

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

APR 20 1989

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name \_\_\_\_\_  
other names/site number Bonaparte Historic Riverfront District

2. Location

street & number First, Main, & Washington Streets  not for publication  
city, town Bonaparte  vicinity  
state Iowa code IA county Van Buren code 177 zip code 52620

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<u>24</u>	<u>11</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>25</u>	<u>13</u> objects
			<u>13</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 2

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.  See continuation sheet.

James J. [Signature] April 14, 1989  
Signature of certifying official Date  
Bureau of Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register. Beth Beland 4/25/89  
 See continuation sheet. \_\_\_\_\_  
 determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet. \_\_\_\_\_  
 determined not eligible for the National Register. \_\_\_\_\_  
 removed from the National Register. \_\_\_\_\_  
 other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

## 6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Specialty  
Commerce/Department Store  
Industry/Manufacturing

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Specialty  
Commerce/Office  
Commerce/Restaurant  
Park

## 7. Description

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

No Style

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation limestone  
walls brick  
weatherboard  
roof metal  
other cast iron  
pressed metal

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The town of Bonaparte (population 547) is located on the north bank of the Des Moines River in the rolling hills of southeastern Van Buren County. The business district lies on the flood plain along the riverfront, with the residences on the hills rising to the north, and to the east of the business district on the plain. Streets are laid out parallel to the river, so there is a slight deviation (6-8°) from the cardinal points. The riverfront district is approximately three blocks long, and is bounded on the west by the City Park and three mill-related buildings, and on the east by a series of buildings facing Washington Street. The district extends from the riverbank north to Second Street, with the majority of the buildings facing First Street (also known historically as Front, Water, and/or River Street). There are thirty-eight resources in this district: Thirty-five buildings; and three structures (all of these located in City Park, the stone lock, a stone gateway and wall, and a bandshell). Of the thirty-eight resources, twenty-five are considered to be contributing to the district (nine key structures, and sixteen contributing). All of these are related to the economic development of Bonaparte between its founding in 1837, and 1909 when the Meek Mills were sold.

The contributing buildings and structures in this district can be grouped as follows:

- 1) Three mill-related buildings, #1, 25, 26.
- 2) Eighteen brick commercial buildings:  
Eight two story, #6, 8, 12, 13, 14, 20, 22, 32.  
Ten one story, #4, 11, 16, 17, 18, 19, 30, 31, 33, 34.
- 3) Three wood frame commercial buildings, #36, 37, 38.
- 4) The stone lock, #29.

Two resources in the district are already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Lock #5 (site #29), and the grist mill (site #26). One other building in Bonaparte is listed on the National Register, the Aunty Green Hotel, just north of the district at the northwest corner of Second and Washington.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2

CFN-259-1116



Cresap-Stadler, Opera entry, Whiteley Opera (#12, 13, 14)



Historic photo, north side of First, Whiteley Dry Goods on right.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3

CFN-259-1116

The riverfront district grew and changed as the town grew. In 1838 there had only been 3,174 in the Territory, by 1847, Iowa had become a state, and boasted a population of 10,203. By 1860 it had grown to 17,081. Many of these settlers were coming up the Des Moines River valley and passing through Bonaparte.

First Street, between Main and Washington, contained several brick buildings by the 1880s, but a number of frame structures remained. In 1886 a fire destroyed fourteen buildings in Block 2, those facing Washington, and several facing First. Buildings #16, 17, 18, 32, and 33 replaced the burned buildings.



Site #32, built in 1889 replacing burned building.

In 1894 fire demolished the buildings in the middle of the block, including the new Haney Opera House. These were almost immediately replaced by buildings #11, 12, 13, and 14. The last three of these are unusual in Bonaparte because they feature a highly decorative pressed metal facade. The last frame buildings on the north side of Block 2 were leveled by fire in 1900. This corner of Main and First remained empty for almost twenty years.

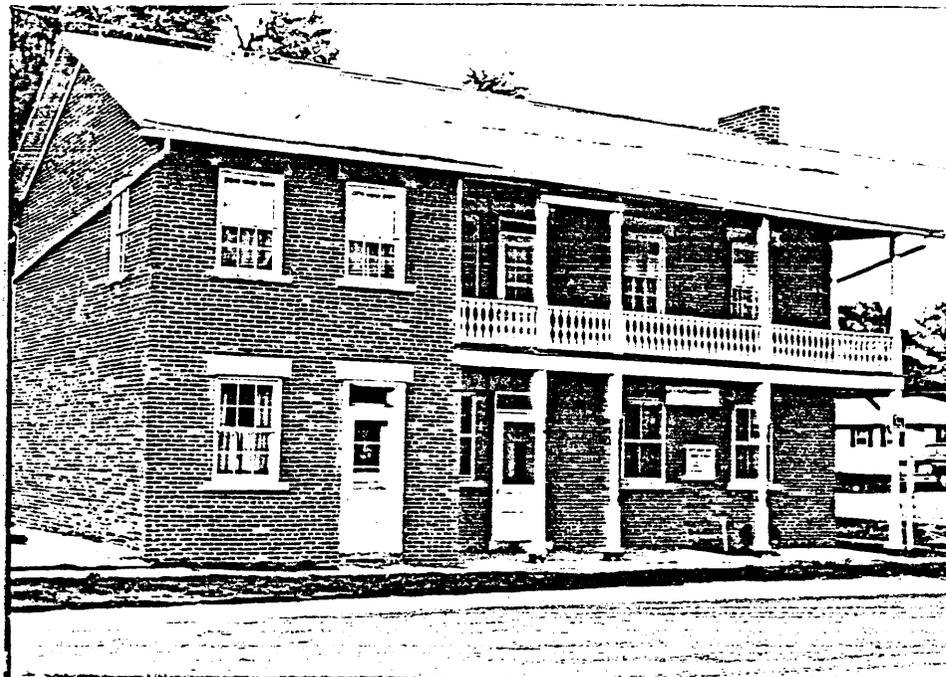
MAR 21 1989

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 4

CFN-259-1116



The Aunty Green Hotel (NRHP), 1844.  
(this isn't a part of the Bonaparte District)

The commercial buildings of the riverfront district are clustered in three periods of time: The 1850s; following a major fire in 1886; and following fires in 1894 and 1895.

There are a number of brick houses and buildings in the community from the 1850s, five of which are located in the riverfront district. These buildings share common design elements: Locally produced red brick, with limestone sills and lintels. Throughout Van Buren County river towns there are examples of brick structures from the 1850s, but Bonaparte has a larger number than the other towns. Two of these, #6 and 8, are two story brick buildings on First Street (in Block 1). The original building on the site of #2 may also have been of this type. These buildings have a symmetrical facade, with the Mercantile Block (#8) having not only shop entrances, but a central entrance with transom and side-lights leading to the second floor. The three smaller, single story buildings in this 1850s group all have low pitched gable roofs. One, #30, has a gable entrance, giving it something of a Greek Revival feeling. The two with entrances on the eave side (#31 and

MAR 21 1989

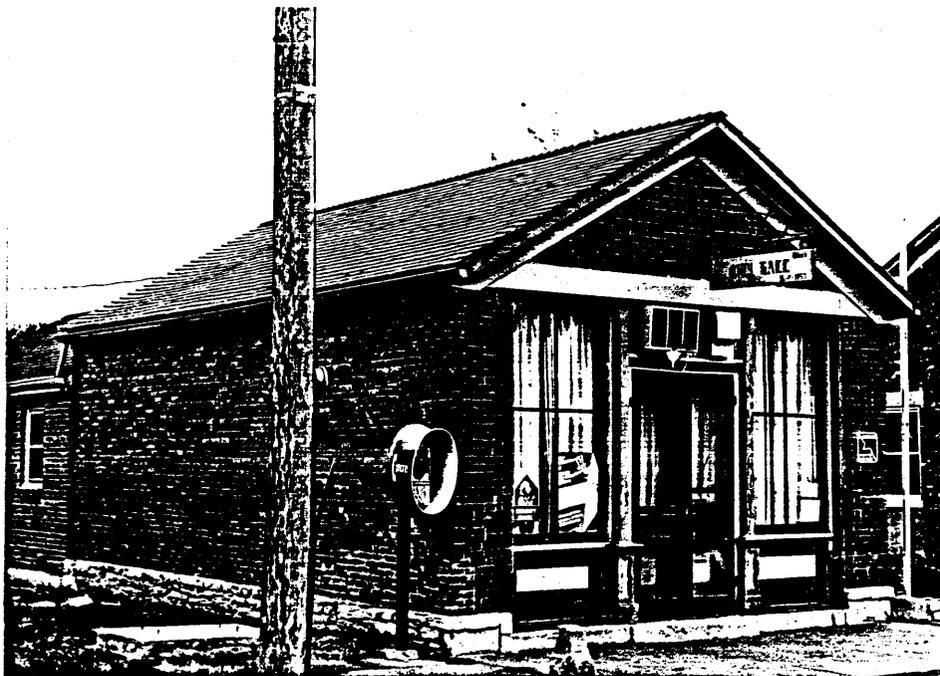
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 5

CFN-259-1116

34), both have two front doors and may have been constructed as duplexes or for two small shops. This group of buildings dates to the period of construction of the stone lock and dam.



