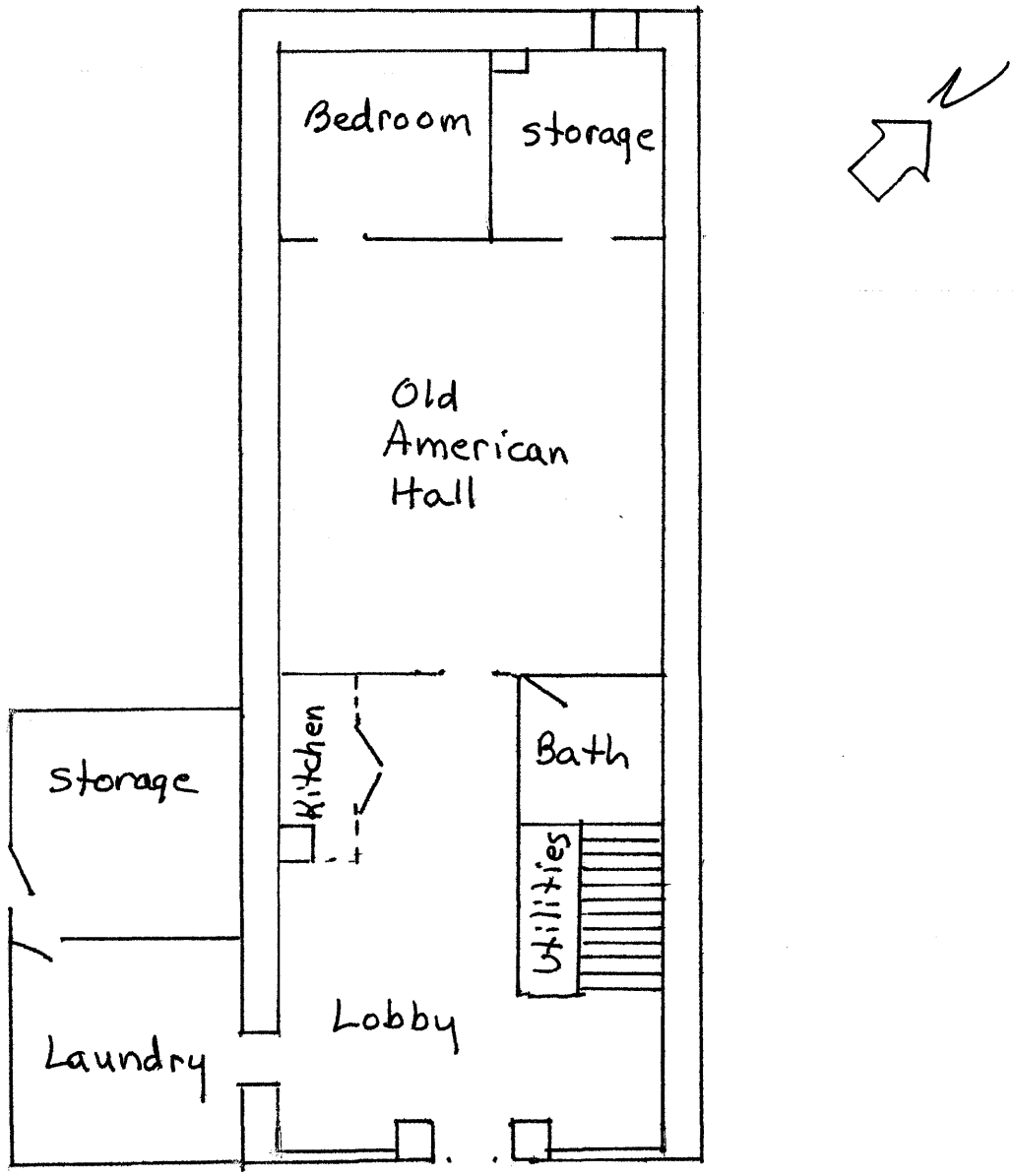
[7] Property Abstract for 116 Main Street, McGregor, Iowa, # 34, p. 10. The parties in this agreement are William I. Gilchrist and Ann R. Gilchrist, longtime owners of the property on which sits the American House, and a group including Charles Bean and Roscoe F. Hersey other property owners and land speculators. Gilchrist and the others had held title to lot 16 for many years.
[8] *Iowa State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1882-1883, to 1905-1906
[9] John Bickell, Interview with Patricia Eckhardt, November 5, 2000. Mr. Bickell said he learned all about this as a boy from a woman on his paper route. She said she had been one of the "Girls" when she was younger. She was in her fifties then he thought. She said the madam and the girls lived in the American House and frequented the saloon in one or both buildings and took their "customers" to the small rooms in the Ryan House.

in the old American Hall on the first floor. His will[10] gives the two buildings, the "three story stone building, known as the "Hotel Building" and the two-story frame building, to his heirs. The will states that the Hotel Building is rented to a single party, but the two apartments in the Ryan House are not rented.

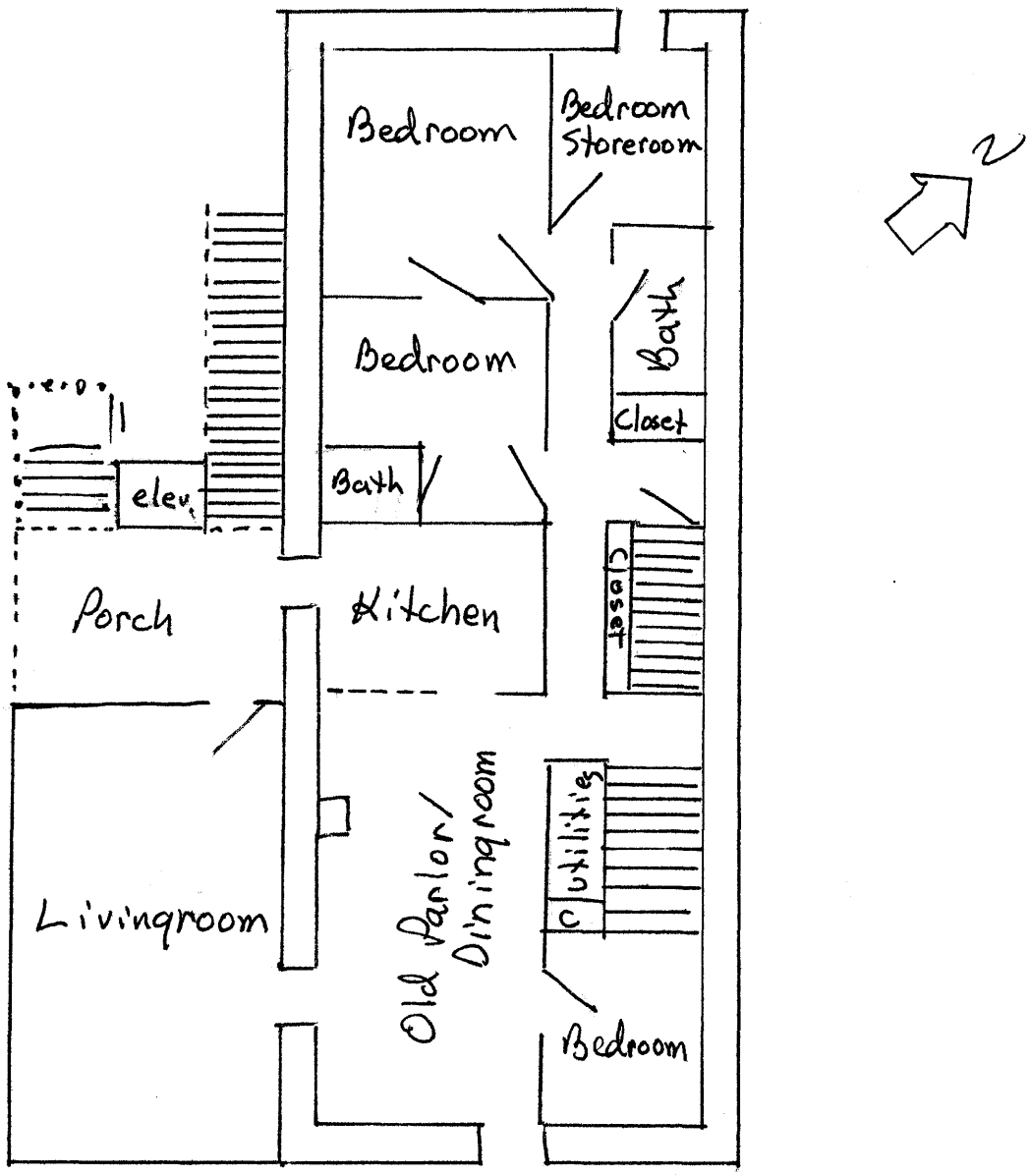
The Ryan House has its own colorful history, but sadly, little of the historic fabric remains. Only the general outline and some of the framing are original. A succession of recent owners has remodeled the building to make a vacation home. The present owner has replaced the exterior walls, windows and doors and the interior walls. The interior has been gutted although the first floor might follow in the general outlines of the original building of the 1880s. Replacing the reported 20 hotel rooms on the second floor is now a three-bedroom apartment with an open living-dining kitchen at the front. A new roof constructed in 2000 replaces a flat roof that replaced the original gable roof. It is a shed roof slanting from northwest to southeast to take the run-off water away from the seam between it and the American House. Water seepage must always have been a problem in the past and it is hoped that the new, more steeply slopping roof will correct that problem. The rear wall has been changed due to the addition of a bedroom on the second floor on stilts. The facade has been changed with the addition of a large deck resting on streetlight poles.

[10] Property Abstract, #37, p. 11.

