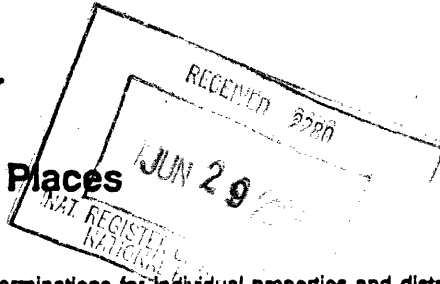


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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 B'nai Jacob Synagogue

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 529 E. Main N/A Not for publication

city or town Ottumwa N/A vicinity

state Iowa code IA county Wapello code 179 zip code 52501

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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.)

Rowell J. Lortie
Signature of certifying official/Title

June 28, 2004
Date

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

State of 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 *Sandra M. McQuinn* Date of Action 8/10/04

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.)

- 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.
- 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 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.)

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 # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

SOCIAL HISTORY

ETHNIC HERITAGE

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1915-1954

Significant Dates

1915

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Kerns, George M.

L.T. Chrisman & Co

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Name of Property

Wapello County, IA
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1

1	5
---	---

5	4	9	8	7	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

4	5	4	0	4	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

2

--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

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 Molly Myers Naumann, Consultant
organization For the Ottumwa HPC date March 2004
street & number 167 W. Alta Vista telephone 641-682-2743
city or town Ottumwa state IA zip code 52501-1437

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 SHPO or FPO.)

name B'nai Jacob Synagogue, c/o Bessie Ullman, Treasurer
street & number 1221 E. 4th Street telephone 641-682-6906
city or town Ottumwa state IA zip code 52501

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.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 1

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION:

The B'nai Jacob Synagogue (1915) is located on the north side of the 500 block of Main Street near the east end of the Ottumwa central business district. Ottumwa, the Wapello County seat, is situated on the Des Moines River. Like many buildings on Ottumwa's hilly north side, the synagogue rests on a lot approximately 5' above street level with the hill rising sharply behind the building. It faces toward the railroad tracks and Des Moines River to the south. However, since the original plat of the city was laid out parallel to the river and not to the cardinal points, the synagogue actually faces southwest.

It is an almost square single story brick building with a poured concrete basement, measuring 40'6" across the façade and 48'8" along the side walls which are 12' high. A pyramidal roof is asphalt shingled and there is a single chimney on the west side. A concrete retaining wall parallels the sidewalk, and broad concrete steps lead up to the entrance. A low single story glazed hollow tile addition (30' x 63'10") with flat roof was made to the rear in 1960 to house a community meeting room, kitchen, and rest rooms. This addition is not visually intrusive as it is located at the very back of the lot, next to the steep hillside.

Exterior:

The B'nai Jacob Synagogue features a symmetrical tripartite façade. The broad (17'6") central portion is separated from the sides by shallow brick piers (1'10" wide), and these piers are repeated at the corners. The central portion features a double door entrance flanked by sidelights. Each door contains twenty-one rectangular panels. No date has been determined for the replacement of the original wooden doors by the current set, but it is believed that the original ones were also composed of a series of recessed panels, echoing the design of the sidelights. This entry is surrounded by a shallow brick pavilion. Above the entry are three round arched windows. The reddish-brown brick is laid in a running bond with a few decorative elements such as the simple arches around some windows. A single soldier course frieze above the windows creates a recessed brick panel containing a stone Star of David. The narrower (7'10") side sections each contain a tall slender window (1'7" wide) which is capped by vertical jack-arches. The three wall sections are individually defined at the roofline by slightly pitched parapets, continuing the tripartite division.

The side elevations continue the tripartite divisions with the tall narrow windows at each end, and the recessed brick paneled frieze found on the façade is repeated above the central portions on each side. On the west elevation the center portion is filled with five tall round arched windows measuring 2'5" wide. On the east elevation the center portion is composed of four of the tall arched windows, with a windowless polygonal bay in the center. A door is located at the "north" end of the east elevation, under the narrow end window. The part of the exterior walls above the soldier course on all elevations has been re-pointed with a different type of mortar, creating the appearance of a "hat" or "crown."

The north elevation has the same tall narrow end windows, plus a series of three round arched windows echoing those on the façade. Below the three windows is a door in the center with a rectangular window on each side. Originally this was the rear of the building and the door opened to the outside. Today this door opens into the community room.

Interior:

The main floor of the synagogue is composed of four rooms plus balcony. The foyer is entered through the double doors. It measures 8'1" x 12'3" and has a doorway on each side wall. These doors

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 2

lead into corner rooms measuring 12'3" x 14'6". The room on the left (west) served as the cloak room and the one on the right was used for children's classes.

Double doors opposite the entrance lead from the foyer into a sanctuary/auditorium that measures 35'6" from front to back, and 37'6" across. The ark is located in the polygonal bay in the east wall, while the bimah (the platform from which the Pentateuch and the Prophets are read) was originally located in the center of the room. A balcony, for the women and children of the congregation, is located across the front (south) of the room and is reached by stairs along the front of it. (Stairs leading to the unfinished basement are located directly under those to the balcony.) The plaster walls are painted off-white while the wood trim is of dark oak. The oak is used for the window frames and sills, doors, benches, the cornice linking the tops of the windows, the medallion in the center of the ceiling, the stairway to the balcony and the balcony railing. The most prominent use of the oak is for the framing around the ark. This repeats the round arches found in the windows. Originally the ark was enclosed by a velvet portiere. This was replaced some years ago by oak cabinet doors designed to match the original woodwork. The original oak benches (pews) are arranged in rows facing east toward the ark. Benches in the balcony are also arranged to face the ark. The oak floors were left uncovered originally.