Site #30, with gable entrance.

The lock and dam were built in 1852 as part of the Des Moines River Improvement Project, and represent one of the few sets actually completed. The project was never finished, and the lock was left to deteriorate. The dam was replaced in 1872, and that dam was destroyed in 1903. The lock is located in City Park. The mill race ran between the lock and park for many years, but it has been filled in, and like the lock, now has trees growing in it.

Brick construction at the west end of the district includes the mill buildings. Two of the present mill-related buildings replaced earlier buildings on approximately the same site: The woolen mill (#25) was built in 1863, replacing an 1853 building which burned; and the grist mill (#26) was built in 1878, replacing a smaller building. The pants

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

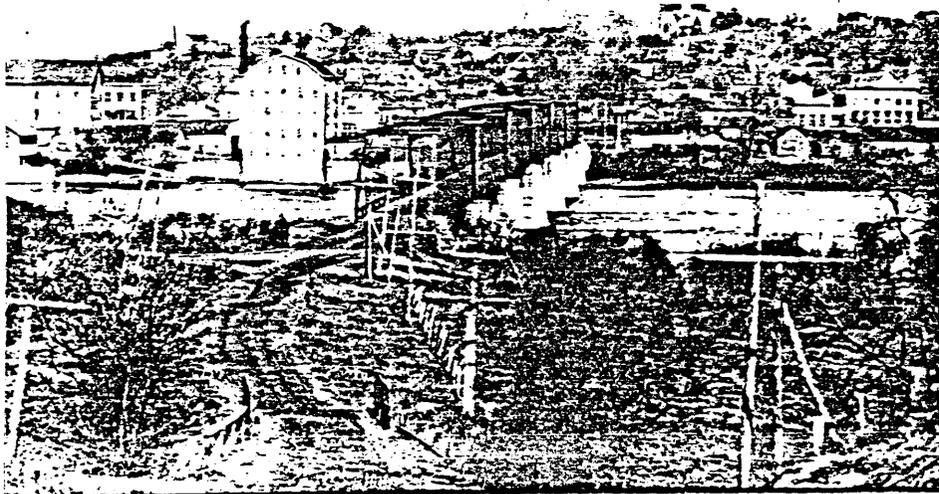
## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 6

CFN-259-1116

factory (#1) was built in 1892 specifically as a factory to make pants, but shortly thereafter expanded into the manufacture of suits as well. It is interesting to note that the only buildings in Bonaparte which were more than two stories tall were the Meek mill buildings, including the non-extant three story brick on site #2. The woolen mill (50' x 85') is presently two stories plus basement, but originally was taller, the top one and one-half stories being removed in 1938. Both the grist mill (40' x 50') and pants factory (50' x 100') are three and one-half stories. These extra stories were necessary because these were industrial, not retail, buildings.

Birdseye View of Bonaparte, Iowa



Historic postcard shows Meek mill buildings to left.

The river was not to remain the major form of transportation for long. The railroad arrived in 1858, and in 1877 a bridge was built across the river, linking the south side with Main Street (sometimes called Bridge Street). This bridge carried traffic for eighty-three years before being replaced in 1960 by the present concrete one.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 7

CFN-259-1116

The town of Bonaparte was established because it provided two of the essentials for settlement: Water power, and timber. During 1836 and 1837 several men came to the area now known as Bonaparte because it was known as an Indian settlement and good fording place. One of the men was Dr. Roger N. Cresap who arrived in 1836 and built a cabin just east of the present town. In 1837 William Meek arrived from Michigan, looking for a site for milling purposes. Like the others he started in Lee County and worked his way upstream. Eventually he decided on the area around Honey Creek (also known as Coates Creek, near the present City Park). This land appears to originally have been claimed by Robert Coates, who transferred claim to Robert Moffet, who in turn allowed William Meek to claim the land. Somewhat later Cresap purchased 152 $\frac{1}{2}$  acres just east of Meek's, and the two of them allocated part of their land for a new town, originally known as Meek's Mills, Wisconsin Territory.

As the town was laid out, Meek established mills at the west end near the present mill buildings, and Cresap constructed a hotel, called the Tavern, at the east end in 1840 (present site of buildings #20, 21, and 22). A large bank barn and livery was built adjacent to the hotel on the east, and a saw mill constructed a little farther east. The stone wall of the bank barn contained large iron rings which were used to tie up boats. The first steamboat ascended the river as far as Keosauqua in 1839. A strip of land was reserved by Meek and Cresap between First Street and the river for milling purposes. Meek and Cresap effectively defined the commercial area of the town as it exists today, and established the boundaries for the riverfront district. When the town was formally surveyed and platted in 1841, it remained as the two had planned.

The earliest buildings appear to have been constructed along First Street in Blocks 1 and 2, between the mills and the hotel, and were probably of wood frame construction. A few buildings were constructed north along Main and Washington Streets. Second Street was never the major commercial area that First Street was, though several businesses did locate there. The only extant building from that first decade of development appears to be the Aunty Green Hotel (NRHP) from 1844, on Second Street just north of the district boundary.

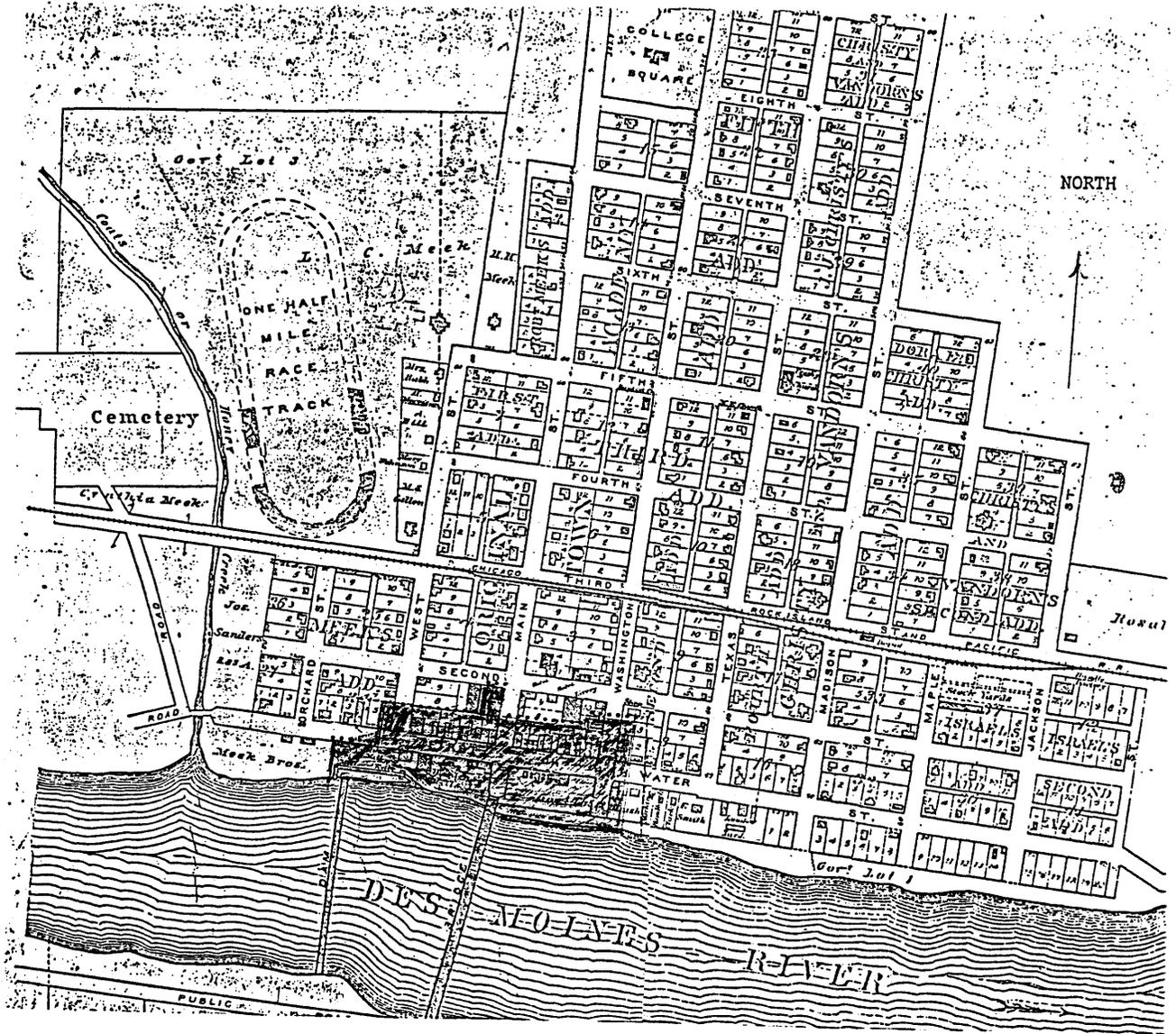
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 8

CFN-259-1116



1897 Plat Map. Shaded area denotes historic riverfront district.

MAR 21 1989

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 9

CFN-259-1116

The south side of First Street between Main and Washington contained the Eason House Hotel (as Cresap's Tavern was later known), and several frame buildings to the west. This side of First was not really developed until the Eason burned in 1895. Around 1900 two brick buildings were constructed on this side of the street, #20 and 22. Two brick buildings, #19 and 21, replace c. 1900 brick structures that were damaged in the flood of 1903.