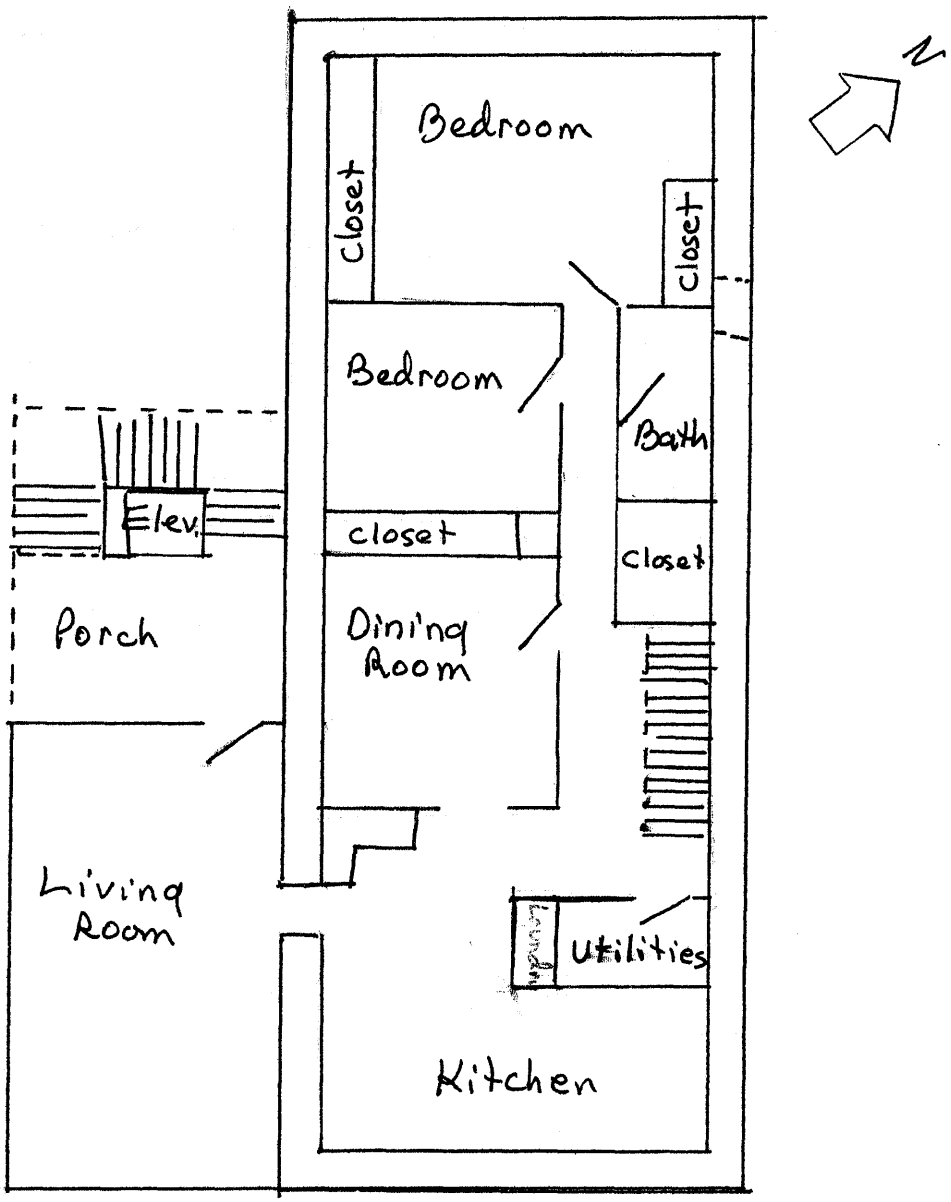
First Floor Plan



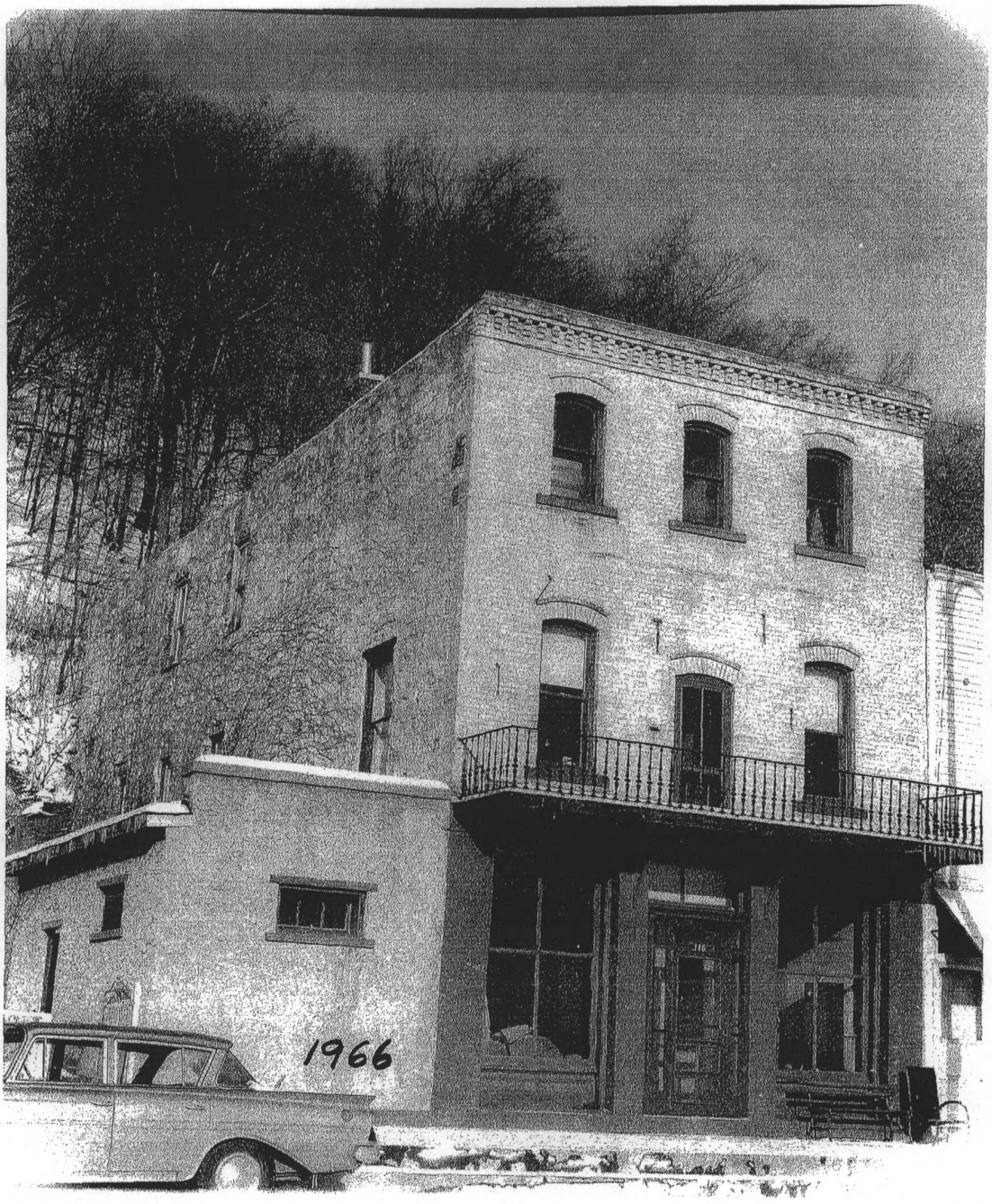
Second Floor Plan



Third Floor Plan



Photograph of 1966 – Before Renovation
Collection of John Bickell



Photograph of 1967 – First Renovation Complete
Collection of John Bickell

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Summary Statement

The American House is locally significant as a hotel built during McGregor Iowa's early years as a Mississippi River ferry landing. William H. Harding, a settler from Ohio, built it in 1854. The port of McGregor was a popular landing place on the west side of the Mississippi for migrants and immigrants traveling to western Iowa, southern Minnesota and points west. Most visitors came from across the Mississippi River by ferry or on the river in packet boats. They left McGregor for points west by horse, stagecoach, wagon or train. The stage left from in front of the American House, and a ticket office was established in the lobby for the railroad, which was located just across Main Street.

The American House exemplifies a vernacular hotel type derived from European models that probably entered the Mississippi Valley via New Orleans. It exhibits the aspirations of its owner to create a civilized place on the frontier. It also serves as a symbol or icon of early American small-town life.

CONTEXT A: EARLY McGREGOR, TRANSPORTATION HUB: 1837-1865

Ferry And Boat Transportation

McGregor's location on the Mississippi River provided it with its earliest transportation connections and affected the town's development. McGregor was an important landing place for migrants and immigrants traveling to western Iowa, southern Minnesota, or farther west. Some even went through McGregor on their way to the California Gold rush. All visitors came from across the river on ferries or arrived on packet boats traveling the river. They left McGregor by horse, stagecoach or wagon, and later by train. Most residents came to live in McGregor to make their living developing businesses to serve the needs of the travelers

Traffic was not all one way. McGregor soon became an important port on the Mississippi and a place to sell grain and send other products on to market via the river. By 1862, McGregor was the largest primary grain-receiving depot in the world according to the *Chicago Times*.[2]

The town of McGregor, Iowa was named after Alexander MacGregor with his permission, but with the change in spelling.[3] The young Alexander MacGregor, born of Scottish parents, moved

[2] This comes from an article in the *Chicago Times* of January 1862, which lists the bushels of flour, barrels of lard, furs, etc, that were brought to the port. From Bickell Archives.

west from New York State seeking adventure and fortune. He settled for a time in the Chicago area. He was advised by a friend, Mr. Thomas T. Sherwood,[4] a noted hotel proprietor in New York, to invest in land and work in business. MacGregor and a friend, Richard Allen, formed "Land Company No. 1", a private company of which there were many at that time. Its purpose was to invest in land. They bought tracts from the government to divide into lots for speculation in what is now the Chicago area. Having what Lena Meyer called "western fever," MacGregor sold that land and moved further west to Prairie du Chien (Wisconsin). The Blackhawk War was over, land across the Mississippi was open for settlement, and this area was developing quickly. He began dealing in land speculation as soon as he arrived.