Early Undated Photo Looking to SE
(Courtesy of Wapello County Historical Society, Bessie Ullman, Donor))

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

**B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa**

Section number 7 Page 3

The large round arched windows seen on the outside provide the major illumination for the sanctuary. Originally all windows in the building contained "yellowish tinted" panes (*Ottumwa Courier*, 23 Aug 1915). Although some of the yellow glass panes have been replaced, the original feeling of "sun light" remains. Artificial lighting is provided by a multi-light chandelier in the center of the room. It was described in the newspaper article about the dedication as "as pretty a system of illumination as there is to be found in the city....the huge chandelier in the center of the auditorium probably excels anything of the vicinity." This chandelier remains in place. It is suspended from the center of the ceiling by eight lengths of chain. These chains hold a large metal circle from which are suspended a series of eight large, alternating with eight small, frosted globes, the large ones hanging few inches below the smaller ones. Below this is suspended a second, smaller metal circle from which hang eight of the smaller size globes, with a single large globe suspended in the center on a longer chain. Nine additional frosted globes hanging from the ceiling, four on each side, and one in the center of the east (rear) wall, complete the illumination. All of the globes are original except for the large center globe on the chandelier, and one along the west side. (It is of interest that the frosted lights in the synagogue appear to be identical to those used in the courtroom of Ottumwa's Federal Building/Post Office, NRHP, dating from 1912-14.)

The major alterations to the interior have been changes to the bimah and the ark. As noted earlier, the bimah was originally in the center of the room, under the chandelier and was elevated three steps. It was enclosed by a railing with spindle-work along the top and lighting was provided by a frosted globe at each corner. The bimah contained a small bench and a reading table. Around 1942 the bimah was lowered a step or two, and in the early 1960s it was removed completely. At that time a platform was built along the east wall in front of the ark. This is reached by three steps at either end and has a low railing across the front. This railing is broken into three sections by inset Stars of David. The platform holds chairs for the readers and pulpits for the readings. The doors to the ark were probably added at the same time. While the benches on the main floor are original, the book shelves attached to the rear of each have been removed and the seats of the benches have been upholstered. The oak flooring is now covered by carpeting. Two windows opening from the sanctuary into the children's room have been covered by panels carrying names of deceased members of the congregation. At the rear of the room, the windows above and on each side of the door have been covered on the exterior by the construction of the community room. This community room is totally functional with tile floors, suspended ceiling with fluorescent lighting, paneling along the long rear wall, and plaster walls everywhere else. There is no attempt to match this addition to the original 1915 building.

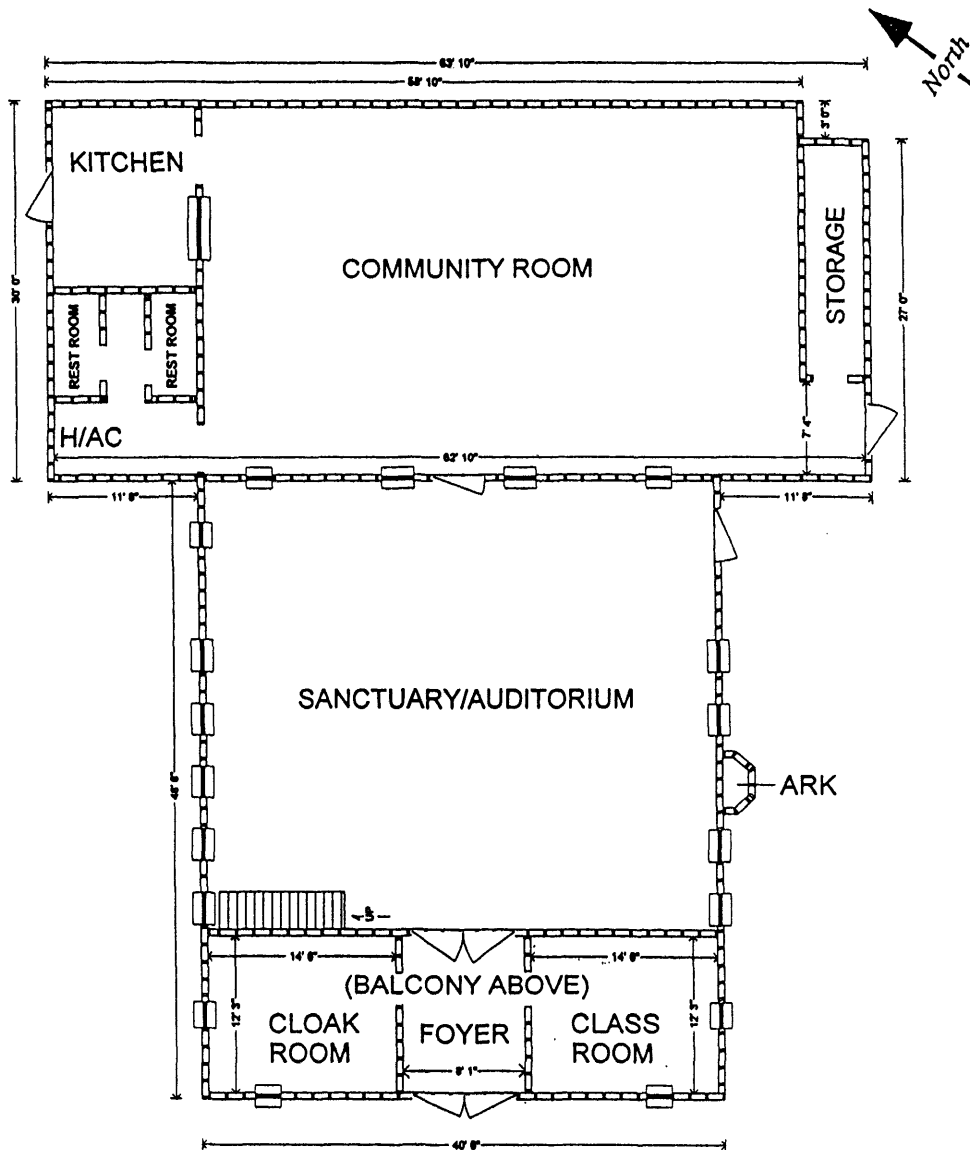
The B'nai Jacob Synagogue retains a high degree of integrity, both on the exterior and interior.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 4