The three frame buildings with boomtown fronts on the east side of Washington date between 1885 and c. 1900, and complete the east end of the business district. These are the last of the original frame commercial buildings remaining. The two story frame building on the corner is the I.O.O.F. Building from 1885 (#38).

With the exception of the mill-related buildings, the buildings in this riverfront district are primarily retail establishments. Most are of brick construction, one or two stories tall, with a flat, gently sloping roof. There are several examples of low pitched gable roofs as well. Unlike many towns, there is no common building width along First Street, though the lots on the north side are all 50' wide and 100' deep. Many of the buildings are less than the 50' width, often about 25'. With one exception (#3), the buildings along the north side of First share a common facade-line, being placed directly at the front of the lot. The brick and limestone used are both readily available. There was an abundance of limestone in the bluffs along the river, both for limestone blocks and to use in making lime mortar. Several lime kilns were located in the Bonaparte vicinity. At least two brickyards existed in Bonaparte over the years, one maintained by the Meeks just west of the cemetery, which provided bricks for the mill buildings; and one located one mile north of town.

Throughout the histories of Van Buren County and Bonaparte, there was always an emphasis on the woolen mill, with mention of the grist mill and two saw mills, one of Meek's and one just east of the commercial district built by Cresap. Other businesses and factories were noted (a wagon works just west of the pants factory, an ax handle factory near the railroad tracks, and a pottery east of the business district), but the emphasis was on the woolen mill. In 1906 the Meek Mills closed, and "the entire assets of Meek Bros. Co. offered for sale" in 1909.

Bonaparte did not die with the closing of the Meek industries. Census figures show almost 1,000 inhabitants in 1905. With the loss of the community's largest employer, population declined. There was little new construction along First Street for the next few years, but around town new houses and buildings were constructed as needed for the people who stayed.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 10

CFN-259-1116



Boating on the Mill Race in City Park.

City Park, at the west end of the Meek Estate, was dedicated in 1911, and a bandshell added in 1920. In 1918 a new bank and Masonic Hall was built at the northeast corner of Main and First (#9), and three years later another bank was built in the middle of the block (#15). While both of these banks must be considered non-contributing to this district because they do not fall within the period of significance, they might be considered eligible in the future as part of a multiple property nomination. When the bridge was built in 1877 it turned the corner of Main and First into a major intersection. It was logical that the first service station would be built at that intersection (#23), and shortly after the highway was paved connecting with Highway 2 in 1930, a second service station was built on the opposite corner (#24). The woolen mill sat empty, and in 1928 the roof was removed for safety reasons. Ten years later the top one and one-half stories were removed by the W.P.A. to turn it into a community hall. Stone from an adjacent building was used to construct an arched entrance and 150' wall along the First Street side of the park (#27).

FORM 21 1989

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 11

CFN-259-1116

All river towns are prone to flooding, and Bonaparte is no exception. The Des Moines produced massive floods in 1851, 1903, and 1947. The 1851 flood was said to have been caused by forty days of rain. While this has a Biblical ring to it, the forty day figure appears to be accurate, as that is the number mentioned up and down the river valley. The flood of 1903 washed out the already damaged dam, and covered Second Street in front of the Aunty Green with a foot of water. People boated up and down the streets. In 1947 all of Bonaparte from the riverbank to the railroad tracks (Third Street) was under water. Amazingly, it appears that the only buildings lost to floods were on the south side of First Street in 1903. Just as floods threatened in warm weather, ice jams were a menace in late winter. The 1970s saw huge piles of ice behind all of the buildings along First.

The other changes seen along First Street have occurred since 1960. A tornado struck in August 1964, damaging a number of buildings in the district, but not completely destroying any. The Meek woolen storage building at the northeast corner of First and West burned in January 1965 (the fire also destroyed the Record-Republican building and its contents, including back issues of the newspaper). The present large metal building on the lot (#2), is the replacement for the three story brick. Next door (#3), was the site of a major fire on New Years Eve 1977. This lot was vacant until a single story building was moved in during the past year. In the same block was a two story brick building (#7) from c. 1885 that collapsed from the weight of snow on the roof in the 1970s. In Block 2, the lot between buildings #9 and 11 was empty from the 1900 fire until 1980 when the present building, a diner, was located there.

The major alterations which have taken place in the district include the paving of the streets, replacement of original sidewalks with concrete, and some alterations to first floor storefronts. Only three buildings from the period of significance have been altered to the point where they cannot be considered contributing structures, #5, 21, and 35. One other, #22, has vertical board siding on the first floor, but you can still see the original cast-iron elements under the siding. This is reversible, and this building can be considered eligible.

During the past two years a number of buildings in the district have undergone successful rehabilitation. New businesses and professional offices occupy these buildings.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 12

CFN-259-1116



Northwest corner First and Main, Flood of 1903.



Looking from bridge toward Opera House, Flood of 1947.

MAR 21 1989

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 13

CFN-259-1116

Interiors have not been directly addressed in this nomination. Throughout the course of this project, and previous ones involving Bonaparte, the emphasis has been on the exterior of the buildings. Little research has been attempted on interiors since most have been greatly altered. There are two possible exceptions to altered interiors: #1, originally the Pants Factory, now a Glove Factory; and #11, Dr. Bogle's Drug Store which is now a gift shop.

The area around Bonaparte was heavily occupied by prehistoric Indians, as evidenced by an Area XV Regional Planning Commission archeological survey completed by Anton Till and Blane Nansel in 1980. Their pedestrian survey of the riverfront area within the corporate limits found no evidence of prehistoric sites due to the extensive alterations made during the nineteenth century settlement. However, the potential for deeply buried deposits was not assessed. In 1983/84 Till and Nansel conducted another survey for the Corps of Engineers, focusing on the riverbank east of the bridge. Here, approximately one and one-half blocks east of the district boundary they discovered a long narrow cache pit associated with the Hanback (Bonaparte) Pottery which was located on that site from 1866 to 1895. This site (13VB200) was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places March 14, 1984, but is not included in this district. No other investigations have been made concerning historic archeology. The Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from 1898 shows non-extant buildings within the district boundaries. Additional historic and prehistoric archeological surveys are needed in Bonaparte to clarify potential under criteria D.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 14

CFN-259-1116

KEY STRUCTURES

- #1 Meek Pants Factory, 1892
- #11 Bonaparte Drug Co. (Dr. Bogle's), 1894
- #12 Cresap-Stadler Building, 1894
- #13 Opera Entry, 1894
- #14 Whiteley Opera House, 1894
- #26 Meek Grist Mill, 1878 (NRHP)
- #29 Des Moines River Lock #5, 1852 (NRHP)
- #30 Farmers and Traders Bank, 1853
- #32 Whiteley Grocery Store, 1889

CONTRIBUTING STRUCTURES

- #4 c. 1860
- #6 1853
- #8 Mercantile Block, 1853
- #16 1886
- #17 1886
- #18 Whiteley's Dry Goods Store, 1886
- #19 c. 1903
- #20 c. 1900
- #22 1902
- #25 Meek Woolen Mill, 1863
- #31 1850s
- #33 c. 1895
- #34 1850s
- #36 c. 1895
- #37 c. 1900
- #38 I.O.O.F. Building, 1885

NON-CONTRIBUTING STRUCTURES

- #2 1965
- #3 Moved in, 1988
- #5 c. 1850, altered
- #7 Bait Shop, N.D.
- #9 Bank, 1918, possibly eligible as part of MRA
- #10 Diner, 1980
- #15 Bank, 1921, possibly eligible as part of MRA
- #21 c. 1905, altered
- #23 Service Station, 1925
- #24 Service Station, c. 1930
- #27 Stone arch and wall, 1938
- #28 Bandshell, 1920
- #35 c. 1850s, greatly altered