MacGregor and Burnett purchased the land, which was called "The Ferry Property" in 1837 from Lockwood and Burnett, land developers of Prairie du Chien who had purchased it from the heirs of the Giard family. Basil Giard had settled land across the Mississippi prior to 1832. He originally had no legal title for his land and applied to the Spanish Governor of Upper Louisiana at St. Louis for a land grant. He received the grant for 5,760 acres, but it was not surveyed or recorded by the United States until 1807, although the U. S. accepted all titles when France sold Louisiana in 1803. It was officially known as the Basil Giard Track, and was one mile deep (north to south) and six miles wide (east to west). The ferry landing and most of the subsequent town of McGregor are located in the southeastern part of this tract

MacGregor and Burnett established a ferry from Prairie du Chien to their western ferry landing in 1837, which MacGregor operated. The first ferryboat, propelled by poles, was more like a floating platform than a boat. It became inadequate for the increasing traffic, and in 1841, MacGregor and Burnett built a new and much larger boat, called a scow, propelled by horse or mule power. This boat was called "The Civilian," and was used for a few years until a larger one was built. MacGregor began a second ferry route from the spot where the Wisconsin River joined the Mississippi to McGregor.

MacGregor explored all land routes to and from the river on the Wisconsin and Iowa sides to control possible competition and to attract all of the ferry business he could. He purchased land about one-quarter mile south of the Ferry Landing to protect himself from the competition by Hercules Dousman, the builder of Villa Louis[5] in Prairie du Chien and partner in the American Fur Company. There must have been considerable friction between the "English" settlers and the French ones, who had arrived much earlier. Alexander MacGregor continued to purchase

[3] Meyer, Lena. *Alexander MacGregor And His Town.* McGregor, Iowa: McGregor Public Library, 1971. The following account of Alexander MacGregor and the early town of McGregor come from this important book.
[4] Thomas S. Sherwood, Letter to Alexander MacGregor, April 16, 1833, McGregor Historical Society.
[5] Villa Louis is now a Wisconsis State Historic Site administrated by the Wisconsis State Historical Society.

land adjoining his ferry property until he had about 300 acres. This successfully forced Dousman to use less convenient landings to the north.

When the Ferry property was purchased, there was already a double log cabin on the land in the Coulee de Sioux, but Alexander MacGregor built himself a house there in 1846. MacGregor had married in 1843 and brought his bride, Ann, to Prairie du Chien. They lived near his ferry landing on St. Feriolle Island[6], and near his hotel, Granite House. The Ferry business was very successful, and when MacGregor decided to lay out a town at the western landing in 1846, he moved his home there the next year.

There is some confusion in the archival record about this house and subsequent houses inhabited by MacGregor and his wife. Meyer states that the first MacGregor house was built in 1846, and I suppose that it served as a store and hotel as well as a home.[7] That building is most likely the white frame building in the undated view of McGregor #1 (see page 23). The American House appears in this photograph, dating it to at least 1854. You can see the sidewall rising above the Ryan house, but the façade is obscured and partly covered at ground level. MacGregor is reported by Meyer[8] to have built a second house, a brick one, in 1849 at the head of the harbor. The brick house that appears in historic photos (undated photograph #2, p. 24) has traditionally been identified as McGregor's house. This house could not have been built earlier than 1854 because of the earlier photograph, but it is traditionally identified as the MacGregor House.

Roads and Land Transportation

Once in McGregor, most visitors wanted to continue west on land by horse, stagecoach or wagon. The first advertisement for the American House states that the stagecoach left from its front door (page 21). The earliest stagecoaches were located in the southern part of Iowa because this territory was close to the more populated parts of Illinois.[9] In 1853 stagecoach routes began in northern Iowa near Elkader and Dubuque and ran as far north as Decorah. Two stage lines competed for service to McGregor, Joseph Sharpe of Dubuque and The Col. Winthrop Line. Sharpe began stage service to McGregor in about 1858. He ran the important, tri-weekly Osage-Decorah-Dubuque route. Sharpe's service fell into disfavor in 1859, and Winthrop won the contract away from him. The Western Railroad transferred the delivery of railroad mail from the Sharpe coaches to the M. O. Walker line at about the same time. By 1861 Sharpe was again running the stage-mail from McGregor to Decorah to Osage, but he faced M.

[6] St. Feriole Island is the original location of Prairie du Chine, but it had flooding problems and a rising water table. The town was moved back from the river.
[7] Lena Meyer.
[8] Lena Meyer.
[9] Kirkpatrick, Inez E. *Tavern Days in the Hawkeye State*. Published by author, n.d.

O. Walker's competing stages along the whole route. After a time they agreed to divide the northern territory. Mr. Walker withdrew his stages from Osage and Decorah and Sharpe was to retire from the line of Decorah to McGregor. There was peace between the stagecoach lines, but higher prices. U. Farnsworth, of Elkader, added a third stage line serving McGregor and Strawberry Point in 1866. His coaches ran directly south to Manchester where his customers could catch the Dubuque and Pacific Trains. There were other operators on short routes. The stage remained the principal U. S. mail carrier for a number of years. The expanding railroads increasingly took over mail and travelers in the next ten years.

McGregor was also the original starting point on the west side of the river for a road between Fort Crawford, Wisconsin and Fort Atkinson, Iowa called the "Military Road."[10] The Coulee de Sioux provides advantages for a road starting at the river and moving up to the plains. The grade of the hill is not too steep as to prevent a team of horses from pulling a load up the hill. The government leased land on the river bank from MacGregor to build a warehouse to store supplies to be hauled to the new fort. A road was built to connect the two forts, which led up the Coulee de Sioux. Part of this road follows HWY 18. Later, Dousman succeeded in getting the military to use a point north on the Yellow river for their road where his ferry landed. The road was called the Upper Ferry Road, and the valley of the Yellow river was named Coulee de Dousman. But Dousman held sway for only a short time as his Coulee provided only a very steep and difficult road. The final road went up Bloody Run where Marquette is located today.

The first railroad to go through McGregor was the McGregor, St. Peters, and Missouri Railroad in 1857. This line was bought out several times over the next few years becoming by 1864 the Dubuque Division of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul railroad. This road had stations at the Turkey River, Guttenburg, Clayton, McGregor, and North McGregor (Marquette). The American House became a popular hotel for railroad passengers and a railroad ticket office as well (see fire insurance map of 1886 (page 26). A panoramic view of Main Street showing the American House and the railroad line and station shows the scene before 1900 (page 29).

WILLIAM H. HARDING'S AMERICAN HOUSE

William H. Harding, a settler from Ohio, moved to McGregor, Iowa and saw it as a place to secure a good living in the hotel business. Travelers and immigrants needed to have a place to stay after crossing the river and to provision themselves and hire land transportation on their way west. McGregor offered this in ever growing capacity throughout the 1850s and 1860s. In spite of this, McGregor suffered with economic problems as did the rest of the Midwest, and the Civil War only intensified these and caused the flow of immigration to slow to a trickle for a few years.

[10] Meyer, Lena, *Alexander MacGregor land His Town*, McGregor, Iowa: McGregor Public Library, 1971.

The American House was one of several hotels to offer lodging to travelers in the mid 1850s. Harding purchased his property in May of 1853 and proceeded to construct his hotel. It was opened by the next year. "Wm. H. Hardin, Hotel," is noted on Lena Meyer's list of people living in McGregor by 1856. Harding placed a "business card" ad in the first issue of the North Iowa Times followed by a large advertisement with a description of the hotel in November 14,1856 (page 21). In December of that year there is an important article in the North Iowa Times entitled "Ball at the American,"[11] which tells about festivities in the newly completed hall. This is followed by an editorial,"City Improvements," in January of 1857, which notes that the American is receiving very material enlargement and improvement, and names the new hall specifically. The author refers to the hotel as the "well known" stand. What those enlargements and improvements amounted to was not mentioned.

Harding clearly wanted to establish a town hotel, a civilized place, not just a primitive house where travelers spent the night. He says in the *North Iowa Times*, that he wants his hall, American Hall, to be the site of meetings and a place of value to the citizens of McGregor. It is perhaps this idealism that made the American House less than profitable. Rather than twenty rooms like the second floor of the Ryan House next door, he had ten sleeping rooms and two business rooms in all of the two upper floors. More than 40 percent of the floor space of the building is devoted to functions other than sleeping rooms and this does not account for the eight-foot wide halls in the upper floors. There is the lobby, the hall, a kitchen, and a parlor. He just didn't have enough rooms to take advantage of the flood of travelers when they were flowing through in great numbers, and when there were only a few, he was empty as were the other hotels. Competition was keen with at least four other hotels in town even by 1856, and they all advertised continually in the *North Iowa Times.*

Harding placed advertisements in the *North Iowa Times* from its first issue in October 1856 through 1858, but he must have been financially strapped, and he appears to have tried to sell his hotel. New owners are named in an advertisement in January 5, 1859, Scott and Wright. By 1860, we see ads naming W. H. Harding as proprietor again which tell us that he has "newly refitted the house." Perhaps the sale did not go through, and he got the hotel back. In January 11, 1865, the Freeman Brothers are advertised as the new owners. They place an ad in the 1865 Iowa Gazetteer. E. P. Clarke and E. B. Hopkins replaced Freeman Brothers in January 1870 as proprietors. The hotel is given a new name in 1870: The Evans Hotel.

A second complication for Harding was the MacGregor family feud. Most of the town of McGregor was part of the Basil Giard Tract, a property purchased by Alexander MacGregor but with some of his brother, James', funds. The two brothers, followed later by their heirs, fought through the courts for twenty years for ownership of the Giard Tract and other land in and

[11] "Ball at the American," *North Iowa Times*, December 19, 1856, p.1.

around McGregor. This made the ownership of the land in question. It comes down to the fact that if you bought your land from Alexander, you might have to pay James for it again. The property abstract reveals a struggle for financing and the numerous owners or mortgage holders in the few years before and after Harding purchased and built his hotel, and James MacGregor Jr's. name is on the property abstract. In any case, it appears that Harding sold his hotel and moved farther west just as it might have become profitable.

