United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

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

Name 1.

Letovsky-Rohret House historic

and/or common

Location 2.

street & number 515 East Davenport Street

Classification

Ownership

<u>_x</u> private

_ both

Public Acquisition

_ being considered

_ in process

_ public

Iowa City, city, town

state

Category

____ site

_ district

____ structure

__ object

3.

_ no

code 19

Johnson county

vicinity of

Iowa

Status ____ occupied ___ unoccupied

work in progress Accessible <u>____</u> yes: restricted __ yes: unrestricted industrial military

Present Use ____ agriculture commercial educational entertainment government

congressional district.

____ museum _ park

1

____x private residence __ religious

not for publication

code

103

- _ scientific ___ transportation
 - other:

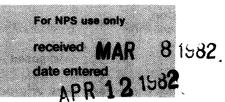
Owner of Property 4.

Ralph and Victoria Christian name

515 East Davenport Street street & number

city, town	Iowa City,		vicinity of	state	Iowa	
5. Lo	ocation of	Legal	Description			
courthouse	e, registry of deeds, etc	Johnson	County Recorder's Off	ice		
street & nu	mber	Johnson	County Courthouse			
city, town		Iowa City		state	Iowa	
6. R	epresenta	tion in	Existing Surv	/eys		
North title _{North}	Side Preservati Side Neighborho	on Study od Survey	has this property be	en determined e	ligible? _x_	yes no
date 1977				federal sta	ate coun	tyx local
depository	for survey records D	ivision of	Historic Preservation	·		
city, town	Iowa City			state	Iowa	

$O \subseteq \mathbb{P}$	NO. 1024-0018	
CX2.	12/31/84	



7. Description

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Letovsky-Rohret House, situated on the eastern edge of the proposed North Side Historic District and the western edge of the proposed Goosetown Historic District, is one of a dwindling handful of mediumsized, middle class Victorian residences in Iowa City that survive in relatively unaltered form. Architecturally, it is a vernacular interpretation of the Greek Revival style, but it has overtones of the Italianate mode as well. The house's pilastered corner boards, transom over the front door, entablature window and door heads, boxed cornice and plain frieze along the roofline, and pedimented attic vents in the gable ends are typical of the former while the tall first floor windows and the round topped entrance door on the front are common features of the latter mode.

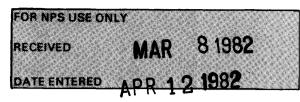
Bonhumil Barta Letovsky had this three-bay wide edifice constructed for him and his family in 1881. This T-shaped house consists of a two-story, rectangular shaped main block and a one-story wing. Of wood frame construction, the structure rests on concrete blocks coursed to resemble stone over a full basement and is sheathed in wooden clapboards. Windows are generally of the two-over-two wood sash variety and are set in rectangular surrounds. The house is capped with a medium pitched gable roof covered with asbestos shingles. On its east and west sides, the roof was pierced by single interior end chimneys, but in recent years the stack on the east side has been removed down to roof level and replaced with a metal stack.

Other noteworthy exterior features include a front porch that runs almost the full length of the house on the front (north) facade and a side porch on the east side of the one-story wing. The front porch pilasters with their carved columns and jigsawed brackets indicates that the porch was once much more elaborate. The present owner has located round carved columns similar to the pilasters and will soon install them. Brackets will be added when available. Although the side porch was enclosed in the 1920's, most of its original features, including carved wooden posts still remain.

Inside, the house follows a central hall plan with a parlor, dining room, and kitchen on the first floor and two bedrooms, a bath, and small storage area on the second floor. Most of the original fabric remains including somewhat elaborate architrave window and door trim on the first floor; four panel molded red pine doors, most of which have their original hardware; car siding wainscoting in the kitchen; and a single flight, one run open stairway with carved walnut newel post, balusters, and handrail.