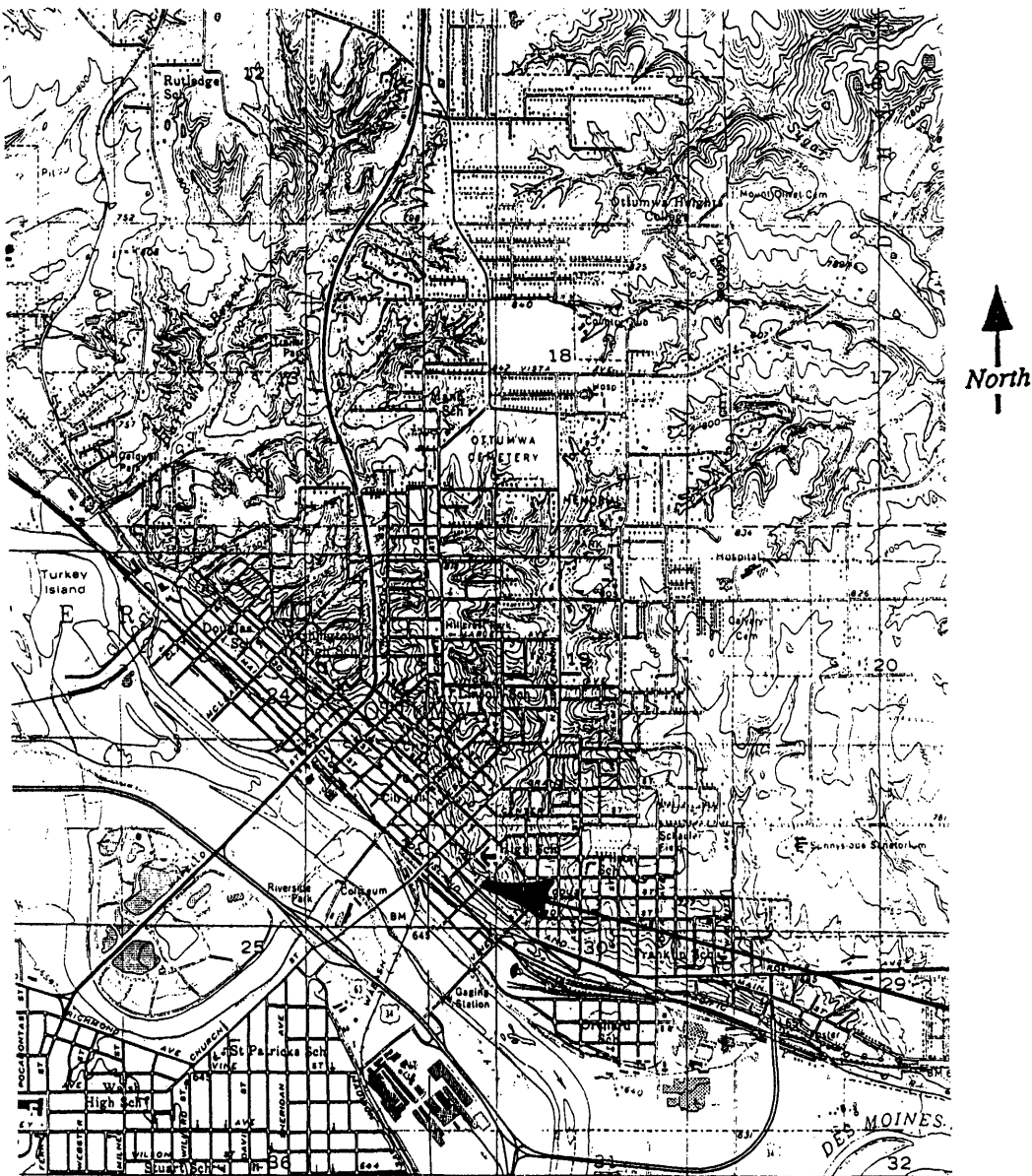
Synagogue Floor Plan
(Computerized drawing based on sketch and is not to scale)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 5



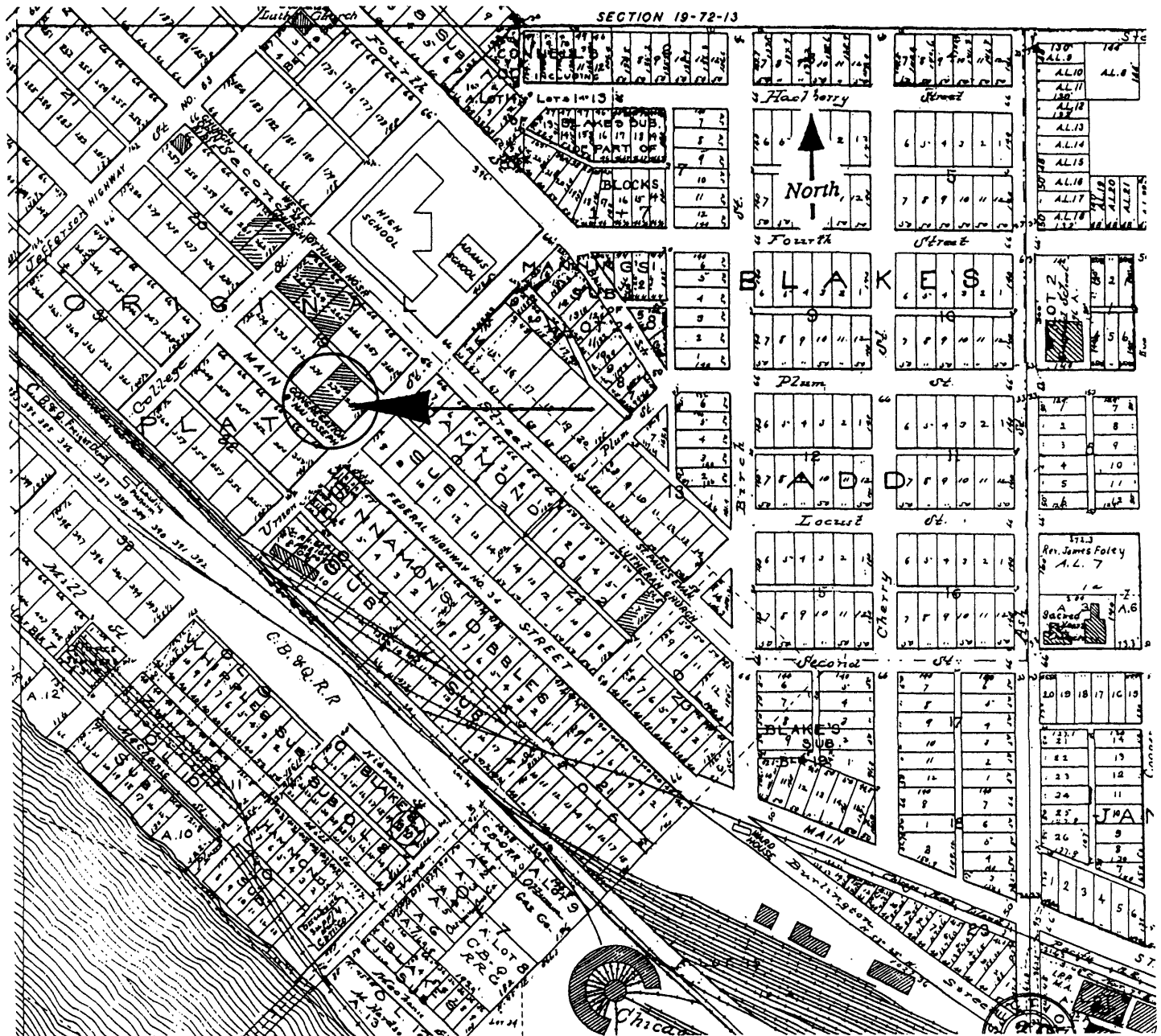
U.S.G.S Map of Ottumwa (North) Quad
Location of Synagogue Indicated by Arrow