THE END OF McGREGOR'S COMMUNICATIONS HUB YEARS

After the Mid 1870s McGregor's prosperous period was coming to a close. Even though the Ryan House was opened and used the American House as part of its facilities for a time, the riverfront area was waning in favor of the more centrally located business district where two hotels were able to handle most of the travelers by that time. McGregor's importance as a communications hub and its access to the Mississippi were less important. Ferry traffic ended with the construction of bridges across the Mississippi, and other towns with bridges became more important than McGregor. Even the railroad focused on larger towns such as Dubuque to the detriment of small towns, even towns on the River like McGregor.

McGregor continued to serve as a stopping place for the great rafts of timber cut in the northern forests of Minnesota and Wisconsin for a time. The American House provided food, drink, lodging, and more for the men who worked the rafts and the rails. It is during this time that the American House is said to have became a "well known house of ill repute."[12] By 1903,[13] at the latest, even this use had ceased. The Ryan House closed, and its two parts were separated and were referred to as the "Hotel Building" and the "Wooden Building" by their owner. They were used for apartments and later were vacant for many years. By the 1960s the American House was purchased by John and Ruth Bickell and used as a vacation home.

CONTEXT C: THE AMERICAN HOUSE AS AN EXAMPLE OF EARLY HOTEL ARCHITECTURE AND AN AMERICAN ICON

[12] John Bickell and others have told me about this. This is oral history only. John Bickell said he learned about this from a woman on his paper route when he was a boy. She said she had been one of the "girls" at the American House, then the Ryan House. According to him, she said the madam and girls lived in the American House, they solicited their customers in the saloon downstairs, and took the men to the small rooms in the Ryan House next door.

[13] Property Abstract

Architecture

The American House is a vernacular hotel type based on the zero-lot-line, business block. This type evolved from European buildings of a similar scale and size such as the French Maison a Loyer, and only a few examples survive in small towns. This town hotel type is different from the more suburban or rural Inn that often has a broad porch or veranda at the first floor level.

The usual version of this vernacular hotel type had commercial space or a commercial looking storefront on the first floor with upper floors having more regular and smaller windows punctuated by balconies or porches on the upper floors. A balcony, usually with an iron railing, is almost always present and is an identifying item for hotels. Balconies were not added to commercial buildings unless there was housing of some kind on the upper floors such as apartments or hotel rooms. On the interior it had to have a lobby and often a dining room and kitchen as well as sleeping rooms. A parlor was also considered a necessity for all but the most humble hotel, and a stable was also important. Many had washrooms, and later, of course, modern bathrooms.

There are very few published examples of extant vernacular hotels that date to the 1850s, but there are a few here for comparison. The examples are larger than the simple three-bay American House, but there are similarities. Barnum's Hotel in St. Louis, 1854, had commercial space on the lower floor and a front porch and balcony on the façade (page 33). While irregular in shape to fit its triangular lot, the Flatiron Hotel in Omaha had commercial space on the lower floor and a balcony with an iron railing on the corner (page 34). The earliest portion of the Sherman House in Chicago is dated to 1845. It had a balcony at the second floor level and looked (it is not extant) much like a taller and wider American House (page 35). A second example from *Lost Chicago* is the Briggs House designed in 1856 (page 36). This is a much more elaborated version, but note the commercial space on the ground floor and the iron balconies on the façade. The hooded windows might be added later.

The French "maison a loyer" architectural type is a city building type with apartments on the upper floors. This type inspired many American hotels and apartment buildings. Two examples from Paris show the rich development of this form in Europe (pages 37 & 38). These small apartment houses served as models for small non-free-standing, commercial buildings in America. Paris was a vaguely known quantity. Many people had been to Europe or came from Europe and had seen these small buildings on the European city streets, and Americans admired French style in architecture and other things more than has been acknowledged. A reference to France is even found in the "Ball at the American" article in the North Iowa Times. "The supper

was good, the music was good and the dancing could not have been improved outside of *La Belle France*!"

French influence specifically and European influence in general entered the Mississippi valley easily in the 18th and 19th centuries through New Orleans. The prevalence of Iron railings is ubiquitous there. All buildings, even residences, had iron balconies. A look through *New Orleans Architecture II* reveals the many vernacular buildings of the American House type, i.e. three stories tall, three bays wide commercial buildings with iron railings. Only one example of many of that type from New Orleans is illustrated here (page 39).

The American House exhibits the important characteristics of the hotels described above. It has large windows in the first floor storefront and the all-important second floor balcony with an iron railing on the façade. In the context of McGregor, Iowa, however, the American House is out of place. Other early hotels were wooden gable front structures. It serves to express the aspirations of its builder, W. H. Harding to create a city hotel with amenities the other hotels did not offer.

An Example And An Icon

The rehabilitation of the American House by John and Ruth Bickell served as a model and example for others in the McGregor area to restore or renovate their older houses and commercial buildings. An additional benefit to the town was the well noted rise of tourism. There were many articles about the Bickell's and the American House with photos of the façade and the interior. John Bickell is proud of his building and was always ready to talk about its history. Because of the American House and all of this publicity, about $800,000 was invested in the restoration of many buildings in Clayton County. An important feature in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* expresses this with "River Town Revival" with sub headlines "McGregor native's interest in hotel converts others." American House was featured in two different articles in the *Iowan Magazine*. One article is entitled "McGregor is a Happening." Bickell and the American House were featured in articles in the *Des Moines Register*, the *Hawkeye Realtor*, the *La Crosse Tribune*, and others. The *Courier-Press* of Prairie du Chine, Wisconsin writes "McGregor Restoration Transforms River Town." The American House was and is a historic preservation example and model to follow. Its image appeared in many articles and has become a familiar symbol of McGregor and of small town commercial buildings.

The American House helps identify McGregor from the river. It, and the small row of buildings that stand with it, symbolize McGregor and serve as a backdrop for civic ceremonies at the river's edge. Related to its function as a symbol and identifying marker for a specific small Iowa town, the image of the American House as used as a symbol for small town values. Anonymous photos of the American House illustrate many articles not related to McGregor or Iowa. A

humorous example of this is the *T.V. Guide* illustration for the "Millennium" T. V. show (page 40). What could be more symbolically generic than that?

Advertisement for the American House
North Iowa Times, November 14, 1856

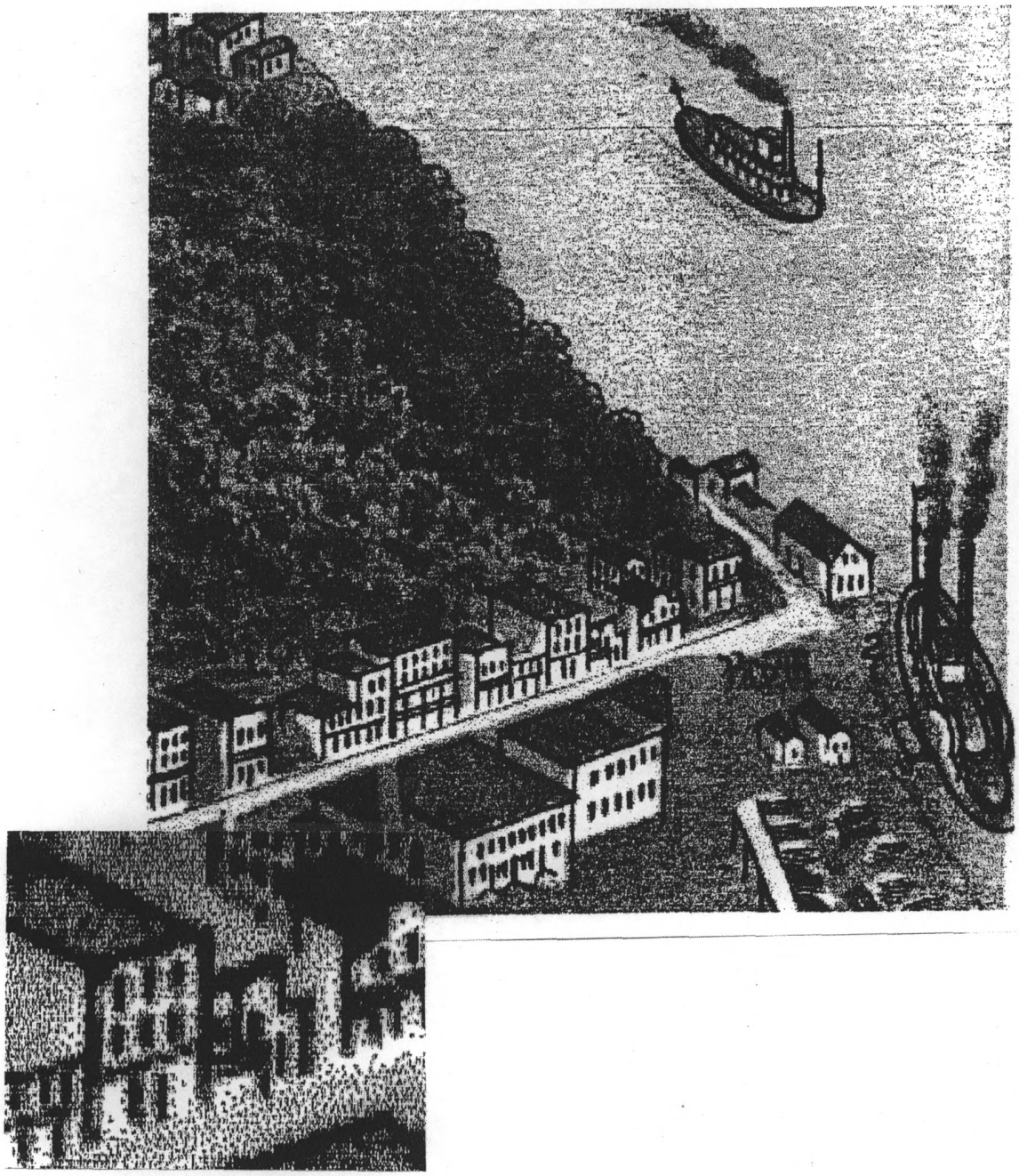
AMERICAN HOUSE.

