

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

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received DEC 6 1984

date entered JAN 3 1985

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Benson Block

and or common Potter Block

2. Location

street & number 108-12 N. Market not for publication

city, town Ottumwa vicinity of

state Iowa code 019 county Wapello code 179
1157

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military <input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Union Bank and Trust, c/o Mr. Bernard Huston

street & number 123 East Third St.

city, town Ottumwa vicinity of state Iowa 52501

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. County Clerk's Office

street & number Wapello County Courthouse

city, town Ottumwa state Iowa 52501

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Area XV Cultural Resource Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1983-4 federal state county local

depository for survey records Iowa SHPO

city, town Des Moines state Iowa 50319

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Benson building (1924) exemplifies how the availability of decorative cladding materials enabled owners of early commercial buildings to completely transform their building facades. This well preserved neo-classical front, designed but never used for theater use, is locally of interest due to its ornate detailing, and its scale. It is one of three buildings with full white terra cotta fronts. The terra cotta front was a successor to the use of metal in cornices or fronts, and presaged the appearance of aluminum and other later materials.

The original 1883 rectangular plan measured 66' by 118', the current building is the rearmost two fifths, measuring 66' by 52'. The two story brick building is structurally free-standing, with the exception of its southern side wall (originally an interior rear wall within the larger building, now a party wall). The unusually short depth of the building results from its being a cross section of the earlier building's long rectangular plan. The first story houses three storefronts, separated by temporary interior walls. The second floor is open in plan, and is reached by a central freight elevator and a stairway in the northeast corner. Iron columns support the two floors. The original building was overbuilt, for warehousing purposes. Floor joists measure 3" by 14" and are set a half foot apart. A false gabled front and parapet wall disguises an otherwise flat roof with rear drainage. The existing three storefronts originally each had single door entrances. Presently the central storefront is linked to another front and has no entrance off the street. The drop in front elevation, from north to south, requires the southernmost entrance to be combined with steps for egress.

The terra cotta facade executed in the neo-classical style is the dominant significant feature of the Benson building. Originally designed as a theater, the symmetrical design allowed for a three entrance bays, now broken into three storefronts. Ornate pilasters with engaged Corinthian capitals separate each bay on the first floor. Clerestory spaces above each bay are presently filled with signage, but probably originally were glassed in some manner, with higher interior ceilings. String courses, a panel band, and projecting sill, composed of relatively small terra cotta pieces set in a dark mortar, separate the two floor levels. Three large arched windows with casement window infill are on the second floor separated by paired fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals. Projecting scrolled keystones project above each window. The neo-classical style is represented by pilasters, columns, detailing, and the pedimented gable which covers the front parapet wall. The broadly projecting gable is dentillated. A triangular frieze features an elaborate cartouche and rinceau. A parapet wall tops the pediment and is in turn capped with a free standing statuary urn at its peak.

Alterations have visually eliminated the 1883 structure completely. The original building consisted of a three bay pedimented facade, with three windows in each bay. Pilasters broke up the bays visually. A projecting corbelled cornice underscored the centered pediment. An interesting roof feature was the reversal of the usual pitch direction, with drains penetrating the front facade. The 1923 fire wrought an undetermined amount of damage to the third floor at least, and possible some considerable interior damage. The 1883 building apparently had two storefront areas, the 1885 Sanborn map provides no street numbers for the N. Market Street front, but does indicate the presence of a cornice line there. An 1892 photo indicates that the occupant, a dry goods firm, had signage there and used the storefront. The southern three fifths of the 1883 building has become a two sided facade with a new brick and decorative stone veneer which would appear to date from the pre-World War One years. It is probable that a breakup in ownership and a redesigning

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**National Register of Historic Places
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date entered

Continuation sheet Physical Description

Item number 7

Page 2

of the building produced these fronts, and that what became the Benson building was damaged in 1923 so as to require rebuilding. The use after 1916 of the subject building for auto retailing strongly hints at minimally some first floor remodeling. The present front dates from late 1924. The interior freight elevator was relocated to the present site, towards the southeast corner, and rear windows were located on the first and second floors, three per floor. The only noticeable deterioration on the facade is the disintegration of several of the terra cotta dentils on the pediment front. The present signage obstructs the original clerestory openings.

Eastward expansion of the Ottumwa business district engulfed a residential blocks by the early 1880's. The Potter Block occupied a narrow end lot and was bordered on the east by substantial brick houses as late as 1892. The Potter block was originally an "ell" in terms of its storefronts, having three main storefronts on E. 2nd street, its south face, and three on N. Market, its west rear face. The elevation of the site drops from north to south, resulting in a two foot drop in elevation between the corners of the facade.

A public square, just a block to the northwest, became a focal point for public buildings. In 1885 the area was generally not fully filled in, and was largely residential. By 1892 a two story brick front (extant) filled the lot to the immediate north of the subject building. By 1925 the county courthouse, federal building, city hall, library, Y.M.C.A., Wapello club, a major church, and Turner Hall were all sited within close proximity to the Benson building. Residences still survived on the north half of the same block.

Terra cotta was in general use in Ottumwa during the mid-1920's. Bedford stone was an equally popular facade material. A few local buildings have fronts which are fully covered with terra cotta. These include the American Legion building (226 E. 2nd), the First National Bank (1915, Main and Market, also neo-classical, with two white terra cotta facades) and the subject building. Buildings with combined brick and terra cotta include the Ottumwa Daily Courier (213 E. 2nd), Capitol Theater (223 E. Main), and the Ottumwa Hotel (1917).