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 7



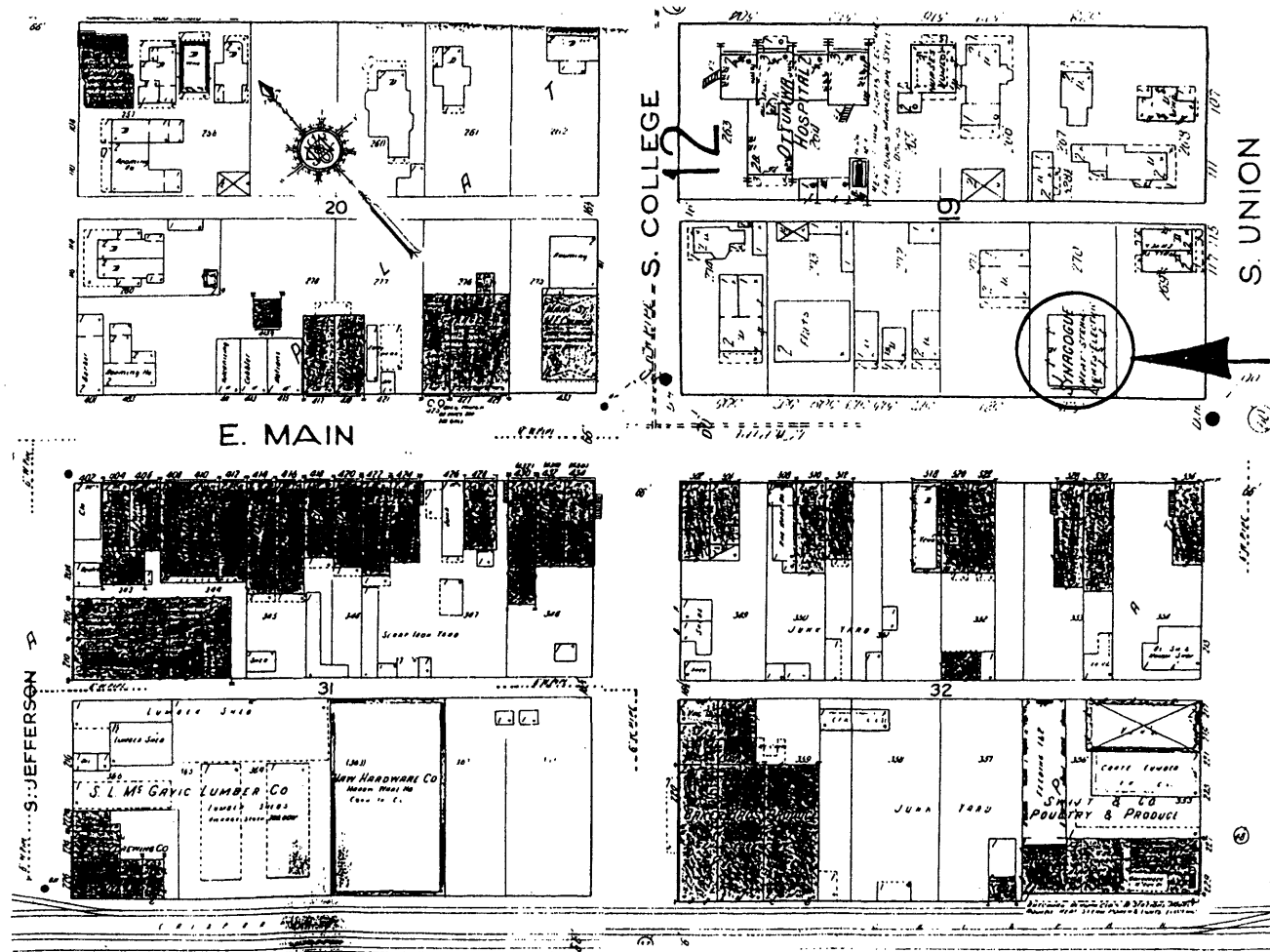
1939 Plat Map of Ottumwa Illustrating Diagonal Orientation
Of the Original Plat
Synagogue Indicated by Arrow
Note that the map incorrectly identifies it as B'nai "Joseph"

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 8



1917 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Showing
Location of Synagogue in Relation to Commercial Buildings

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 9

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The B'nai Jacob Synagogue (1915) is locally significant under Criterion A because it illustrates the importance of the Jewish community in Ottumwa's business and social history, and because it was composed of an ethnically cohesive group of people. It is considered locally significant under Criterion C as the only synagogue in Ottumwa's history, and as an example of a design executed by local master architect George M. Kerns. It links to the 1995 "Architectural & Historical Resources of Ottumwa, Iowa" Multiple Property Document and meets the registration requirement under the "Architecture" context. It meets Criteria Consideration A as it has significance under both Criteria A and C. B'nai Jacob may have state significance as the only remaining active synagogue in the southeast corner of Iowa, an important area of Jewish settlement in Iowa.