When constructed in 1881, this house was located at 330 North Van Buren Street. In 1919 E.C. Houser purchased the property, and he moved the house approximately 100 feet east onto the back of the lot so that he could build two new houses. At the time of the move, the present basement and

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM



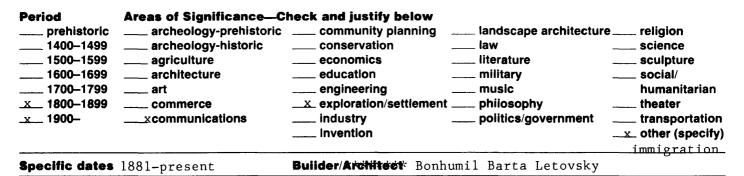
CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE]

foundation were added, a bathroom was installed, closet space was created, and the side porch was enclosed. The detached garage located southeast of the house appears to have been added around the late 1930's or early 1940's.

Presently, this house is undergoing extensive rehabilitation and restoration. In addition to the previously mentioned porch restoration, it is being repainted in appropriate Victorian colors to highlight its exterior trim. Inside, heavy layers of wallpaper have been removed and walls painted in Victorian colors, woodwork has been stripped of excess paint, and false ceilings and walls have been removed.

8. Significance



Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Letovsky-Rohret House has a two-fold significance. It is the only known extant structure in Iowa City closely associated with the Letovsky family, publishers of Iowa's first Czech language newspaper. Secondly, it is the only surviving residence of Peter Rohret, a German immigrant and early settler, famed for his expertise with an ax and who helped build "Old Capitol," and later served in numerous county offices.

Bonhumil Barta Letovsky, who built the house at 515 East Davenport Street, was born in 1849 in Letovice in present day Czechoslovakia. In 1854 his father John Barta Letovsky took him and the rest of the family and immigrated to the United States, landing in Boston. From there they went on to Racine, Wisconsin before moving on to Iowa and settling in Jefferson Township in Johnson County. For five years the family farmed, but in 1859 they pulled up stakes and returned to Racine where the elder Letovksy helped found and edit <u>Slovan Amerikansky</u>, the first Czech language newspaper in the United States.

In 1869 John B. Letovsky and his family returned to Iowa and settled in Iowa City, where he and J.P. Pesha started <u>Slovan Americky</u>, the first Czech language paper in Iowa. Shortly afterwards, Letovsky's sons, Bonhumil, John M., and S.B. purchased Pesha's interest, and the publishing firm of John B. Letovsky and Sons came into being. Contemporary accounts indicate that the Letovsky's enterprise enjoyed a steady growth in circulation and readership. Their success probably owed as much to the steady stream of immigrants from their native land coming into Iowa as to their ability as journalists and businessmen. Between 1870 and 1890, Iowa was surpassed only by Wisconsin and Illinois in attracting Czech immigrants, and even as late as 1900 when most Czechs were opting for the more industrialized states, the state placed eighth.

In the decade of the 1880's, the Letovsky family reached the pinnacle of success in Iowa City. Their paper continued to grow, achieving a circulation of several thousand and began to be published on a weekly rather than a semimonthly basis. John M. Letovsky, who succeeded his father as editor, became active in local politics, serving on the city council, as mayor, and in the general assembly. Their success was also evidenced by their construction of new homes.

In 1881 Bonhumil erected the house presently at 515 Davenport Street, and shortly afterwards John M. built his residence at 417 Bloomington (recently demolished). According to family tradition John M. Letovsky and his family resided in the Davenport Street house for several months, and most likely this occurred while their new home was under construction.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

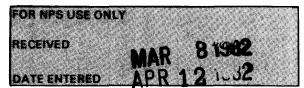
.

10.	Geographical	Data		AUNER			U
Acreage	of nominated property	than one ac	ere				
	gle name <u>lowa City West</u> ()uad	IM NOT I		Quadrar	igle scale _	:24,000
UMT Ref	erences		_				
	Easting	460	B Zor	ne Eastir	l_l_l_i	Northing	
c			▫∟				
ε			FLI				
G			нЦ				
	boundary description and just the Original Town of Iowa	ification a City.	West 45' d	of East	50' of N	lorth 75'	Lot 3, Bloc
	states and counties for prope	rtiae availa-	nina etata -				
				r county i	Joundarie		
state	N. A	code	county			CO	de
state		code	county			co	de
11.	Form Prepared	l Bv					
organiza street &	tion Division of Historic number 26 East Market Str				<u>e 319/35</u>	3-4186/3	53-6949
city or to	wn Iowa City			state I	owa		
12.	State Historic	Prese	rvatio	n Offi	cer	Certif	ication
i ne evan	uated significance of this property						
As the de	national st esignated State Historic Preservation		iocal	listoric Pre	servation	Act of 1966	Public Law 89
665), l he	reby nominate this property for in g to the criteria and procedures se	clusion in the	National Regis	ster and ce			
		<i>A</i> ()			1		
State His	toric Preservation Officer signatur	re Adu	K.	Aprile	son	(
title D	irector, Division of Hist	oric Prese	rvation		date	Februar	y 19, 1982
For N	PS use only				•		
i ha	preby certify that this property is in						1,
. 6	Below Dyen	<u>ر الم</u>	dional Reg	CHC615	date	- 41	12/12
-Keepe	er of the National Register						
Attes					date		
500000000000000000000000000000000000000	of Registration		A ST	The state of the second se	COMPANY COMPANY	1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1	Contraction of the second s