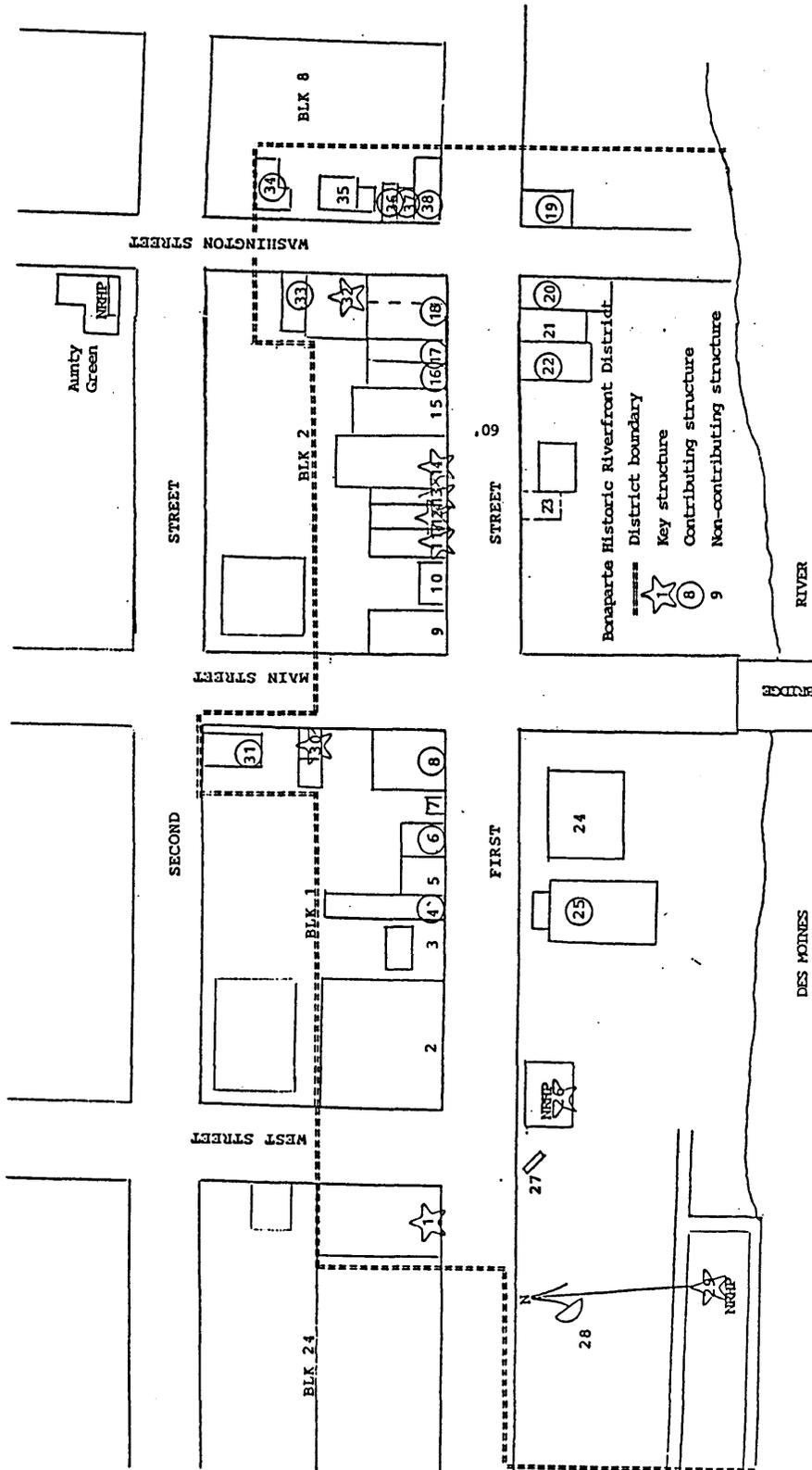
MAR 21 1989

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 15

CFN-259-1116



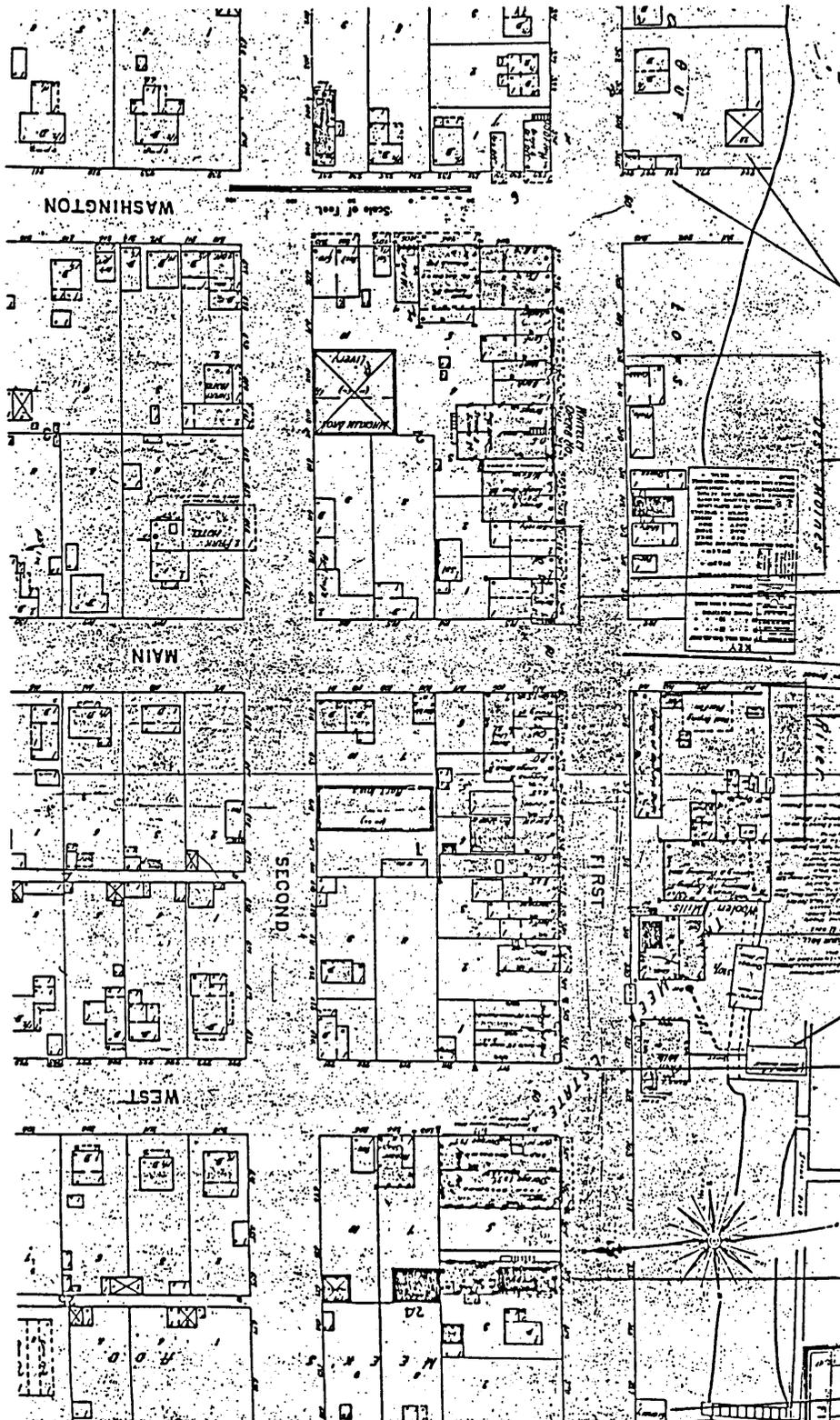
MAR 21 1989

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 16

CFN-259-1116



Sanborn Fire Insurance  
Map 1898  
(Non-extant buildings)

Small frame & livery

Group of frame bldgs.

3 bldgs burned 1900.

Mill-related drying & storage, demol. between 1925 and 1938.

Woolen mill power house, warehouse, water-power house.

3 story brick warehouse burned 1965.

Wagon works, burned in 1940s.

Granery.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties.

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

APR 20 1989

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

NATIONAL REGISTER

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

Commerce  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1852-1909  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

N/A

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Bonaparte Historic Riverfront District is representative of a small nineteenth century community in the development of the Des Moines River valley. It illustrates how a major business influences the economic development of a town. Several other small towns were laid out along the Des Moines in Van Buren County (Palestine, Napoleon, Pittsburg, Portland), but failed to grow and prosper. Of the towns which did flourish along the river, many seemed to turn away from the river, not seeing it as a major feature of the town. Farmington and Keosauqua illustrate this, as in both cases, the business district is near, but not along, the riverfront. In Eldon (upstream in Wapello County), though it is on the river, the primary reason for its growth was the railroad, and the visual focus of the town is away from the river. Eddyville, in far northwest Wapello County was, like Bonaparte, an Indian camp site and fording place. The original business district was laid out along the riverfront to take advantage of the river-boats. When the railroad came through, the main street orientation changed 90°, and the business district stretched from the river to the railroad tracks, totally altering the appearance of the town. Of all the small communities along the Des Moines, it seems that only Bentonsport (NRHP District) and Bonaparte retained their original riverfront focus. The apparent reason for this in Bonaparte was the strong influence of the Meek mills complex from the time that William Meek arrived and set up the first mill in 1837, to the closing of the mills and sale of the property in 1909. These mills drew commerce to the riverfront, and kept it there. While Bentonsport declined in the twentieth century, and today has little business activity, Bonaparte has remained commercially active.

The Bonaparte Historic Riverfront District includes thirty-eight resources, twenty-five of which are key or contributing either because they are greatly altered (three), or because they do not fall within the period of

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

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

APR 20 1989

**NATIONAL  
REGISTER**

Section number   8   Page   0  

CFN-259-1116

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The period of significance for the Bonaparte Historic Riverfront District should be 1852-1909.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 2

CFN-259-1116

significance (ten). The key and contributing resources include three mill-related buildings, twenty-one buildings representing the commercial development of Bonaparte between 1837 and 1909, and one of only three remaining structures relating to the ill-fated Des Moines River Improvement Project of the 1850s.