Criterion A:

The earliest Jewish settlers in Ottumwa were Reformed Jews from Germany and Austria who arrived around the middle of the 19th century. Several of these became prominent business leaders. Charles Sax arrived sometime before the Civil War, and in 1865 he brought his younger brother Jacob B., age 12, to Ottumwa. As young J.B. grew up he opened his own clothing store in competition with his brother. J.B. became a very successful businessman on Main Street leaving a substantial trust fund at his death in 1922. Both J.B. and his wife converted to Christianity at an unknown date. Another early settler was Phillip Emanuel Adler who came to Ottumwa around 1875. He was involved in several different business activities, but it was his son E.P. Adler who became one of Ottumwa's best known businessmen. E.P. started to work for the *Ottumwa Courier* (Ottumwa's oldest continuous business, dating to 1848) in 1893, and by 1895 had risen to become City Editor. *Courier* owner A.W. Lee founded the Lee Syndicate made up of nine newspapers, including the *Ottumwa Courier*. In 1901 E.P. Adler was transferred to Davenport to become the publisher of another Lee newspaper, the *Davenport Times*, and later became the president of the Lee newspaper group. The Sax and Adler families appear to have been part of the Ottumwa Hebrew Association which was formed in 1876 primarily to purchase land for a Jewish cemetery. Two acres just east of the Ottumwa Cemetery along Vanness were purchased for this purpose.

Author Edna Ferber and her parents moved to Ottumwa in 1890. She described life in Ottumwa in her 1939 autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure*:

Some miracle of mischance led my father to a small Iowa coal mining town distinguished by the Indian name of Ottumwa. My father had been told that there was absolutely no general store in the town. Ottumwa clamored apparently for Ferber's Bazaar. He inspected the place (he must have been blindfolded) and returned with glowing stories of this Iowa town in a farming and coal-mining district. The fact that it boasted more than sixteen thousand population without a decent shop for china, toys, notions and all sorts of household goods should have been significant enough to serve as a warning.

Ferber didn't like living in Ottumwa, partly because there were so few Jewish families and no place of worship. They gathered in homes for services and rented a hall for the High Holy Days. The Jewish families visited back and forth with each other on a regular basis, forming their own social group. Ferber noted that "they saw a little too much of one another." Her father's business did not prosper and the family left Ottumwa in 1897.

The next wave of Jewish immigrants came primarily between 1890-1910 and were the

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 10

forbearers of the present Jewish community. Some came directly to Ottumwa after they arrived from Europe, while others started their new life in New York City, or in eastern Iowa communities. Several Ottumwa families lived briefly in Muscatine before moving to Wapello County. As a rule these immigrants were poor and had to depend on relatives who were already here to provide living space, jobs, and financial assistance. Most were eastern European: Russian, Polish, Latvian, and Lithuanian. The U.S. Census figures from 1920 and 1930 show that the majority of these immigrants were from Russia, with those from Poland coming in a close second. (U.S. Census figures for Wapello County, 1920 and 1920-30)

Due to their financial situation many of Ottumwa's newest residents became peddlers to earn money and to learn the English language. With a packet of clothing and notions on their back they traveled from coal mining camp to mining camp, often stopping at farmsteads as they passed by. When they accumulated enough money, many rented space and opened a store in Ottumwa. The wives were responsible for running the store while the men continued to travel the countryside until the stores were firmly established and the family could live from that income alone. The families usually lived in rooms behind the store or in an apartment upstairs. This was an economical solution to the housing question as well as providing easy access to the business. It must be remembered that in the early 20th century stores along Main Street stayed open much later than today, and the owners were often called out at strange times to cater to their customers.

The center of Ottumwa's business district was the corner of Market and Main, between the 100 and 200 blocks of E. Main Street. The businesses of the Jewish immigrants were clustered in the 300-500 blocks of E. Main Street, basically between Green and Union Streets. The 1915 City Directory lists the following Jewish owned businesses on E. Main:

- 304 E.W. Wachter, Barber
- 309 Herman Greenberg, Shoemaker
- 311 Ezral Brown, Secondhand goods (Ezral & Freda at same)
- 313 Brody Bros. Clothing, Louis and Harry (Harry & Bessie reside at same)
- 315 Mrs. Selia Sax, Men's Furnishings (Selia & Louis reside at same)
- 319 Sam Stein, Clothing (Sam & Sara reside at same)
- 320 Samuel Brody, Shoemaker (Samuel & Bessie reside at same)
- 323 Mrs. Kate Redman, Grocery
- 324 Jonas Sax, Pawnbroker
- 404 Oscar Bookin, Jeweler (Oscar & Henna reside at same)
- 413 Morris Rosenbaum, Shoemaker
- 414-16 Jacob Redman, Clothing (Jacob & Ida reside at same)
- 419 Nathan Sax, Shoemaker (Nathan & Mencoka reside at same)
- 420 Joe Barmash, Clothing (Joe & Ida reside at same)
- 424 Max Barmash, Clothing (Max & Rose reside at same)
- 426 Mrs. Bessie Sigel, Junk
- 432 Joseph Cohn, Clothing (Joseph & Frieda reside at same)
- 502 Henry Spiwak, Secondhand Goods (resides at same)
- 510 David Spiwak, Mattress Manufactory (David & Rose reside at same)
- 521 Alex Sigel, Junk (Alex & Sarah reside at same)

As the families became more established they opened new businesses as well. In addition to the clothing store, the Cohn family got into the motion picture theater business. The Browns expanded from secondhand furniture to a store selling new furniture. The Sigel families had both a clothing and a

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 11

furniture store, and the Spiwak family had a furniture store and an auto dealership. There were so many Jewish businesses in the 400 block of E. Main that it was referred to as "Jew Town." (Ullman, "Jewish Settlers in Ottumwa, p 8) In addition to the businesses noted above, there were two Kosher butcher shops and two Kosher bakeries. Not all were self-employed, some worked at John Morrell & Co. meatpacking, and at least one was on the police force.

