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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

71000

# 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 Captain Nicholas W. and Emma Johnson House  
other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Location

street & number 21st St. & University Ave., SE corner N/A not for publication  
city, town Des Moines N/A vicinity  
state Iowa code IA county Polk code 152 zip code 50311

## 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing	
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>2</u>	_____	buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-state	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____	sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____	structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	_____	_____	objects
		<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

## 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.

David [Signature] \_\_\_\_\_ 10/23/90  
Signature of certifying official Date

State Historical Society of Iowa  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See cont. 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.  
[ ] 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:) \_\_\_\_\_

Arlene [Signature] \_\_\_\_\_ 12/6/90  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic: single dwelling

Funerary: graves/burials

Domestic: single dwelling

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

Late Victorian: Queen Anne

Other: Chateaufesque

foundation brick

walls brick

roof asphalt

other stone

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

[X] See continuation sheet, section 7, page 1.

**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

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

Architecture

1896

1896

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Smith, Oliver O.

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

[X] See continuation sheet, section 8, page 1.

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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[X] See continuation sheet, section 9, page 1.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data**

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Acreage of property less than one acre

UTM References

A	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	B	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	Zone Easting	Northing			Zone Easting	Northing	
C	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	D	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	Zone Easting	Northing			Zone Easting	Northing	

[ ] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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Verbal Boundary Description

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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Boundary Justification

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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name/title	Barbara Beving Long, consultant	date	August 28, 1990
organization	Four Mile Research Company	telephone	(515) 266-4964
street & number	3140 Easton Boulevard	state	Iowa zip code 50317
city or town	Des Moines		

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The Captain Nicholas W. and Emma Johnson House is a highly unusual example in Des Moines of Chateausque stylistic elements applied to a late Queen Anne house type.<sup>1</sup> As such, the house design admirably reflects the cosmopolitan career of Captain Johnson. Identifying Chateausque features displayed on the Johnson House include a steeply pitched hipped roof, the use of masonry, smooth and rough wall surfaces, prominent contrasting courses, a feeling of massiveness and solidity, and the fleur-de-lis motif. The prominent front-facing gable is the primary Queen Anne feature. Notable interior elements, including ornate plasterwork, woodwork, ceramic tile, and leaded glass, continue the opulence and fine design of the exterior. Alterations are not intrusive and are associated with the building's conversion to a funeral home in the 1930s. Still a funeral home and residence for the owner, the brick house and its carriage house occupy a large corner lot in a once-prominent area. Residential 21st Street is several blocks from Drake University and related commercial development along University Avenue of the former town of University Place.

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The large (41x49') house consists of 2-1/2 stories set upon a raised basement. A massive hipped roof now covered in asphalt shingle flares at the ends to form a rather deep overhang. In addition, there is a prominent front-facing gable and two full-height polygonal side bays that pierce the hipped roofline. Two tall corbelled chimneys provide another strong shape. The porch treatment is correspondingly strong and bold. Notable are squared brick piers (with both smooth and rough brick) and ten sweeping moulded wood brackets. The massing of the Johnson House is an effective combination of well-proportioned bold shapes.

Brick with a distinct pinkish cast is used throughout in both smooth and rough textures, and the mortar joints are flush with the smooth brick. Rough brick alternates with smooth on the raised basement below a smooth limestone water table and also is used on the bays, front gable, and porch columns.

The contrast is effective and subtle, especially when combined with the smooth stone courses. These courses provide an interesting horizontal unifying element at the cornice line--where the course is quite broad--and on upper bays and the front gable--where they are slender and allied with windows. Stone also forms a distinctive surround or setting for grouped staircase windows on the north facade and again at the front gable.

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<sup>1</sup>McAlester notes that "Chateausque is a rare style used primarily for architect-designed landmark houses." (p.373.)

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Notable is the broken moulding that concentrates attention on a carved fleur-de-lis.

Window sizes and shapes are varied, and they often reflect interior uses. Large original wood frame double-hung windows light most rooms. Nine small rectangular windows occur at the central staircase, six similar windows light the stair alcove off the entry hall, and three others adorn the rear or west facade to light the former dining room. These grouped windows (as well as the lights for the original wood double entry doors and double foyer doors) contain superb heavy leaded or colored glass panels. Some display the fleur-de-lis pattern, a repeated motif on the house.

The fleur-de-lis is also found on ceramic tiles of one of the two fireplaces. These small fireplaces have distinctive wood columns, such as the tall fluted Ionic columns in the front parlor. Other notable woodwork includes massive sliding double doors, a staircase with slender turned spindles four to the riser, newels with carved detail, and entry hall paneling with delicate dentil courses.

A variety of distinctive elegant plaster patterns further enriches the interior. In the entry hall plaster beams divide the ceiling and are decorated with three patterns, including fretwork. Other rooms have patterned plaster cornices with small consoles (second floor bedroom), four patterns including egg-and-dart (second floor halls), large consoles (near dining room), and acanthus (first floor front parlor).

But the most elaborate cornice adorns all four sides of what likely was the library that is located at the north side bay. The design consists of three broad bands within approximately 24" and is executed in what appears to be the original colors: dark gold, bright metallic gold, blue, and reddish orange. The library ceiling is also dark gold. The top band curves, has two shades of gold, and consists of tightly woven arabesques. Below is a rather architectural form reminiscent of Moorish capitals. Like the wood detail of the house, the plasterwork is small in scale, rich and elegant.