The beginning of the Bonaparte Riverfront District can be traced to 1837 when William Meek established the site of his grist and saw mills near Honey Creek, and a small village, designated Meek's Mills, Wisconsin Territory, grew up. Dr. Roger N. Cresap had arrived in this area somewhat earlier, and lived in a cabin east of Meek's village. In 1839 Cresap purchased 152½ acres joining the village on the east, and the following year built a hotel, known as the Tavern, on what is now the corner of First and Washington Streets. With the mills on the west, and the hotel on the east, Meek and Cresap had defined the boundaries of the business district.

Meek had settled here because of the abundance of water power, and had built a simple wing dam to provide power for his mill. When that proved unsatisfactory, his company, William Meek and Sons, petitioned the legislature for permission to build a larger dam. This was granted by the Territorial Legislature in 1839, the year the first steamboat ascended the Des Moines as far as Keosauqua. In 1841 the town was officially platted and named Bonaparte in honor of Napoleon. In 1844 Meek erected a new flouring mill that was to be of major importance, not only to Bonaparte, but to the surrounding counties. Following the signing of the 1842 Sauk and Fox treaty which completed the cession of all their Iowa lands to the United States, the "New Purchase" was opened for settlement on May 1, 1843. This included the counties to the west and northwest of Van Buren. These new counties lacked the basics in the first years, and among the most important needs was access to a flouring mill. It was not unusual for settlers to come to Bonaparte from as far as fifty to one hundred miles to have their grain ground. Semira Phillips, an early settler in Oskaloosa, Mahaska County, wrote of the trip to Meek's Mills in Van Buren County.

With settlers coming to Bonaparte to have their grain ground, there developed a need for housing, food, and other services. The mill complex included a bunkhouse and stable. The Aunty Green Hotel was built in 1844, and businesses grew up along First Street (sometimes called Front, Water, or River Street) between the mills and the Tavern (later known as the Eason House Hotel). A ferry plied the river below

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 3

CFN-259-1116

the Eason House, tying up to large rings in the limestone foundation of the bank barn just east of the hotel.

The year 1846 brought statehood to Iowa, and the Mormons to Van Buren County. There was a Mormon encampment two miles east of Bonaparte at Reed's Creek. Locally it is said that many of the houses and buildings were erected by the Mormons during this period. No documentation has been located to prove this. It is known that some of the men came into Bonaparte and worked at the mills while living at Reed's Creek.

A state road was laid out in 1847 from West Point in Lee County to Bonaparte, providing another means of transportation. Much of the traffic heading west came through Van Buren County, with settlers coming up river on boats, and across the hills and valleys on the state road.

A massive flood swept through Bonaparte in 1851. The following year a new dam was built at Bonaparte. This was part of the Des Moines River Improvement Project that had been approved by Congress in 1846. The project was designed to make the Des Moines navigable from its mouth to the Raccoon Fork (present site of Des Moines) by constructing a series of twenty-eight locks and dams. Towns along the river dreamed of unprecedented growth, with steamboats bringing loads of people and supplies to their docks. To finance this project, alternate sections of unsold public land, stretching five miles on each side of the river, would be offered for sale. The story of the Des Moines River Improvement Project is lengthy and complicated. It is sufficient to say that there were legal disagreements as to just how far the land grant extended (to the Raccoon, or all the way to the Minnesota line), and who was to do the actual construction. Contracts were let, but often were not fulfilled. Commissions were appointed, and were replaced. Edwin Manning, banker and businessman from Keosauqua, was appointed to look into the matter. He reported to the Legislature in 1856, that in six years only "three stone-masonry locks" and two dams had been completed. In 1858 the State Legislature gave up on the navigation project and adopted a resolution saying that all remaining unsold lands, stone, timber, and other materials were to be given to the Keokuk, Fort Des Moines, and Minnesota Railroad for the purpose of constructing a railroad from Keokuk, up the Des Moines Valley, to the northern line of the state. The day of the riverboat had passed.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 4

CFN-259-1116

While the great controversy was going on about the river improvements, improvements were being made in Bonaparte. The 1850s were a decade of growth, not just along the riverfront, but in residential neighborhoods as well. There are many brick (and a few frame) houses from this period in Bonaparte. Downtown, buildings #8 (the Mercantile Block) and #30 (later known as the Farmers and Traders Bank) were built in 1853, and it is possible that building #6 dates to the same year. These are similar in design, using locally produced brick with limestone sills and lintels. Thomas Christy is said to have been the builder of the Mercantile Block, and he had a business there for many years. At first it was supposed that the building was constructed for him, not by him, but information has been located identifying Christy as a mason when he came to Bonaparte. It is possible that he actually was the builder. The summer of 1853 William Meek and Sons built a woolen factory near their mills. In 1858 the Keokuk, Fort Des Moines and Minnesota Railroad arrived in Bonaparte, providing a new means of transportation to the town.

During the 1860s and '70s the major new buildings appear to be replacements for the original mill buildings. The woolen mill burned in 1863, but construction on a new building was started immediately. The result was a brick building with limestone foundation, four stories high, 50' x 85', costing \$50,000. The machinery was water-powered.

In the 1865 Iowa State Gazetteer, Hair estimated Bonaparte's population at about 600. He noted "an extensive woolen factory built of brick...its owners, Messrs Meek Bros." and identified other principal business establishments as three dry goods, grocery and general stores, two drug stores, one tannery, and one flouring mill. He noted "the Des Moines River was navigable until the last two years, since which time the imperfect condition of the locks and dams renders navigation dangerous."

Though it appears that boats could no longer ply the river, the river power could still be harnessed and used. A new dam was built in 1872, and in 1878 the flouring mill which had been built by William Meek in 1844 was replaced by Robert Meek and Bros. at a cost of \$15,000. It was a brick building, 40' x 50', three and one-half stories tall, had six runs of buhrs, and was water-powered, site #26 (NRHP).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 5

CFN-259-1116



Lock #5,  
Site #29,  
Silted in with  
trees growing.  
(NRHP)

Grist mill,  
Site #26.  
(NRHP)



MAR 21 1989

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 6

CFN-259-1116

One of only two bridges across the Des Moines in Van Buren County was constructed at Bonaparte in 1877. This bridge connected with the south end of Main Street, right in the heart of the business district, providing easy access to all of the services Bonaparte could offer. This bridge served as a major link to the south side of the river for over eighty years.

The 1878 History of Van Buren County, Iowa says "The manufacturing interests of this place are nearly all centered in the woolen-mill" and notes that "one of the most extensive and successful woolen factories of the state is situated in Bonaparte.....The firm employs seventy-five hands. The capacity of the mill is a matter worthy of mention. There are 1,640 spindles in use, six sets of carding machines and two shearing machines. The mill hands turn out 22,000 yards of cloth every four weeks and from 1,600 to 1,800 pounds of stocking-yarn."

To further illustrate the growth of Bonaparte, the 1878 History lists: four dry goods stores, two drug stores, four grocery stores, one harness shop, one jewelry house, two boot and shoe stores, one clothing house, one general store, two commission houses, two agricultural marts, two butcher shops, two hotels, a photograph establishment, a wagon factory, brick yard, pottery, blacksmith shop, and glove factory, in addition to the flouring mill, woolen factory, and saw mills.

It is interesting that nowhere is there a mention of who is building the buildings to house all of these businesses. Looking through the business directories, in 1880 one carpenter is listed, but no brick or stone masons. By 1890 there are three carpenters, and still no masons. In 1901, two stone masons are listed, Young and Troutman, but they have disappeared by the 1912 directory. Obviously, masons were working in town, but chose not to advertise. One name is mentioned in an article from around 1912, Isaac McCracken. He was apprenticed at age 15 (in 1852) to John R. Wright of Bonaparte, learning to make brick and do construction work. It was said that McCracken built thirty houses in Bonaparte single-handedly. In sixty years (1852-1912) he made several million brick on his own. His grandson, Arthur F. McCracken, says that his grandfather built all of the brick buildings in the business district. It is possible that he did construct many, or most, of them as the majority fall within his active period.

Statistics for Bonaparte as a town, separate from the township as a whole, were not given until 1880. In that year the population was

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 7

CFN-259-1116

listed as 689. The 1880s and '90s were a period of growth and of new construction. The business district included a mixture of frame and brick buildings. The social aspects of a community must be considered as well as the commercial ones. Secret societies played an important role in Bonaparte, just as they did in most other nineteenth century towns. The first to be organized was the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, No. 22, chartered on November 8, 1849. In 1885 a committee was appointed to determine how much it would cost to build a hall 20' x 40', two stories high, with cellar. On July 18 of that year, the committee reported that a brick building of that description would cost \$850.00, while a frame building of the same size would cost \$650.00. A frame building was authorized (site #38).