The immigrants who arrived between 1890 and 1910 were Orthodox Jews. They organized the B'nai Jacob Congregation in 1900 and purchased half the ground belonging to the Jewish Cemetery. Services were in one of their homes and they rented a hall at 502 E. Main for the High Holy Days. In 1914 the decision was made to build a synagogue. A committee composed of Dave Spiwak, Nathan Friedman, Max Barmash, Ezral Brown, Benjamin Redman, Joe Barmash, E. Sigel and Jacob Redman made plans for the building. (Wolfe, p 258) The location selected for the building, in the 500 block of East Main, was a very practical one. Orthodox Jews are forbidden from driving or riding in a vehicle on the Sabbath. Therefore, it was of primary importance that the synagogue be located within easy walking distance of the majority of the members of the congregation. Bricks were sold to raise money for the new building. By the time the synagogue was dedicated, over 75% of the cost had been paid, leaving only a \$2,500 debt. The *Ottumwa Courier* carried a three column article on 23 August 1915 headlined

DEDICATE THE NEW SYNAGOGUE SUNDAY
Place of Worship of Local Jewish People Formally Opened to Public
GENTILES ASSIST
Minister and Lawyers Make Addresses at New Building;
Structure Cost \$10,000; Pretty and Complete

Gentile joined with Jew Sunday to observe the dedication of the newly erected synagogue of the congregation of B'nai Jacob that is located on East Main Street near Union. The day marked an epoch in the history of the Jewish people of Ottumwa for the goal of their ambition for years has been realized and the realization of their dream for a church home here is one of the neatest church properties in the city. The accomplishment of their ambition gives great credit to the work and zeal of this handful of Jewish people in Ottumwa for in a year's time the building idea was conceived and the plans made and carried out to completion. The synagogue stands out as a monument to the zeal and fidelity to the cause of the Hebrew.

The Christians of various denominations assisted at the dedication ceremonies and by participation in the program as well as by their presence, lent commendation to the work that has been accomplished by the congregation of B'nai Jacob.....(the article notes that the building is almost paid for and then continues)....That the members of the congregation between twenty-five and thirty families, are proud of their effort was very evident Sunday.....

The article included information about the speakers during the dedication including the pastor of the First M.E. Church, two attorneys, and a Jew from Chicago. The Rev. Dr. J.H. Cudlipp noted that the occasion was one that would not have taken place twenty-five years earlier due to differences between the faiths. Attorney John W. Lewis spoke chiefly on race prejudice and religious bigotry, while attorney William McNett dealt with the history of the Jewish people. Nathan Kaplan represented the Zionist Movement and spoke at length on the desire to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 12

Despite the lavish coverage of the dedication in the local newspaper, eight years later (1923) when the book Ottumwa Yesterday and Today was written, devoting an entire chapter to churches in Ottumwa, there was no mention of the B'nai Jacob Synagogue. It must be noted that the decade of the 1920s was the peak of KKK activity in Iowa, and both Ottumwa and Centerville had active Klans. It has been written that "The Centerville Klan regards the Jew as its more dangerous enemy [i.e., more dangerous than African-Americans]." (Silag, pp 320-328) Several photographs of Klan marches in Ottumwa have been located in local history collections.

Synagogue membership continued to grow as more families moved to Ottumwa and as new families were formed and children were born. It was said that almost everyone in the Jewish community was related to someone else in the community. At its peak, synagogue membership was around fifty families, totaling about 250 people. "Wishing to bring the advantages of fraternal association to the Jewish men of Ottumwa" the men of B'nai Jacob established a chapter of the B'nai Brith organization in 1934. (Wolfe, p 258) The women of the congregation soon followed suit by forming a chapter of Hadassah. Both of these organizations included members from neighboring Oskaloosa with meetings held in both towns on an alternating basis. Members of B'nai Jacob were actively involved in the Jewish relief effort during the late teens and 1920s. Newspaper headlines proclaimed that "\$3.00 Will Save A Human Life" and "Jews Need All To Help," appealing to non-Jews in the Wapello County area to help raise \$7,000. That amount was Wapello County's quota in the nationwide campaign to help the war torn Jews in central Europe. (*Ottumwa Courier*, 4 Feb 1922) In the 1950s and '60s the congregation supported efforts of the United Jewish Appeal. (Sigel, p 6)

A number of rabbis served the congregation from the early 1900s to 1969. Since 1969 there has not been a full time resident rabbi. There are not enough members to provide for a rabbi. Student rabbis were brought in from Chicago, Cincinnati, and New York, and full time rabbis from other congregations were sometimes brought in for weekend visits. Rabbis from Des Moines and Minneapolis came to perform life cycle events such as Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, weddings and funerals. In recent years Dr. Alan Gonsler of Omaha has been employed to lead High Holiday services. (Sigel, pp 2 & 3)

One of the most interesting aspects of the B'nai Jacob Synagogue is that although it was originally formed as an Orthodox synagogue, it became part of the Conservative movement in the 1950s. In an Orthodox congregation men and women are segregated, with the women and children sitting in the balcony, and the service is conducted in Hebrew. Conservative synagogues allow people to sit wherever they choose and the service is conducted in English. Two long time members (Bessie Barmash Ullman in her 90s, Irene Meyer Weinberg in her 80s) explained how and why B'nai Jacob made what appears to be this major change in their worship. Since the service was in Hebrew and few of the women and children spoke or understood the language, they gossiped and exchanged recipes in the balcony during the service. It seems that Irene's mother, Edith Meyer, broke a leg or hip and was unable to climb the steps to the balcony. She insisted on sitting on the main floor with the men during services. Slowly, other women and children stopped going up to the balcony and began sitting downstairs. Once they had moved downstairs the decision was made to become a Conservative synagogue. Services were conducted in English and the women and children became part of the service again. It is interesting to note that the first woman to read aloud in Hebrew from the Torah in this synagogue was Ellen Weinberg, grand daughter of the woman responsible for overcoming the traditional male/female seating pattern.

As time went on, sons and daughters took over family businesses and changed with the times. Bookin Jewelry moved several times before locating in the 100 block of E. Main. It was just recently sold outside the family after three generations. When David Meyer took over his father Sol's hardware store he

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

**B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa**

Section number **8** Page **13**

turned it into a computer store. Other children chose to go into new occupations. Harry Ziffren and Charles Bookin became attorneys, Norman and Samuel Bookin were optometrists, and Sidney Brody was a physician.

Although the early Jewish owned businesses were located at the east end of the business district, by the 1950s many had moved, or new ones had opened, in the 100 and 200 blocks of E. Main, the center of the retail area. Clothing stores for men, women, and children lined the street: J.B. Sax Men's Furnishings, Brody's Store for Men, Brody's Store for Women, Ruby's, The Elizabeth Shop, and Tots to Teens. Max Furniture, Stein Furniture, and Sigel's Furniture were all owned by members of the B'nai Jacob congregation. These owners were not only active in B'nai Brith and synagogue related events, but they were active members of the Ottumwa Chamber of Commerce, Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, and various Masonic organizations.