The Proprietor of this well known stand, is still exerting himself to provide comforts and conveniences for the great tide of travelers who visit for business or pleasure, the garden of the west, Northern Iowa. Increasing business requires increased facilities for public accommodation and hence the AMERICAN is receiving very material enlargment and improvment. Its nearness to the Steam-Boat Landing has established its reputation as a convenient House for these who arrive or are intending to take a Boat, while every luuxry the market affords is provided for the wants of numerous guests.

Stages leave every morning for all points West. A Good Stable, well managed, is near the premises. Baggage conveyed to and from the boats Free of Charge.

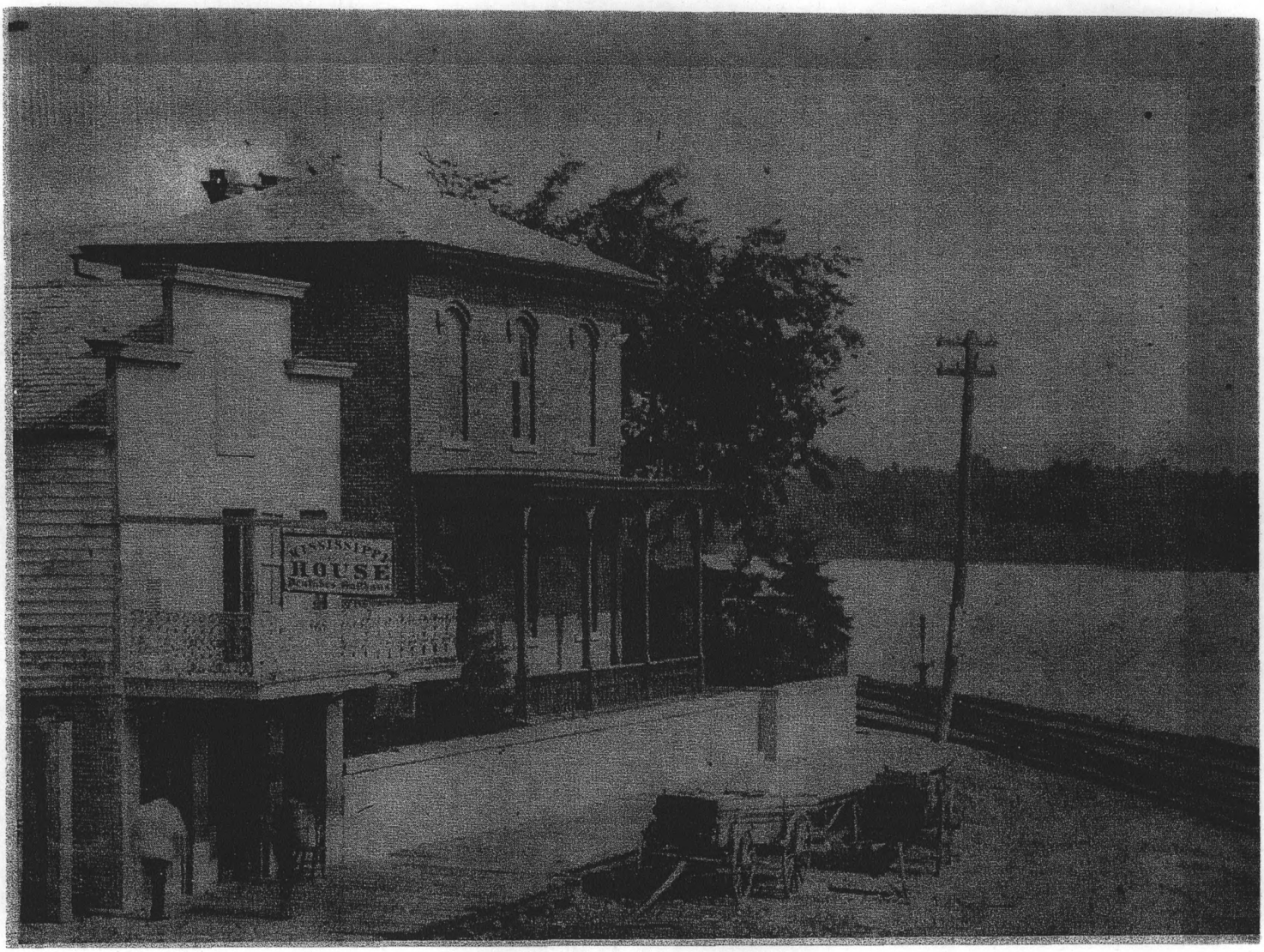
W. H. HARDING, Proprietor.

Birds eye View of MacGregor, Iowa, 1869, Detail
Copy Via Internet From The Library Of Congress
Detail Shows All Of Lower Main Street With The American House Fourth From The Right On The North Side Of The Road.

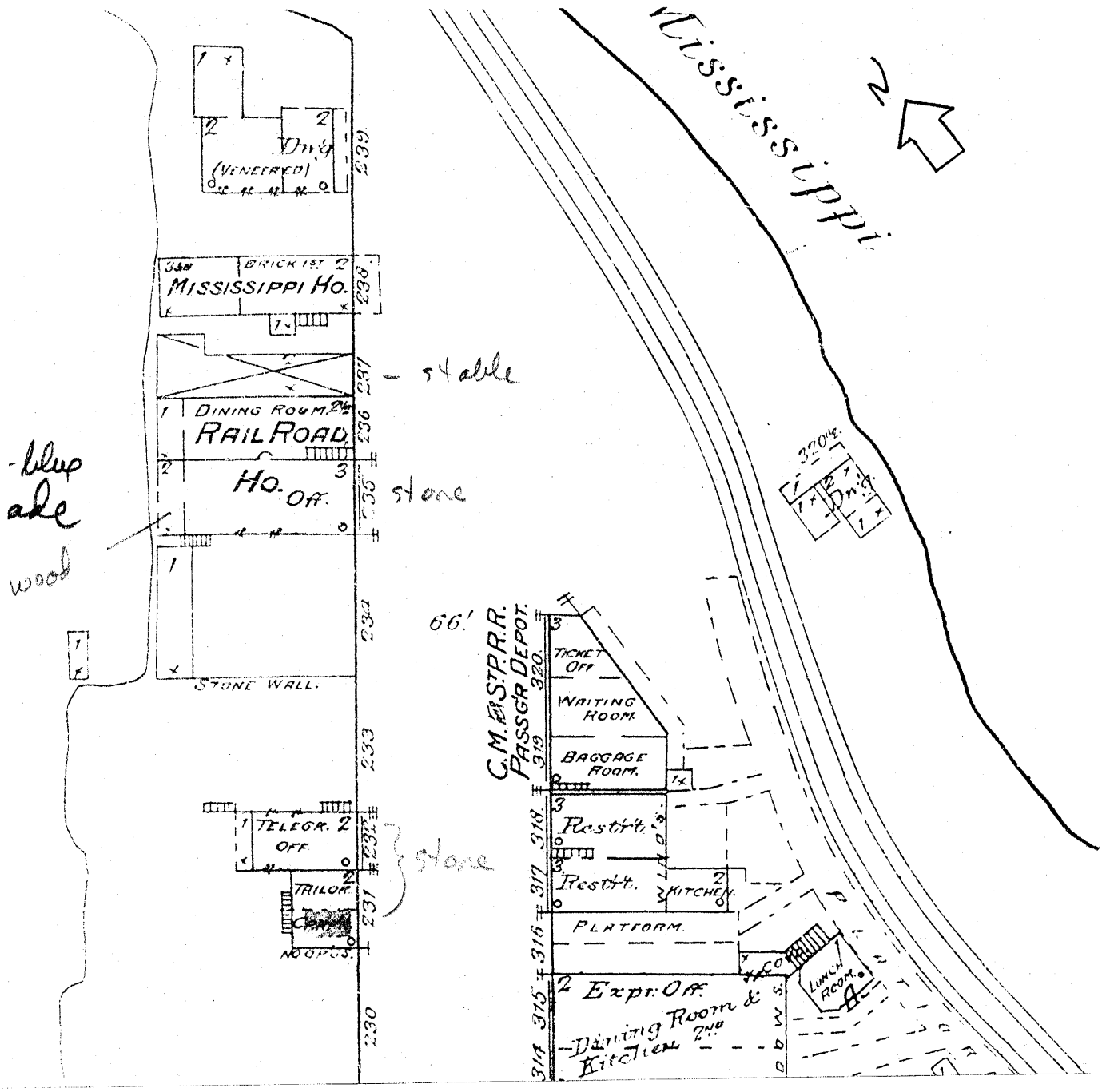


View of McGregor, Iowa, Undated Photo #1 (@1860?)
Looking up Main Street from the Riverfront, McGregor Historical Society
The American House is only just visible with its stonewall behind the Ryan House roof.

