

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

For NPS use only
received **MAR 8 1982**
date entered
APR 12 1982

1. Name

historic Letovsky-Rohret House

and/or common

2. Location

street & number 515 East Davenport Street _____ not for publication

city, town Iowa City, _____ vicinity of ~~Congressional district~~ 1

state Iowa code 19 county Johnson code 103

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 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 checked="" 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
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Ralph and Victoria Christian

street & number 515 East Davenport Street

city, town Iowa City, _____ vicinity of _____ state Iowa

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Johnson County Recorder's Office

street & number Johnson County Courthouse

city, town Iowa City _____ state Iowa

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title North Side Preservation Study _____ has this property been determined eligible? yes _____ no
North Side Neighborhood Survey

date 1977, 1981 _____ federal _____ state _____ county local

depository for survey records Division of Historic Preservation

city, town Iowa City _____ state Iowa

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> moved
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		date <u>1919</u>

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 medium-sized, 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

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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

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) immigration
Specific dates 1881–present	Builder/Architect Bonhumil Barta Letovsky			

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 Letovsky helped found and edit Slovan Amerikansky, 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 Slovan Americky, 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.

(continued)

9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

10. Geographical Data

ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED

Acreege of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Iowa City West Quad

UTM NOT VERIFIED

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

A 15 622580 4613460
Zone Easting Northing

B
Zone Easting Northing

C

D

E

F

G

H

Verbal boundary description and justification
37 of the Original Town of Iowa City.

West 45' of East 50' of North 75' Lot 3, Block

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 Ralph J. Christian, Architectural Historian

organization Division of Historic Preservation date February 1982

street & number 26 East Market Street telephone 319/353-4186/353-6949

city or town Iowa City state Iowa

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

 national x 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 Adrian A. Anderson

title Director, Division of Historic Preservation date February 19, 1982

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

Melona Byers date 4/12/82
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: _____ date _____
Chief of Registration

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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 Slovan Americky 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.

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Abstract of Title for 515 East Davenport Street, copy in possession of owner

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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).

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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).

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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.