The families of the B'nai Jacob Synagogue had many children, and in the 1960s there was discussion about whether or not they should build a new synagogue to accommodate the growing congregation. It was decided to build a community room at the rear of the synagogue to provide room for classes, youth meetings, and social gatherings. It could not have been foreseen that as these children grew up and went to college, many would choose not to return to Ottumwa and the membership of the synagogue would decline sharply.

In recent years, clothier Ernest Brody served two terms as Mayor of Ottumwa while Laurel Sigel (a teacher) was on the City Council. Laurel also served on the Planning and Zoning Commission, Lillian Bookin served on the Housing and Urban Development Commission, and both Frances Ravitz and Ardyth Brown were members of the Ottumwa School Board. Joe Bernstein was actively involved with the YMCA, and Bessie Ullman was the long-time executive director of the YWCA. This was taking place in a community of 25,000 people, only about 100 (less than half of one per cent) of whom were Jewish.

Today, the congregation of B'nai Jacob numbers less than ten. There are two members who come from Fairfield, and one from Centerville. All are retirement age. The B'nai Jacob Congregation has come full circle from a small group meeting in homes to a small group that continues to meet at the synagogue, but that knows the end may be near. It appears that B'nai Jacob is the only remaining synagogue in southeast Iowa, with the nearest active synagogues being in Des Moines and Iowa City.

Criterion C:

How George M. Kerns was selected as the architect has not been determined. There were at least two other architects living and working in Ottumwa at that time, Archie Eaton and Henry Throne. Kerns was well known in the community as he was responsible for a number of commercial buildings and residences, three of which are contributing structures in Ottumwa's historic districts: The Tisdale Residence at 716 N. Court in the Court Hill Historic District; the Harper Residence at 101 Vogel in the Vogel Place Historic District; and the Edgerly Gateway and Chapel in the Ottumwa Cemetery Historic District. (These historic districts have all been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, based on the Multiple Property Document cited earlier.) In addition, he had designed the Wapello County Jail a few years earlier, and two decades later would be responsible for the National Guard Armory/Coliseum. Kerns was born in Moline, Illinois and became an architect through the apprenticeship program, working in several architectural offices in Rock Island and Moline, Illinois in the 1890s. He moved to Ottumwa in 1902 and set up his own office. In 1905 he joined the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 14

The years 1914 and 1915 were a period of growth for the community, both residential and commercial. The *Ottumwa Courier* made note of much of this construction.

Will Begin Work on New Synagogue

The contract was let this morning by the building committee of the B'nai Jacob congregation for the erection of the new synagogue to L.T. Chrisman & Co. and work will begin at once on the structure which is to be located on the north side of Main Street between College and Union.

The contract, which was signed today, has one significant phrase in it, which specifies that no work of any kind shall be done upon the new building on any Saturday. The structure will be of brick with stone trimmings and will be a decided addition to the street upon which it is to be erected. (1 December 1914, p 9)

Prospects Bright for 1915

While the season just past has been a very good one for steady, consistent improvements, the coming year holds some bright prospects for considerable being done and considerable being spent in doing it. The Jewish synagogue, while the plans were drawn in 1914 and the ground broken, actual construction work will be done this year. The First National Bank expects to have a new home at Main and Market.... at Main and Court the Ottumwa Savings Bank will rebuild the exterior of the building. (1 January 1915, p 8)

In the same article the *Courier* also discussed the construction of a number of fine residences "...the majority of these have been built on the north side hill districts, yet there have been a number of very nice homes built in South Ottumwa, in the east end and scattered about the western part of town." The paper made special note of residences for Greenleaf Merrill and James Taylor (in the Fifth Street Bluff district) and the O.D. Tisdale residence on N. Court.

The B'nai Jacob Synagogue appears to be the only synagogue designed by George Kerns during his career. Synagogue design never appears to have been as codified as that for Christian churches. By and large the designs followed styles popular in the geographic region and often reflected the architecture of nearby churches. One of the major principals of design was that of simplicity. The only constants in synagogue interior design are presence of an ark (the cabinet that holds the holy Torah scrolls) and a bimah (the platform and table for reading the Torah and leading services). In Orthodox congregations a balcony for the women and children was another requirement. Traditionally the bimah was located in the center of the room facing the ark in the rear wall, and seating was arranged to surround the bimah and face the ark. This plan called for a rectangular room with entrance opposite the ark. Historically, Jews are to face toward Jerusalem while praying, so in this country the ark is located on the east wall rather than always on the rear wall. Although the ark was originally located in a thick wall, over the years it developed into the primary architectural feature, usually recessed in a niche, with rich decoration and curtains. The "modern" synagogue will also include an entrance vestibule, cloak room(s), an office, and classrooms. (Jacobs & Brunner)

The exterior of synagogues varies more than the interior plans. An article in *Common Bond* entitled "Vernacular Synagogue Architecture" discusses how plans evolved in this country and made mention of the tripartite façade division found in New York City neighborhoods. The symmetrical façade

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 15

features the entrance in the center portion with the two sides appearing almost as towers. This reflects the interior plan, with the entrance leading into the main room, or sanctuary, while the sides indicate the location of ancillary space, cloak rooms, offices, etc. Stylistic elements reflect the popular styles of the period. While many late 19th and early 20th century buildings illustrate the popularity of Romanesque design with simple round arches, there are some synagogues in the Gothic revival style that are indistinguishable from a Protestant church.

Ottumwa's B'nai Jacob Synagogue illustrates a symmetrical tri-partite design with round arched windows. Except for the Star of David on the façade, decoration is confined to simple brick patterning and the rhythmic flow of the arches. It is a very straightforward, almost stark, brick building. The interior is much richer. The warm oak woodwork throughout provides a contrast to the light colored walls. The ark is the main focus, surrounded by the carved oak arch. There are few emblems that are characteristically Jewish and can be used to adorn the building. Here, the ark is flanked on each side by the lion of Judah, and a six pointed star is carved into the lunette above. Originally the rich red velvet portiere was

elaborately embroidered in gold and jewels on which the lion typical of the tribe of Juda [sic] is a feature being worked in gold thread. The tablets typical of the stone slabs on which Moses received the ten commandments, is worked in white silk between the lions and both are surmounted by a beautifully jeweled crown. Hebrew inscriptions are worked in gold thread upon the curtain and all present a richness seldom seen in tapestry. (*Ottumwa Courier*, 23 August 1915)

The red velvet portiere was replaced during the Holy Days with one of white satin. These curtains were removed at some time in the 1960s and replaced by the carved oak doors matching the arch that are now in place.