View of McGregor, Iowa, Undated Photograph #2
Looking North at the Mississippi House and McGregor House Hotels
McGregor Historical Society

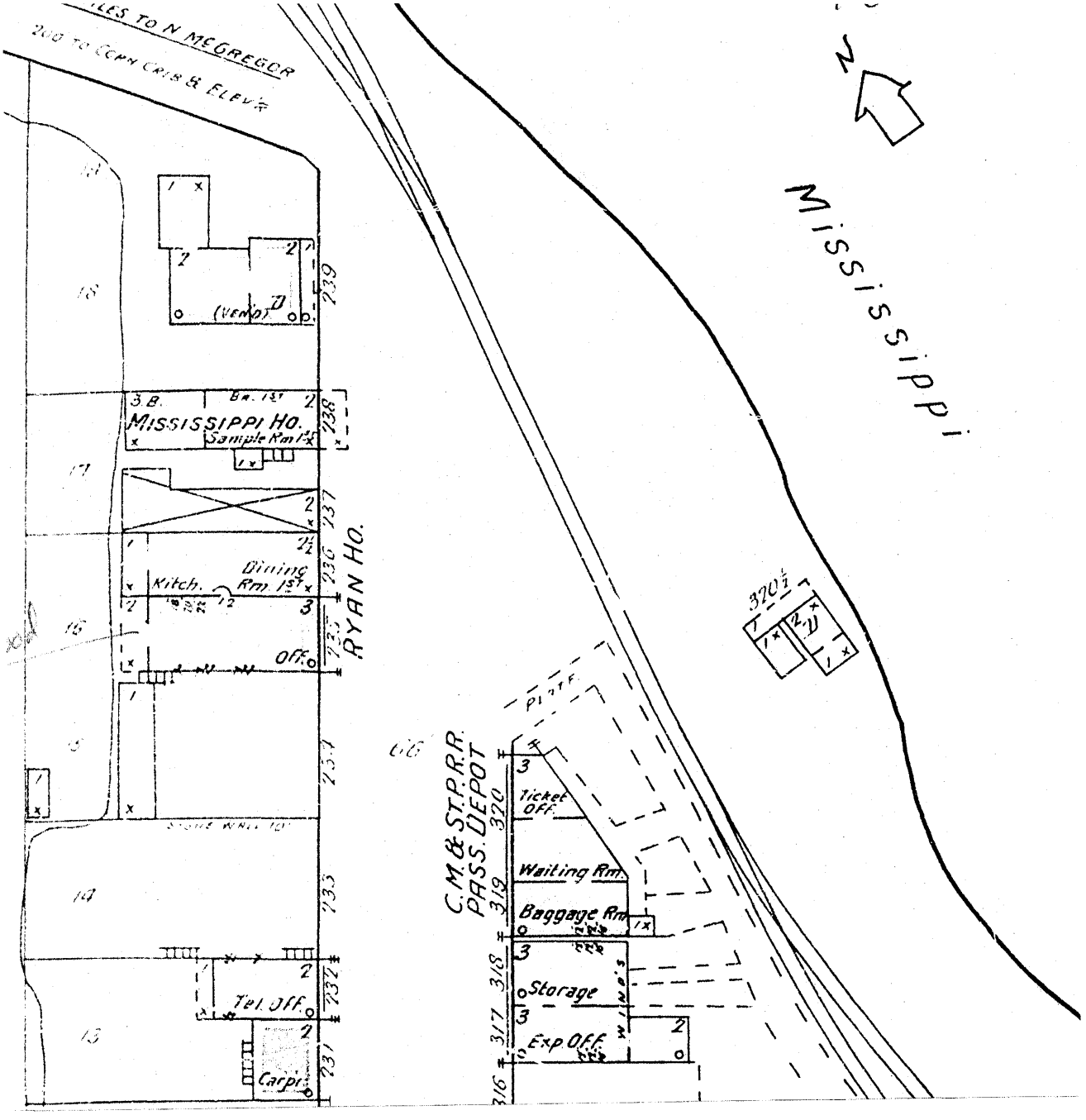


McGregor, Howa, Fire Insurance Map, 1886
American House Marked



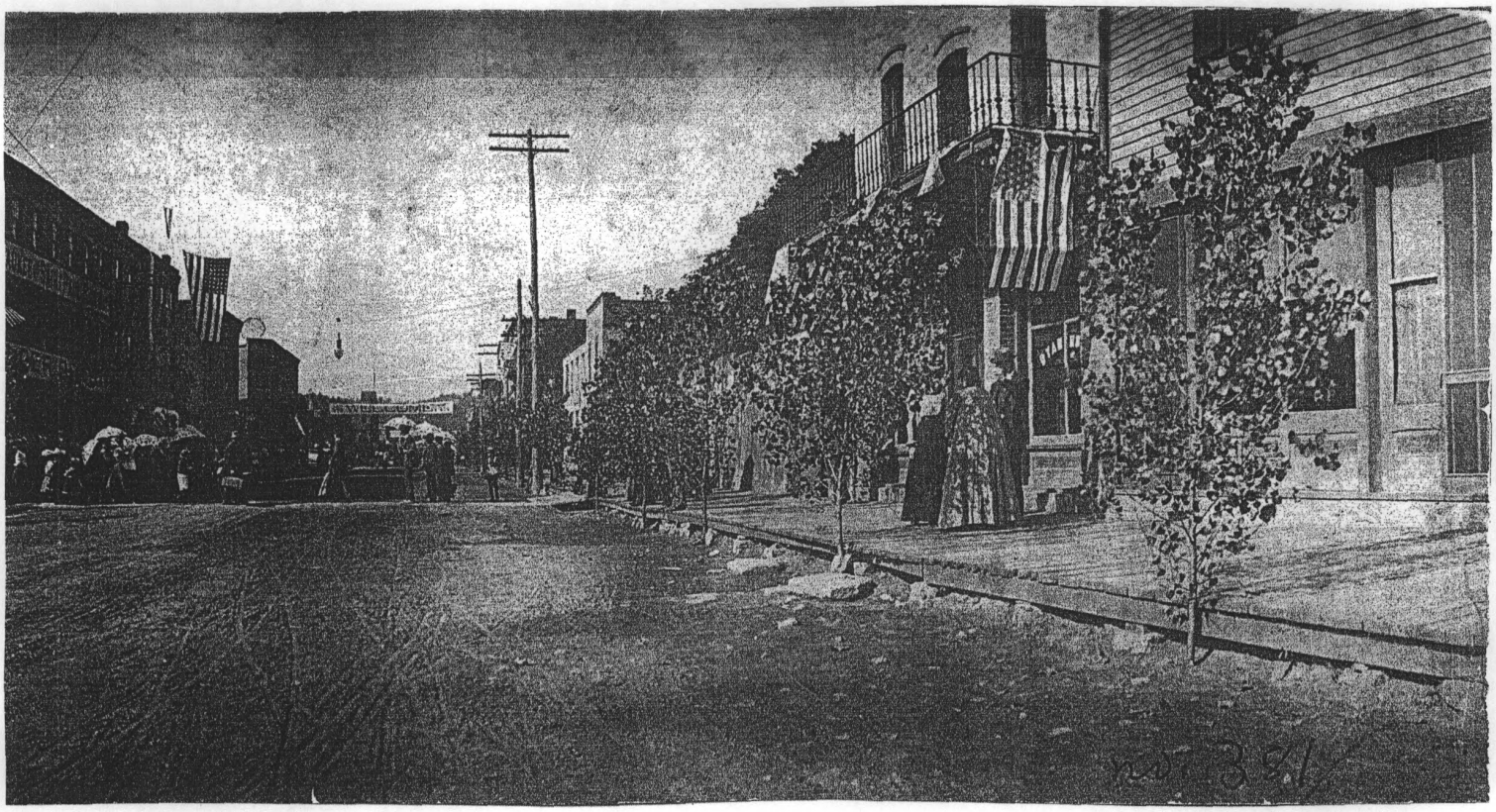
Photograph of the American House and the Ryan House, Circa 1890
Collection of John Bickell

McGregor, Iowa, Fire Insurance Map, 1894
American House Noted



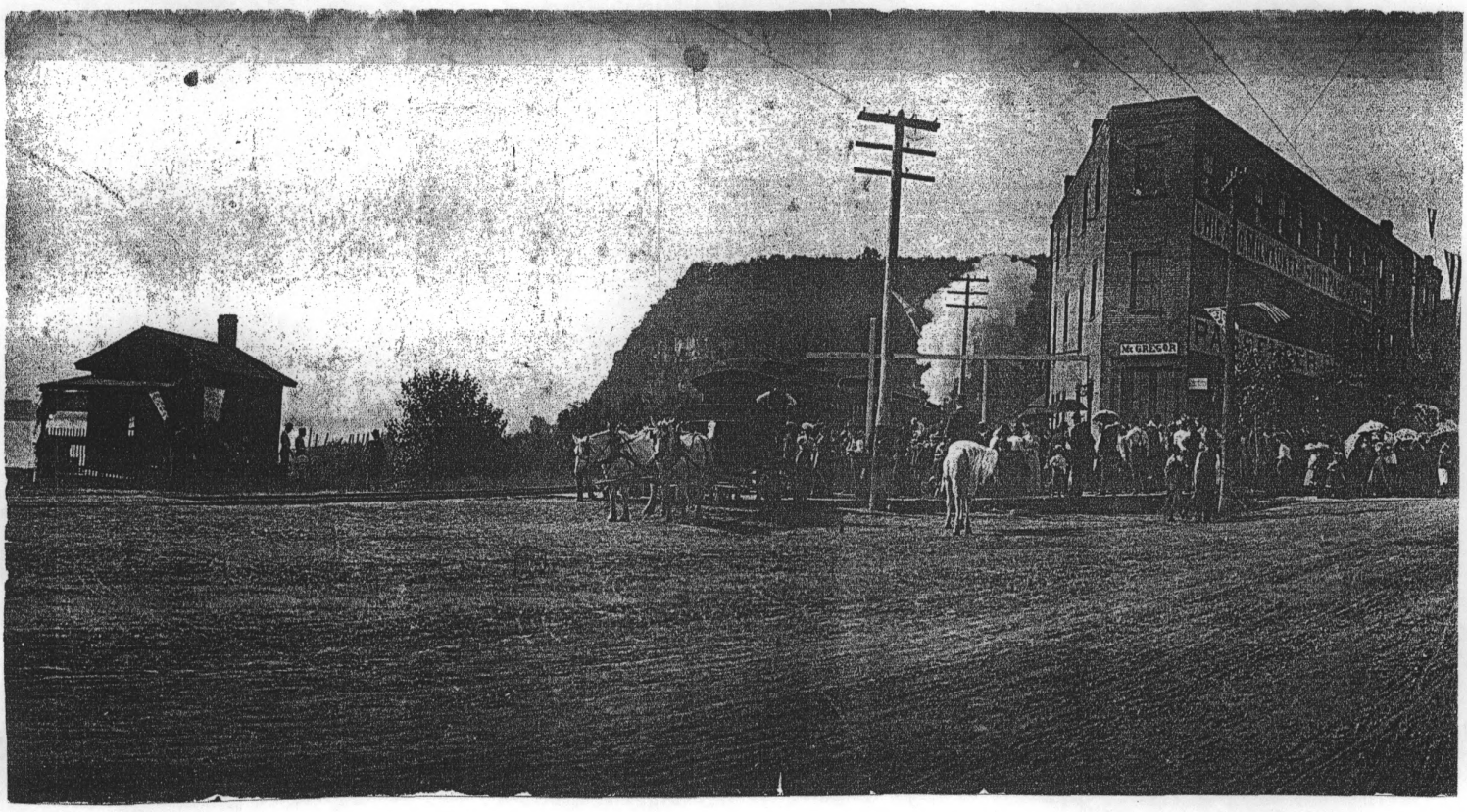
View of Port of McGregor, Looking North from Point Anne, 1897
Note the development behind Main Street on the hillside.
McGregor Historical Society