ł

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM



CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

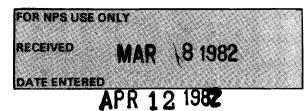
PAGE]

In 1891 Bonhumil and John M. Letovsky, as well as several other family members, sold their homes in Iowa City and moved their newspaper and printing operation to Cedar Rapids. The chief impetus to this move appears to have come from the fact that Cedar Rapids had the heaviest concentration of Czechs and such an action would put them in closer contact with the bulk of their readership in the state. Apparently, this idea paid off because <u>Slovan Americky</u> appeared on a regular basis until 1921 and was published on a scattered basis for a few years after that.

Shortly after Bonhumil Barta Letovsky and his family moved to Cedar Rapids, Mary H. Rohret purchased their house, and she and her husband Peter moved in. Peter Rohret was one of the early settlers of Johnson County. Born in Bavaria in 1829, the third son of Wolfgang and Katherine Rohret, Peter and his family immigrated to the United States in 1840, settling in Johnson County's Union Township. After Peter grew up, he acquired several farms, and until his retirement he listed his occupation as farmer. He also won renown for his skill with an ax and was widely regarded as the best axman in Johnson County if not the state. According to family tradition, he used his skills in helping build "Old Capitol" in Iowa City. Rohret was also active in local politics. A Democrat, he served at various times on the Board of Supervisors, as Assessor, as Township Trustee, Constable, Road Supervisor, and member of the School Board. He played a leading role in the Farmers Mutual Insurance Association, serving as its president and on its board of directors. Very active in the Old Settlers, he played a major role in the cabin building exhibition at the 1889 Johnson County Fair. That same year, he retired from farming and moved to Iowa City. The Rohrets lived in the former Letovsky home until his death here in 1914 and Mrs. Rohret's death in 1918.

In 1919 E.C. Houser, who in the course of his lifetime was to build and move numerous houses on Iowa City's North Side purchased the house from Mrs. Rohret's estate. He moved the house from its 330 North Van Buren location to 515 East Davenport by simply turning the house around on its axis and relocating it on the eastern edge of the original lot. In 1922 the Housers sold the house to Otto and Anna Schmidt whose family owned it until 1948. Since that date, it has gone through several changes of ownership. UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM



CONTINUATION SHEET Bibliography ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE]

Abstract of Title for 515 East Davenport Street, copy in possession of owner Aurner, Charles Ray, Leading Events in Johnson County, Iowa History (Cedar Rapids: Western Historical Press, 1912). Burton Brothers Iowa City Directory for 1875-76 (Galena, Ill.: Burton Brothers, 1875). Capek, Thomas, The Cechs (Bohemians) in America (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920). Cedar Rapids Gazette, March 17, 1974. History of Johnson County, Iowa (Iowa City, 1883). Holland's Iowa City Directory for 1868-9 (Chicago: Western Publishing Company, 1868). Iowa City Republican, Semi-Centennial, 1840-90 with Directory of Iowa City (Iowa City: Republican Company, 1890). Lasha, Vera, The Czechs in America, 1633-1977 (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publishing, Inc., 1978). Owen's Iowa City Directory for 1878-9 (Davenport: R.C. Owen, 1878). Portrait and Biographical Record of Johnson, Poweshiek, and Iowa Counties, Iowa (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1893). Rohret, L.C., "History and Records of the Rohret and Allied Families," 1964, unpublished manuscript in State Historical Society Library.