It was Summer 1886 when a large fire destroyed fourteen buildings on First and Washington Streets (Block 2). The Whiteley Store was one of those destroyed. J.W. Whiteley had come to Bonaparte in 1856 to serve as foreman of the Meek Bros. Woolen Mill, a position he held until 1882. In the late 1870s he opened a small grocery store, and a few years later opened a dry goods and notions store in a two story building on Front (First) Street in partnership with his sons. It was this two story building which was destroyed in the 1886 fire. They immediately re-built a double storefront, single story brick building, #18. Their business prospered, and in 1889 they built a two story brick building immediately behind their dry goods store, but facing onto Washington, #32. This building contained groceries, hardware, a complete general store. Today the building continues to serve as a grocery store.

The Bonaparte Journal carried an article in 1887 discussing the business interests of the community and noted "Early in the history of Bonaparte manufacturing interests were instilled in the minds of the citizens, and today one of the most important industries of Van Buren County, and in fact of southeastern Iowa, are the Bonaparte Woolen Mills....another of Bonaparte's paying institutions is the flouring-mill. The building of the old flouring-mill, by William Meek and Sons, in 1838, was the first move toward making a manufacturing town of Bonaparte." The editor made note of other important Bonaparte businesses: Rees and Riggle Wagon Works, Stebbins Bros. Hardware, the Jolly Melican Boss Tin Shop, Bonaparte Pottery, and thirty-three other advertisers. Another business was added to Bonaparte the following year when the Haney Opera House opened to provide entertainment. By 1890 Bonaparte had grown to 762 people.

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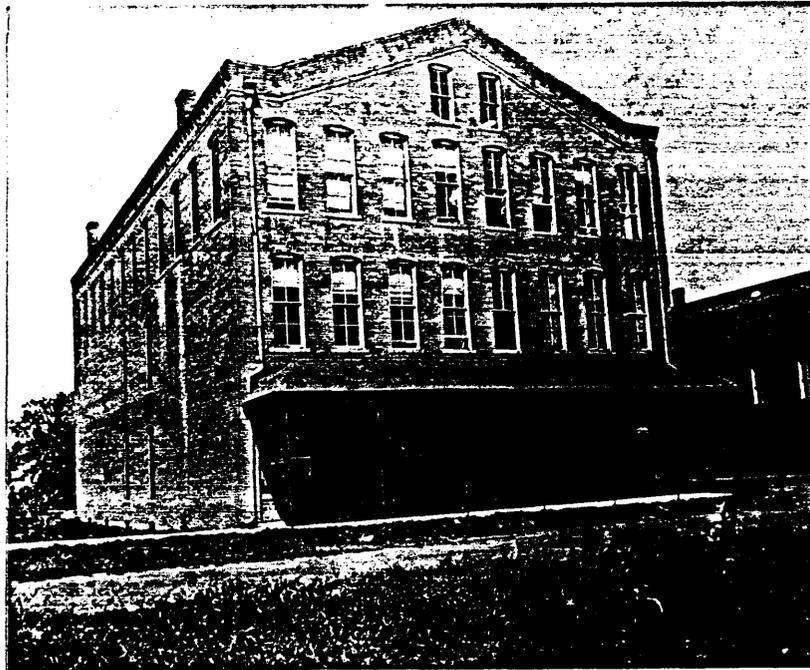
MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 8

CFN-259-1116

Meek Bros. constructed a three and one-half story brick building at the northwest corner of First and West in 1892 to serve as a pants factory (#1), using the wool from their mill. In a relatively short time they added complete suits to their product line. It was said that the wool processed at the woolen mill came from sheep the Meek Bros. raised on their nearby farms. In 1878 Isaiah, Joseph, and Robert Meek owned, individually and as partners, 3,850 acres. How much of this was devoted to sheep raising is unknown, but the hilly terrain is more conducive to the raising of sheep than crops such as corn and beans. Even today, Van Buren and neighboring Davis County are among the leading sheep producing counties in the state.



The Pants Factory, Site #1, c. 1900 photograph.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 9

CFN-259-1116



The Pants Factory, Site #1, 1988 photograph.

The new opera house burned in an 1894 fire that took out the center of the block. J.W. Whiteley immediately re-built the opera house (#14), and renamed it. Other new buildings following the fire included the Cresap-Stadler Building, #12, and the Opera Entry, #13. These three buildings provide a visually united front, as these are the only buildings in Bonaparte with full pressed metal facades. The Cresap-Stadler Building originally housed a meat market on the first floor, with a lodge room on the second. Over the years, the building has housed a millinery shop and a barber. Building #11 next door west, also dates from 1894. Known as the Bonaparte Drug Co., it was erected especially for a drug store. It is a one story brick, measuring 22' x 60'. Originally the stock was owned by Dr. W.I. Bogle, a graduate of Keokuk Medical College. A 1902 newspaper article describes the interior as "magnificently furnished and neatly arranged." This building retains a high degree of interior integrity, with most of the original shelves and cases in place.

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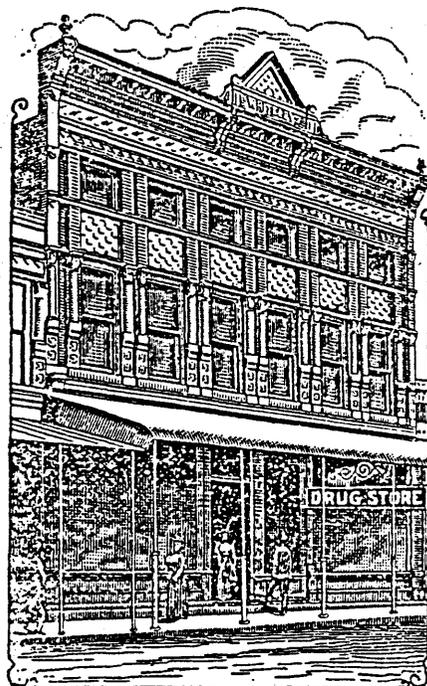
MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 10

CFN-259-1116

### Opera House . . . a magnificent structure



The accompanying illustration is another of Bonaparte's architectural achievements, a monument to the enterprise and tasty pride of one of her progressive business firms, viz, the Whiteley Opera House. This magnificent structure, whose lofty top overlooks our beautiful little city, is certainly a feast for one's eyes to behold; and especially so if the beholder is a Bonaparter with the well developed local pride so characteristic and noticable in Bonaparte citizens. This elaborate edifice is 45 feet wide, 84 feet long and 38 feet high. Entering it, one passes through spacious antique oak doors which open on Front street, crosses the

lower hall on a floor of marble tiling, ascends the wide and commodious stairway which leads to the cloak-room, and goes thence through the wide doorway into the main room, or up another flight of stairs into the gallery. The two-story entrance is 10 feet wide and 60 feet long, and is independent of the main hall. The parquet and gallery together has a seating capacity of 500. The seats are divided into three classes as follows: 100 fine plush-back, 120 standard opera, and 280 common chairs. The gallery accommodates 140 persons.

The stage is 42 feet wide and 28 feet deep, with proscenium openings 18 feet high and 28 feet wide, and is exquisitely fitted with 3 sets of the latest improved border and footlights, curtains, scenery, etc. There are two two-story dressing rooms upon the stage very conveniently arranged. The hall, proper, has a 23 foot ceiling.

Below the opera house are two elegant store rooms, each 21x84 feet. In the front of each room is a single plate glass, 120x160 inches.

Altogether, this opera house is an imposing structure and would be a credit to a city many times as large as Bonaparte.

In this grand erection our pleasure-loving inhabitants will congregate—"when toil, remitting, lends its turn to play," and, oblivious of corroding care, will lose themselves in the intricate plot of the drama, or be carried to realms of enchantment by the soft refrain of the sweet-voiced prima donna.