Undated Photograph #3, View Looking up Main Street, McGregor, Iowa
Detail Right Side
American House and Ryan House to the right, McGregor Historical Society



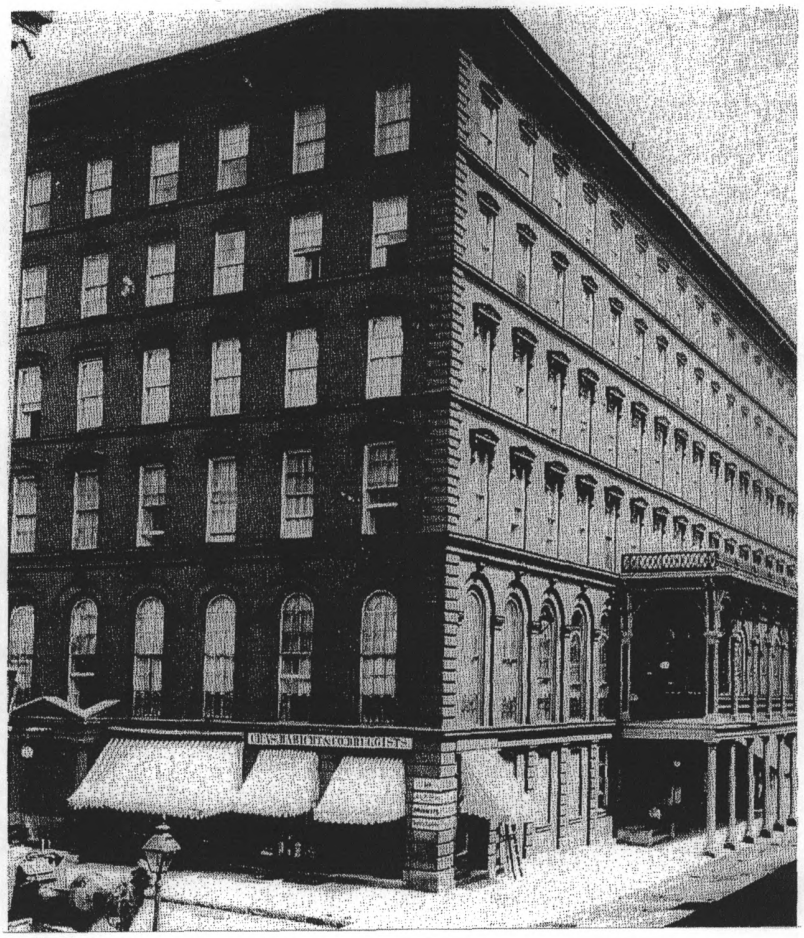
Undated Photograph #3, View Looking up Main Street, McGregor, Iowa
Detail Left Side

The Railroad station and track at left, American House and Ryan House to the right.
McGregor Historical Society

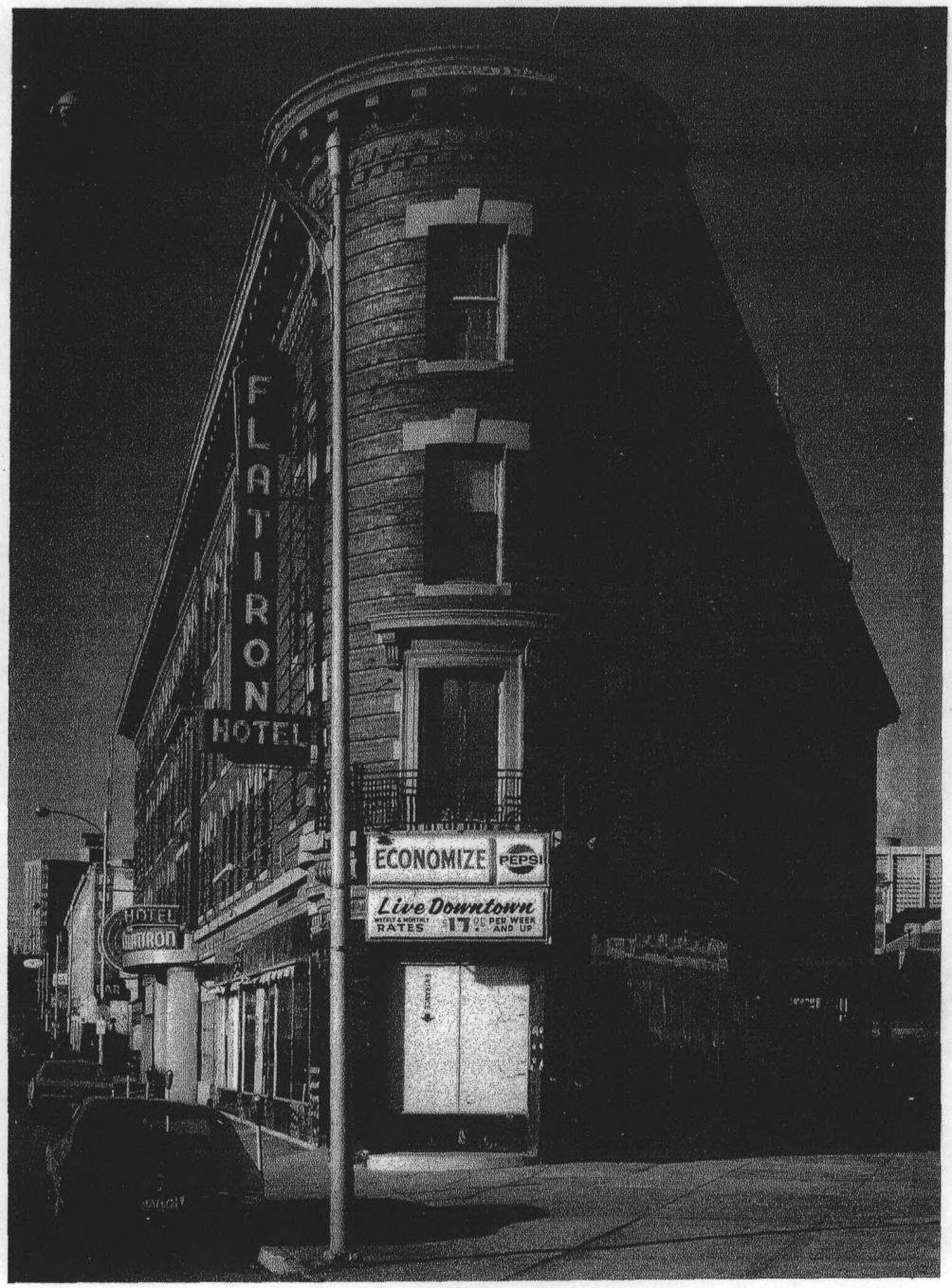


Undated Photograph of the End of Main Street, McGregor, Iowa
American House on the left – This might be from the flood of 1905.
McGregor Historical Society

The Barnum's Hotel, 1854, St. Louis
From The Architectural Heritage of St. Louis, 1803-1891, p. 79.