Above the ark hangs the perpetual lamp (a gift of Louis Bumstein), and a menorah rests on a table in front. Although the bimah was removed, it was replaced by a platform across the east wall that holds the pulpits and chairs necessary for services. This platform linking to the ark is most commonly found in Conservative and Reform synagogues. The massive center chandelier is not required by tradition, but it plays a major role in visual appearance and the feeling of reverence in the sanctuary. This chandelier was a gift of the Friedman family at the time the building was dedicated.

Conclusion:

The B'nai Jacob Synagogue from 1915 is a good, relatively unaltered example of synagogue design in a small Midwestern town. Sources differ on the number, but the Ottumwa synagogue appears to be one of only fourteen remaining in the state. B'nai Jacob was built to serve the needs of the many Jewish immigrants in the community and was located in the 500 block of Main Street because most of the members of the congregation lived above or behind their stores in that area. It has continued to serve the needs of these members through the decades. It is a symbol of the importance of the Jewish community to the business and social development of the town of Ottumwa. It is a rare surviving example of an early Jewish synagogue in Iowa, and appears to be the only remaining example in the southeast quarter of the state.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 9 & 10 Page 16

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

American Contractor. Vol 36, No 1, 2 Jan 1915, p 79.

Atlas: City of Ottumwa & Wapello County, Iowa. Ottumwa, IA: H.E. Cook, Civil Engineer and H.O. Rundell Publishers, printed by Ottumwa Blank Book Co., 1939,

Baker, Chris. In Retrospect: An Illustrated History of Wapello County, Iowa. Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Pub., 1992.

Bookin, Dr. Sam. "Early Jewish Settlers in Ottumwa, Iowa." Unpublished manuscript, no date.

Brody, Ernest. "Jewish Community Experience in Ottumwa, Iowa." Unpublished manuscript, c.1998 (?)

Chiat, Marilyn J. American's Religious Architecture: Sacred Places for Every Community. NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1997.

Clark, Mary Rowene Lang (Comp.) Jewry of Ottumwa, Iowa. Three-ring notebook containing genealogical records for Ottumwa's Jewish community, plus copies of relevant newspaper articles. C.1998.

Ferber, Edna. A Peculiar Treasure. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1939.

Glazer, Rabbi Simon. The Jews of Iowa: A Complete History and Accurate Account of Their Religious, Social, Economical and Educational Progress in the State; A History of the Jews of Europe, North & South America in Modern Times, and A Brief History of Iowa. Des Moines, IA: Koch Brothers Printing Co., 1904.

Goldberg, Shari. "Vernacular Synagogue Architecture," *Common Bond*, Vol 16, No 2/Winter 2001, pp 2-4.

Gruber, Samuel. American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture & Jewish Community. _____: Rizzoli, 2003.

Jacobs, Joseph and Brunner, A.W. "Synagogue Architecture," *Jewish Encyclopedia.com*, (www.jewishencyclopedia.com, 14 November 2003), 16 pp.

McCoy's Ottumwa City Directory, 1915 and 1920-21.

Meagher, Glenn B. and Munsell, Harry B. Ottumwa Yesterday and Today. Ottumwa, IA: Ottumwa Stamps, 1923 (Diamond Jubilee).

Meek, Harold. The Synagogue. New York: Phaidon Press, 1995.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa

Section number 9 & 10 Page 17

Ottumwa Courier. 1 Dec 1914, p 9, "Will Begin Work on New Synagogue."
12 Dec 1914, p 4, "Local Jews Donate to War Relief Fund."
1 Jan 1915, pp 1 & 8, "Much Spent of New Buildings."
23 August 1915, n p, "Dedicate the New Synagogue Sunday."
4 Feb 1922, n p "\$3.00 Will Save Human Life," and "Jews Need All to Help,"
19 Jan 2002, p 9, "Jews have long history in Ottumwa, but fewer remain."
29 Sept 2003, pp 1 & 9, "A different kind of new year."

Ottumwa: Land of Rippling Waters. Ottumwa, IA: *The Ottumwa Courier*, Vol I, 2002, p 5.

Rosenthal, Frank. The Jews of Des Moines: The First Century. Des Moines, IA: The Jewish Welfare Federation, 1957.

Shank, Wesley I. Iowa's Historic Architects: A Biographical Dictionary. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1999.

Sigel, Arnold. "Memories of Congregation B'nai Jacob, Ottumwa, IA. Unpublished manuscript, No date.

Silag, Bill (Ed.) Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000. Des Moines, IA: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2001.

Ullman, Bessie. "Jewish Settlers in Ottumwa." Unpublished manuscript, no date.

Wolfe, Jack. A Century with Iowa Jewry: As Complete A History As Could Be Obtained From Iowa Jewry - from 1833-1940. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Printing and Supply, 1941.

Interviews & Letters

Interviews with Bessie Ullman, conducted by Molly Myers Naumann (Jul 2003 and Dec 2003) & Steve Wilson, 22 Nov 2003.

Interview with Irene Weinberg, conducted by Molly Myers Naumann & Steve Wilson, 22 Nov 2003.

Letter from Bessie Ullman to the Ottumwa Historic Preservation Commission, July 2003.

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA:

Verbal Boundary Description:

Original Plat, City of Ottumwa, Block 19, Lot 270 (66' x 132').

Boundary Justification:

This is the geographic area historically associated with this resource.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

**B'nai Jacob Synagogue
Wapello County, Iowa**

Section number **Photos** Page 18

The photographs submitted with this nomination were taken by Molly Myers Naumann in November and December, 2003. The negatives are on file in the Community Programs Bureau, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, IA.

1. Façade, facing Main Street, looking NE
2. Detail: Front entrance doors and steps
3. Side and front elevations, looking E
4. Side and front elevations, looking W
5. Rear elevation, looking SW
6. Interior: "East" wall with Ark
7. Interior: Showing pews, Ark, and balcony, looking S
8. Interior: Balcony seating, looking SE
9. Interior: View from balcony, looking E
10. Interior: Showing front doors opening from foyer with balcony above, looking SW
11. Interior: Showing rear door opening into community room, looking NE
12. Interior: Detail of Ark and menorah
13. Interior: Community room addition, looking NW