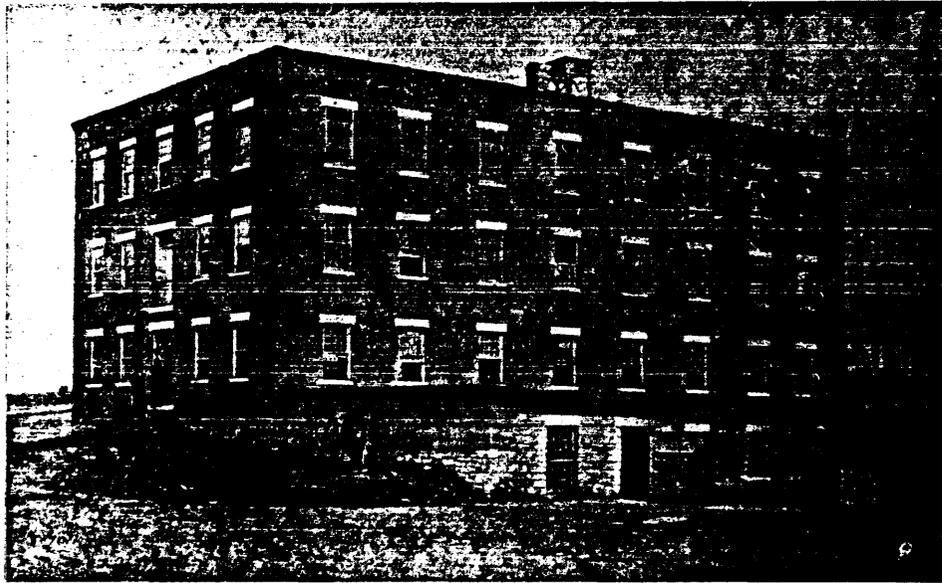
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

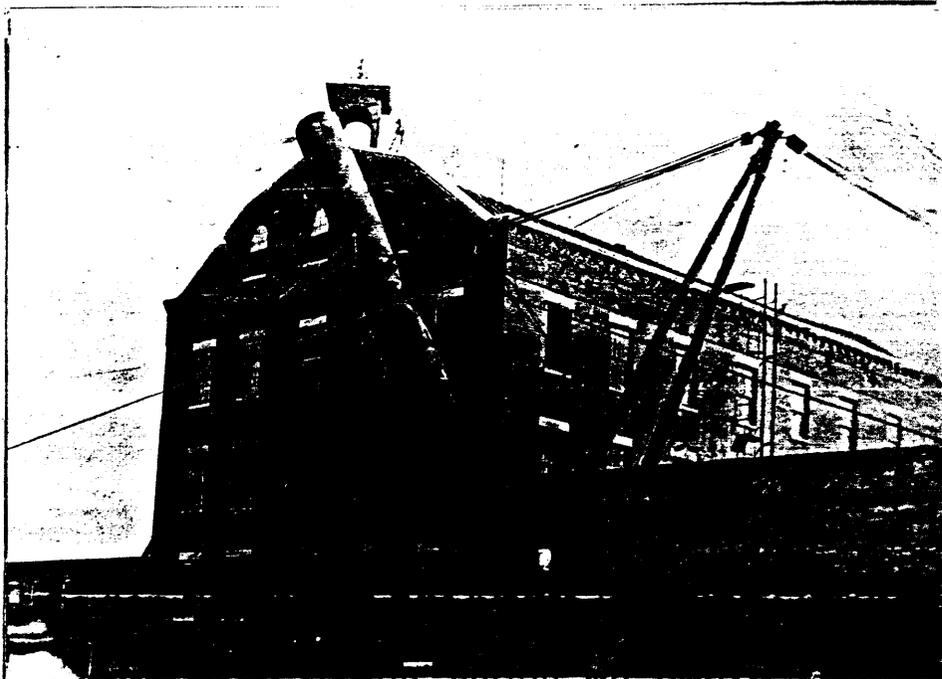
## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 11

CFN-259-1116



Around 1895 the Bonaparte skyline was changed when the woolen mill changed from water power to steam. Not only were a stone powerhouse and smokestack built, but a half story gambrel roof was added to the mill. The new roof altered the appearance of the 1863 building, but it continued to be a dominate part of the streetscape.



United States Department of the Interior  
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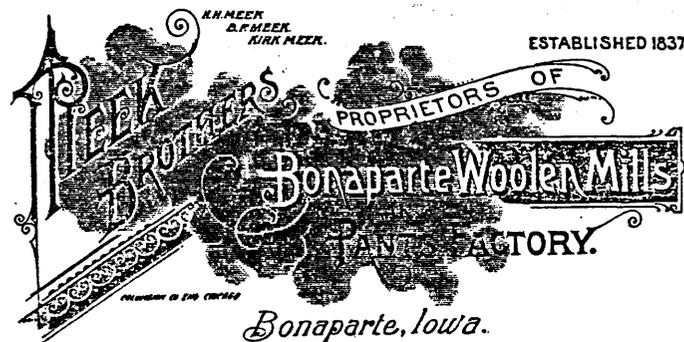
MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 12

CFN-259-1116

## HISTORY OF BONAPARTE, IOWA



The above picture must have been used on advertising literature by the woolen mills.

In 1902 the Bonaparte Bee published a special edition which contained a great deal of information about the town, its people and its businesses. The paper said "It (Bonaparte) has gained a world-wide reputation on account of its great woolen mills and clothing manufactory, owned by Meek Bros. and Co., one of the largest plants of its character in the west, giving employment to two hundred men and women. They also employ several traveling salesmen, who visit not only the western states, but many of the eastern states, also. The clothing manufactured by this great enterprise, for quality and durability, gives such general satisfaction, that most of the time they are unable to supply the demand. This industry of itself is enough to guarentee a prosperous little city all the time."

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 13

CFN-259-1116

Like the articles cited from 1878 and 1887, the 1902 article goes on to list the Bonaparte business establishments: "Besides the large wool mills, clothing manufactory and large flouring mill, Bonaparte boasts a large carriage and wagon manufactory, one of the most solid banking institutions of the state with a capital of \$50,000, three general stores, two grocery stores, two shoe stores, three hardware stores, one general tinware store and repair shop, one splendid lumber yard, three agricultural and implement stores, three restaurants, two drug stores, one racket and notion store, one harness shop, one photographer, one pool hall, one shoe shop, two hotels, one livery barn, one meat market, two barber shops, two millinery establishments, two jewelers, one excellent jewelry store, two real estate firms, one lawyer, three physicians, one dentist, several blacksmith shops, a number of carpenters and contractors, one brick manufacturer, one furniture store, two newspapers, and last, but not least, the finest equipped opera house of any town, of the size of Bonaparte, in the west." It appears that the town had grown, and the census statistics prove that. In 1895 Bonaparte had reached a population of 923, over 150 more people than just five years earlier. In 1898 the town was finally incorporated, with H.H. Meek as Mayor, and R.E. Meek as City Clerk.

On July 2, 1900, three buildings on the northeast corner of First and Main were demolished by fire, removing the last frame buildings in that block of First. The massive flood of 1903 covered downtown with a foot of water, and washed out the dam. A cut 30' side and 10' deep was made between the head wall of the dam and the nearest granery. This flood managed to do what fishermen had been trying to do for years, eliminate the problem of the fish not being able to swim upstream, and foreshadowed other problems for the Meeks.

The woolen mills closed in 1906, and the assets of Meek Bros. Co. were to be sold on Tuesday, September 7, 1909. The firm was bankrupt, apparently the result of lack of sound business management skills, and a changing agricultural economy.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 14

CFN-259-1116

### Assests to be sold

1909

Bonaparte Record: The entire assets of the Meek Bros. Co., of Bonaparte, Iowa, will be offered for sale Tuesday, September 7th, 1909 at 2 o'clock p.m. on the premises.

The property consists of a Woolen Mill, being a Three Story Brick building, with attic and stone basement, a Two Story Brick addition, a Stone Power house, and One Story Stone Warehouse, One Three Story Brick Store house or wareroom, Brick repair shop and Frame Barn, Iron clad.

The Mill building is equipped with six set cards, spinning, dyeing, finishing machinery, from the wool to cloth.

Power Consists of Hamilton-Corlis engine with proper boiler capacity. Has its own electric light equipment, lighting the entire plant.

The Clothing Factory is a Three Story Brick building, metal roof, properly equipped with all machinery, fitted with office room and all necessary space for such business.

There is also a stock of wool, and wool in various stages of manufacture, raw, cleaned, scoured, dyed, spun, waist.

The Clothing stock consists of manufactured clothing, piece goods, clips, and such materials as are used in the manufacture of Clothing.

In addition there is an accumulation of old iron, steel, and junk of every kind.

One Team of Mules, Several Wagons and Harness.

One Burglar Proof safe (Hall's) timer.  
Platform Scales.

Receivers inventory of personal property foots about \$56,000.

THE SAME TO BE OFFERED AS A WHOLE, at public auction by the Trustee to highest and best bidder for cash, but nevertheless subject to the approval of Court. The successful bidder will be required to deposit a certified check for ten per cent of the amount of his bid, to be held by the Trustee until the sale can be reported to and acted upon by the Court.

For further information apply to the Trustee.

J.A. Johnson, Trustee  
Bonaparte

In 1912 S.E. Irish of Keosauqua and M.S. Mosler of Chicago purchased the complex and assured residents that they would "make strenuous efforts to open them for business." It did not happen. The woolen mill sat empty, and finally (1928) the roof had to be removed because it was considered to be dangerous. The pants factory was in business for several years, closed, and was purchased by the Fairfield Mitten and Glove Factory in 1920. It continues to be used by that company today. The grist mill had several owners over the years, but stayed in business as a grain dealer until the 1970s.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 15

CFN-259-1116

In 1905 Bonaparte had reached a population of 968 people. Ten years later, after the closing of the Meek Bros. businesses, the population had dropped to 643. Bonaparte was not just losing numbers of people, they were losing the young people. Census records show that for all years prior to 1915, the largest group of people were aged 21-45 years. Beginning in 1915, the largest group of people in Bonaparte is over age 45.

New construction in the business district slowed, but did not halt completely. In 1918 the Bonaparte Savings Bank (with Masonic Hall above), was built on the northeast corner of First and Main, and three years later their rival bank constructed a new building next door to the opera house. Automobiles came to Bonaparte (yet another new form of transportation), and a new building type followed...the service station. The bridge had made the corner of First and Main a major interection, and it was the logical site for the service stations.