Flatiron Hotel, Omaha, 1856
From Omaha City Architecture, p. 55

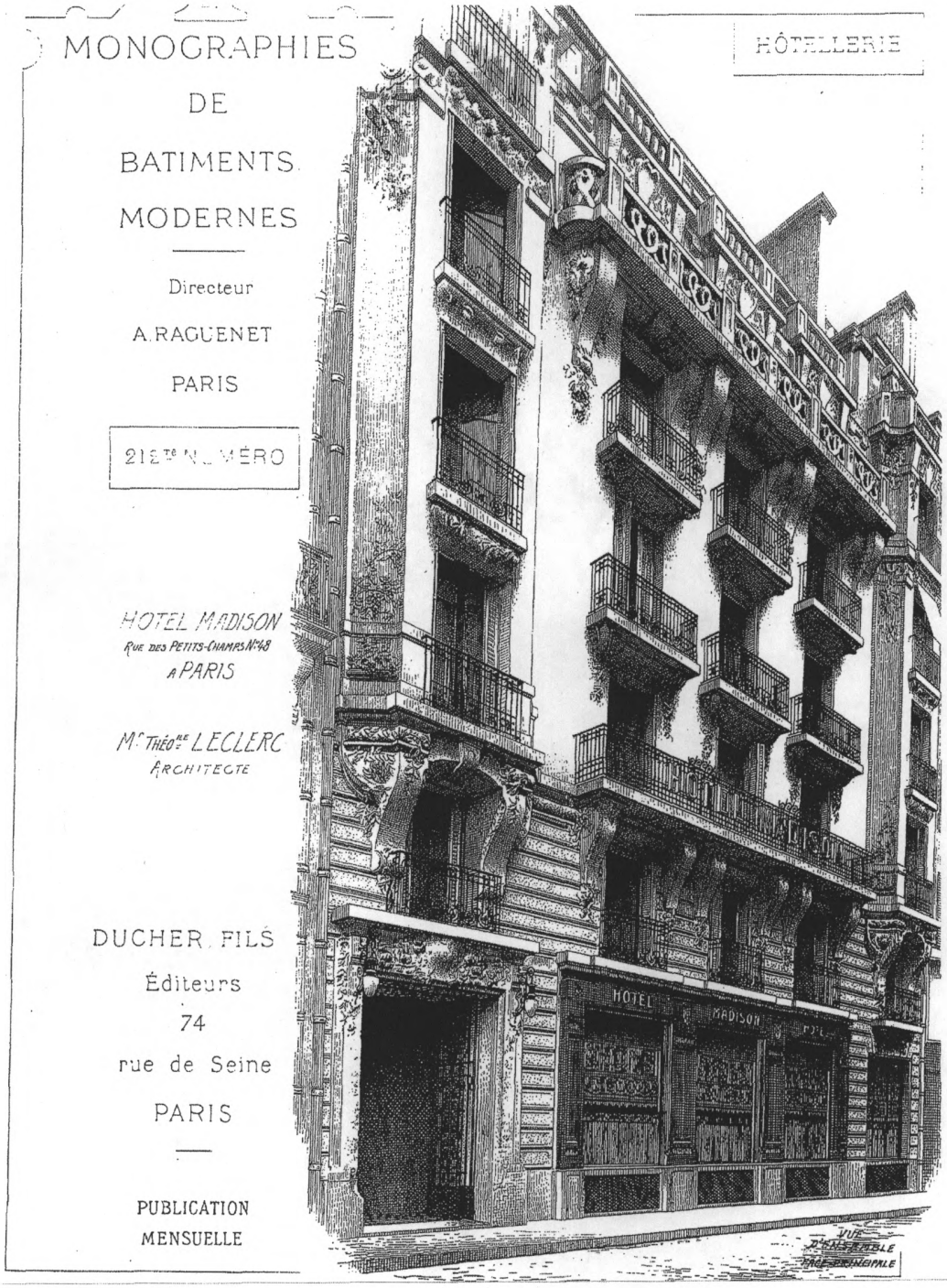


The Sherman House, Chicago, 1845
From *Lost Chicago*, p. 114.

Briggs House, Chicago, 1856
From *Lost Chicago*, p. 111..

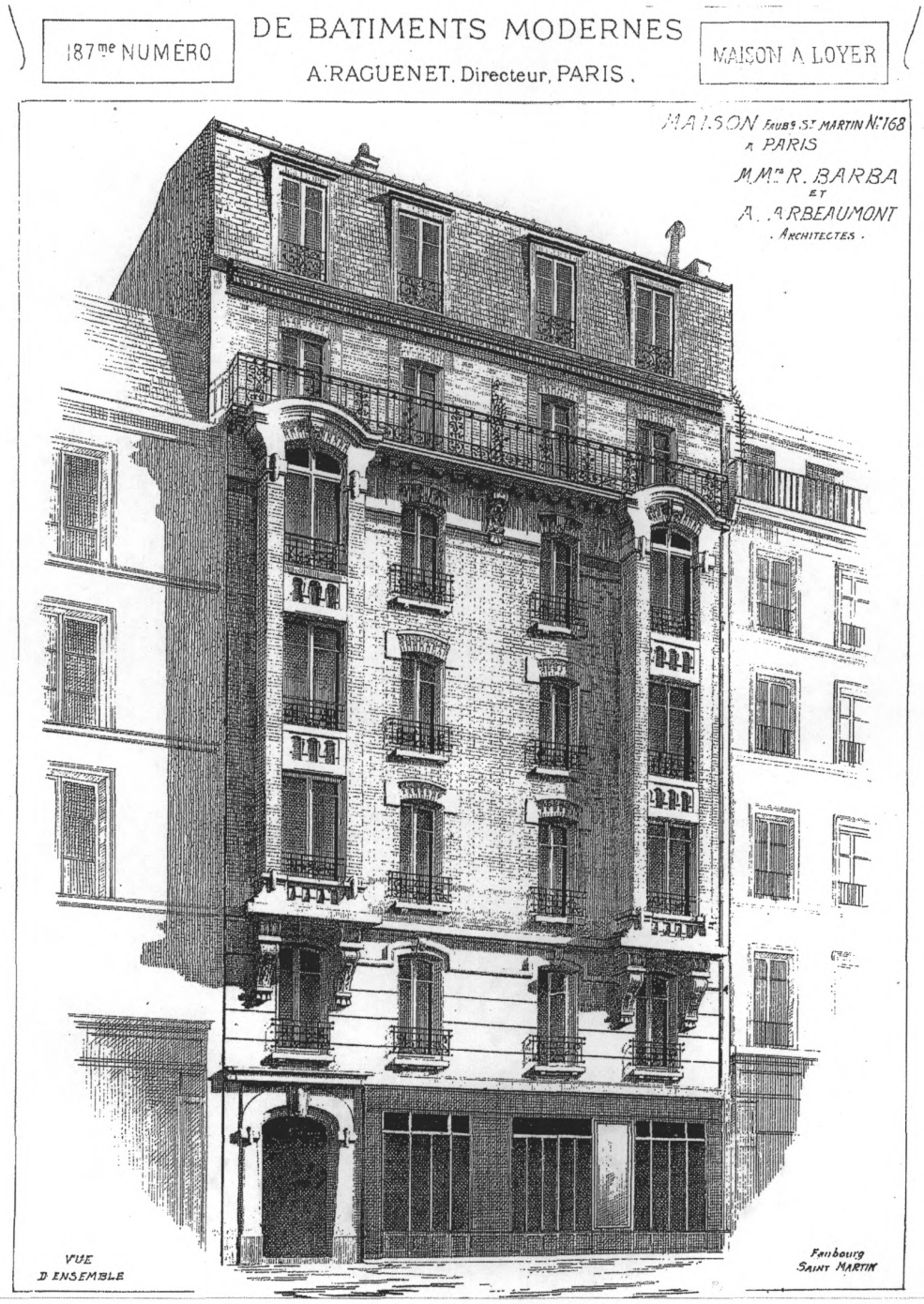
Hotel Madison, Paris

From *Monographies de Batiments Modernes,* No. 187, 1887-1895.

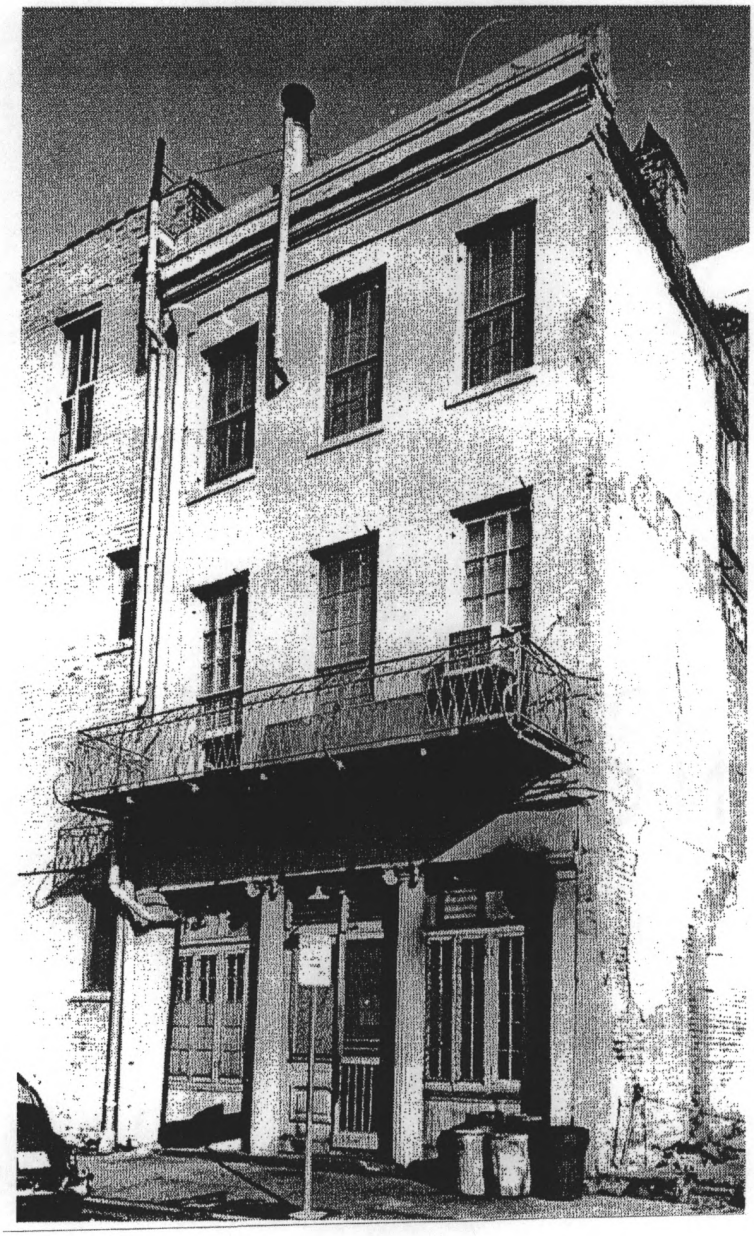


Maison Rue Bardinett, Paris

From *Monographies de Batiments Modernes, No. 136,* 1887-1895.



Three-story Commercial Building, Penn St, Corner of Poydras, New Orleans
Illustrated in *New Orleans Architecture II*, p. 60.



Milllium

"Millennium – Fox Friday," TV Guide, May 1-7, 1999, p. 203.

SOURCES

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Property Abstract for 116 Main Street, McGregor, Clayton County, Iowa.

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Verbal Boundary Description

The property boundary encloses the entire current property identified legally as PT E. 15½ feet lot 15, SW ½ lot 16, Blk. 3.

Verbal Justification

This boundary encloses the original property upon which the American House was constructed plus the property upon which the newer additions rest. This property has been identified with the American House at least since the 1920s.