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
___ prehistoric	___ archeology-prehistoric	___ community planning	___ landscape architecture	___ religion
___ 1400–1499	___ archeology-historic	___ conservation	___ law	___ science
___ 1500–1599	___ agriculture	___ economics	___ literature	___ sculpture
___ 1600–1699	xxx architecture	___ education	___ military	___ social/
___ 1700–1799	___ art	___ engineering	___ music	___ humanitarian
___ 1800–1899	___ commerce	___ exploration/settlement	___ philosophy	___ theater
xxx 1900–	___ communications	___ industry	___ politics/government	___ transportation
		___ invention		___ other (specify)

Specific dates 1924 **Builder/Architect** unknown

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Benson building (1924) exemplifies how the availability of decorative cladding materials enabled owners of early commercial buildings to completely transform their building facades. This well preserved neo-classical front, designed but never used for theater use, is locally of interest due to its ornate detailing, and its scale. It is one of three buildings with full white terra cotta fronts. The terra cotta front was a successor to the use of metal in cornices or fronts, and presaged the appearance of aluminum and other later materials.

The three story brick Potter Block occupied the northeast corner of North Market and East Second Streets, and measured 60' by 118' on plan, its nine bay long side wall fronting along N. Market Street. As its brick walls arose in late August 1883 it was lauded as being one of "...the most substantial buildings in the city." The brick foundation walls of 30" flagstone were "...the heaviest there is in any building in Ottumwa." Forty eight iron and forty wood columns supported the interior. Architects Pickett and Carnes (first listed in Ottumwa in 1875), drew the plans and supervised at least the carpentry work. They also advertised themselves as builders and carpenters. Pickett even assisted in hoisting joists to their positions on the job site. The paper noted "Pickett & Carnes always push things, and never was there a better evidence of it than this new building" (Ottumwa Daily Democrat, 5 October 1883).

The original building appears in the 1885 Sanborn Fire Map with no street on its N. Walnut side. The larger building was then warehousing for dry goods, boots and shoes, and hardware. J. W. Garner Wholesale Dry Goods occupied the full building was the first tenant, and was there until 1911. The building was empty between 1912 and 1915, but this building was probably still associated with the E. 2nd Street building. Between 1916 and 1923 Central Auto Co. and Davis Auto Co. both occupied the building. A second period of vacancy came with the 1923 fire and continued past the remodeling until 1931.

The probable second storefront for the building was the work of a local real estate agent, Ben Benson. He sought to develop the building as a 640 seat movie theater and began his remodeling, including a then contemporary flamboyant theater front. The local paper described this work;

"The building on Market Street which had stood idle since the interior burned over a year ago is being remodeled for a theater. A white terra cotta front is being put on the building, and the tentative plans for the interior call for a modern theatre arrangement with seating capacity of 640. The terra cotta is now being set some distance above the first story and the arched window frames are in place. The Ottumwa Mill and Construction company has the contract"

("Construction Work Is Rapid," Ottumwa Courier, 20 September 1924, p. 14).

Benson's plans were apparently frustrated by a requirement for rear fire escapes that he could not meet, given the shallowness of the site. As such, the elaborate front bespeaks the need to plan the project before you start your work. The vacant building, noted by the 1925 Sanborn Fire Map, was not needed or was not suitable. Its second floor, with blank interior brick walls and an open plan was never developed, and was used only by the cleaning firm for some time. Only by 1935 was the first floor occupied, by the Markette

9. Major Bibliographical References

Refer to Continuation Sheet 9-2

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Ottumwa North

Quadrangle scale 1/24,000

UTM References

A

1	5	3	5	6	9	9	0	4	6	8	10	5	5	10
Zone			Easting					Northing						

B

Zone			Easting					Northing						

C

Zone			Easting					Northing						

D

Zone			Easting					Northing						

E

Zone			Easting					Northing						

F

Zone			Easting					Northing						

G

Zone			Easting					Northing						

H

Zone			Easting					Northing						

Verbal boundary description and justification

A portion of Lot 196, Block 15, City of Ottumwa Original Plat, described as follows, beginning at a point on the N.W. line of said lot which is 80.4' SW of north corner of said lot, thence SW 52.34', thence SE 66', thence NE 80.4', thence NW 66' to pt. of beg. List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title James E. Jacobsen, National Register Coordinator

organization Iowa SHPO date 15 November 1984

street & number E. 12th & Grand Ave. telephone 515-281-4137

city or town Des Moines state Iowa 50319

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *John A. Anderson*

title Executive Director Iowa State Historical Department date 11/19/84

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

John A. Anderson Entered in the National Register date 1-3-85
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: _____ date _____

Chief of Registration

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Continuation sheet Significance

Item number 8

Page 2

Cafe. The Bandbox Cleaners (after 1944 Jolly Cleaners, here until 1980) arrived that same year. McElroy-Vernon Brokerage was there by 1937.

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National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

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Continuation sheet Bibliography

Item number 9

Page 2

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

"Construction Work Is Rapid," Ottumwa Courier, 20 September 1924, p. 14.

"Jolly Cleaners to close after 76 years," Ottumwa Courier, 3 may 1880, p. 12.

"Lively Work," Ottumwa Daily Democrat, 5 October 1883, p. 4.

Ottumwa: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow. Ottumwa: Iowa C. E. Union, 1900, p. 36.

Sanborn Fire Maps, Ottumwa, Wapello County, Iowa, 1883, 1926.

Interview, Paula Mohr with Robert Peterson, 15 January 1984.

Interview, Paula Mohr with Lawrence Holmes, 26 January 1984.

Interview, Paula Mohr with Baxter Smith, 8 June 1984.

1892 photo, taken from County Courthouse tower, view to southwest, private collection of
Make Lemberger, Ottumwa.