When the W.P.A. started work on the woolen mill in 1938 they were re-fitting a landmark for a new use. As a community hall it continued to play a major role in the life of the community. The loss of the top one and one-half stories altered the appearance, but no more than the gambrel roof had in the 1890s.



Woolen Mill (Community Hall), Site #25, c. 1938 photograph.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 2

CFN-259-1116

Plat Book of Van Buren County, Iowa. Philadelphia: Northwestern Pub. Co., 1897.

Portrait and Biographical Album of Van Buren County, Iowa. Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1887.

Iowa Industrial Census. 1870.

Federal Industrial Census. 1870, 1880.

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Sixth through the Twelfth Enumerations (1840-1900).

American Contractor. Vol. 37, II, May 18, 1918, p. 69.

American Miller. Vol. 22, March 1894, p 209.  
Vol. 30, May 1902, p. 412.

"Navigating the Des Moines." Annals of Iowa. Vol. 29, 3rd Series, No. 6, July 1947, p. 63.

Weaver, James B. "The Story of the Des Moines River Lands." Annals of Iowa, Vol. 18, No. 6, October 1932, pp. 420-433.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Bonaparte, 1893, 1898, 1909, and 1927.

### NEWSPAPERS

Bonaparte newspapers from the period of significance are very difficult to locate, except as clippings in scrapbooks, as most of them burned.

The John (Boss) Entler Scrapbook Collection, 12 Vol., in the Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, is a wealth of information, but it is not chronological, and many entries are not dated.

The Bonaparte Bee published a special edition in April, 1902 which contained a great deal of historical information.

The Van Buren Leader-Record published an 80 page special edition for Bonaparte's Sesquicentennial in 1987.

"The Meek Brothers and the Bonaparte Dam." Burlington Hawk-Eye, April 11, 1909, p. 24.

Edwards, Mrs. Walter. "Additional History About Bonaparte." Van Buren Record, September 2, 1932.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1990

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 3

CFN-259-1116

Perkins, Mrs. O.R. "Whiteley is an Old Name in Bonaparte History."  
Burlington Hawk-Eye Gazette, May 4, 1956, p. 1.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Bonaparte's First Hotel Erected in 1840."  
Burlington Hawk-Eye Gazette, June 7, 1956.

### INTERVIEWS

Interviews with several long-time Bonaparte residents were conducted over lunch, with an introduction to our project. Though a number of people were quite helpful, special thanks must go to Ruth Noske Meek, and Arthur McCracken.

### PHOTOGRAPHS

The Bonaparte Public Library has a fine collection of historic photographs which have been useful for this nomination. Various citizens have shared their private collections as well. The Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, also has a box of photographs of Bonaparte.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 2

CFN-259-1116

## Verbal Boundary Description (cont.)

west to a point 50' west of the west right of way of Washington Street; thence south 50' to the north edge of Lot 5, Block 2; thence west along lot line to the west right of way of Main Street; thence north along the right of way to the northeast corner of Block 1; thence west along lot line 50'; thence south to the north edge of Lots 5 & 6; thence west to the point of beginning.

## Boundary Justification (cont.)

business and industrial (mill) area as laid out by William Meek and Roger Cresap as early as 1837, and follows the riverfront. It is bounded by the Des Moines River on the south; the City Park with the lock, and mill-related buildings on the west; the east side of Washington on the east (these buildings sharply define the east end of the business district); and an irregular line across the northern boundary. This line has been drawn to include the buildings which relate to the commercial development of Bonaparte, but not to include empty lots, or new construction which would lessen the feeling of time and place that is present in the district. The primary focus is on the river and buildings along First Street, with additional buildings on the side streets to the north.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 3

CFN-259-1116

## UTM References

- A. 600,900/4,505,680
- B. 600,920/4,505,740
- C. 600,980/4,505,740
- D. 601,000/4,505,780
- E. 601,085/4,505,760
- F. 601,100/4,505,820
- G. 601,140/4,505,800
- H. 601,140/4,505,760
- I. 601,245/4,505,740
- J. 601,245/4,505,760
- K. 601,265/4,505,765
- L. 601,280/4,505,640

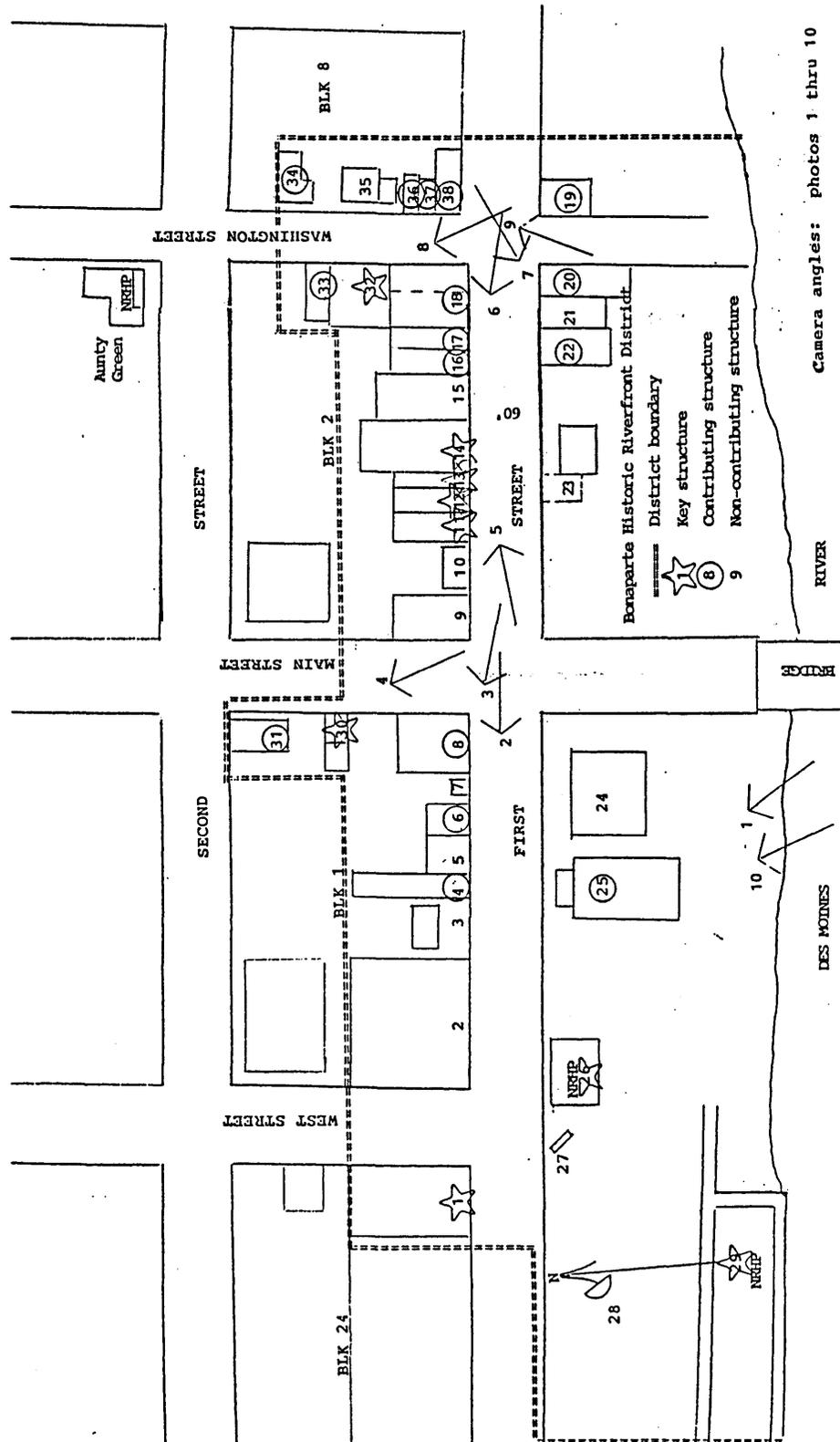
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 4

CFN-259-1116



Camera angles: photos 1 thru 10

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAR 21 1989

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 5

CFN-259-1116

Of the ten photographs in this nomination, all are of the Bonaparte Historic Riverfront District, Bonaparte, IA, and all except photograph #1 were taken by M.M. Naumann. The negatives for all of the photographs are in the Bonaparte City Hall. All, except for #1, were taken in December, 1988.

Aerial view of the west part of the Bonaparte Historic District with Meek Mill buildings featured.

Unknown photographer, c. 1978-80.

#1

First Street, looking west from Main.

#2

North Side of First Street, looking west from Main.

#3

West side of Main Street, looking northwest from First.

#4

North side of First Street, looking east from Main.

#5

North side of First Street, looking west from Washington.

#6

South side of First Street, looking west from Washington.

#7

West side of Washington, looking northwest from First.

#8

East side of Washington, looking northeast from First.

#9

View of the riverfront with mill-related buildings, looking northwest from bridge.

#10