First floor rooms open off the large entry hall and consist of a front parlor, library, back parlor, dining room, small bathroom, and kitchen. Walls between the library and back parlor and back parlor and dining room appear to have been removed at the time of the funeral home conversion. The back parlor and dining room space now function as the funeral chapel, and the kitchen has been turned into a room for the bereaved family to use.

The second floor now houses the owners' living quarters as well as two

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rooms used for offices. There are six rooms as well as the bathroom. The bathroom is notable for its original fixtures (bath, sitz bath, toilet, pedestal lavatory), ceramic tile (including patterned course), and painted patterned cornice. The top floor is now a casket room, and behind the staircase is the embalming room.

The most well known example of the Chateausque style in America is Biltmore, which was completed in North Carolina in 1895. The Johnson House was constructed the following year, and it appears the architect and owner were aware of French-inspired designs such as Biltmore. The fleur-de-lis motif, a stylized French royal iris or lily, is used repeatedly, including on the now removed 2' high wood balustrade over the main entrance (now in storage). Four large carved fleur-de-lis alternate with round "port holes" or roundels, perhaps a reference to Captain Johnson's seafaring past. These and other elements, especially the steep hipped roof, use of brick to form a smooth wall surface, contrasting courses, and impression of wealth and solidity are the principle references to this style which is very rare in Des Moines. The Johnson House is not a pure high style example, and these motifs and elements have been admirably integrated with familiar Queen Anne massing and classically-inspired interior details.

The Johnson House enjoys a large 225x200' double lot with mature trees (which make photographing difficult). Much of the south end is now parking for the funeral home, and the house occupies the north half of the lot. Other large homes from the turn-of-the-century are located along 21st Street but none is as elaborate or in as original condition as the Johnson House. University Avenue is largely commercial, although there are two small brick 19th century flats across from the house. The Basilica of St. John, which is listed on the National Register, is one block away on University.

A 1-1/2 story 23x44' brick carriage house is located on the lot behind and slightly south of the house. Like the house, it has a hipped roof that flares at the ends to form a broad overhang and an additional gable. Notable original features include three arched windows in the gable, 2/2 wood frame windows, and a transom over a wood door. Used to store funeral home vehicles, the carriage house was damaged in the 1970s by lightning, and the gable end was then inappropriately rebuilt. The present owners plan to re-roof the building, reconstruct the gable end, and remove a small 1-story garage addition from the west facade when time and finances permit.

Alterations do not intrude strongly upon the original design or materials of the house. Asphalt shingle has replaced the slate roofing shown on the 1901 Sanborn map. An elevator with adjacent small rooms and porch was

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added to the side rear of the southwest corner to accommodate funeral home use, replacing a small porch. The elevator takes bodies to the embalming room on the top floor and then to the first floor chapel. This change, which dates from the 1930s, has reddish brick that harmonizes with the original. Windows throughout have metal storms, and a limited amount of stone (some sills and at the porch brackets) has been painted. The balustrade with port holes and fleurs-de-lis over the main entrance has been removed because of its highly deteriorated condition; it is now in storage and will eventually be returned to its original location. Inside, a large curving wall above the main staircase is now painted white. With its prominent location, neighboring embellished surfaces, and the presence of an applied "frame," it is quite possible that a mural or other decorated surface lies beneath the coat of paint.

The Captain Johnson House may be the best example of a home in Des Moines converted to a funeral home, once a common practice, but this theme has not been explored, for there is little documentary evidence to place the property within this context.

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The Captain Nicholas W. and Emma Johnson House is a highly unusual example in Des Moines of Chateausque stylistic elements applied to a late Queen Anne house type. As such, the house design admirably reflects the cosmopolitan career of Captain Johnson, who was born in South America and sailed the Atlantic in the years before the Civil War. The property's Area of Significance is Architecture (Criterion C), for the Captain Johnson House embodies the distinctive characteristics of an unusual style, the Chateausque, and possesses high artistic values. Notable features include the fleur-de-lis motif executed in stone, ceramic tile, and glass; the massing; and the materials, especially ornate interior plasterwork, woodwork, and leaded glass, and exterior brick in two textures and stone. The Period of Significance is 1896, the year of construction.

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According to several obituaries as well as 1880 and 1885 Census records and county histories, Captain Johnson was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1829 where his father was engaged in business. The family returned to New England in 1834, settling in Connecticut. Between 1854 and 1862 Johnson captained a ship in the Atlantic. According to an 1879 county history, "the business was ruined by the damages incident to, and growing out of, the civil war." The same account notes that Johnson was returning from a successful trip from Africa when he "barely escaped being captured by the Alabama," a Confederate ship. Although these references seem to suggest involvement with the slave trade, that era had passed by the 1850s for American shipping. It is much more likely that Johnson carried spices and other exotic cargo on his excursions.

Following a successful trip to the Cape of Good Hope, Johnson sold his cargo and ship and then traveled through the American West. In 1863 he settled in Lee Township in northeast Madison County and by 1879 he had amassed 960 acres of land. An 1869 county history counted him among the three "most extensive farmers" in the township. Johnson's second wife, Emma Johnson, was the sister of a Des Moines resident who was married to John M. Dewey, owner of the Kirkwood Hotel, and this likely contributed to the Johnsons' decision to settle in Iowa.

In 1891 the Johnsons moved to Des Moines and bought the lot at 21st and University in 1895. According to an account in the Iowa State Register, Johnson took out a building permit late in February of 1896 to build "a brick veneered stone trimmed residence at a cost of \$7,000 at the north-west corner of Twenty-first Street and University Avenue." The same paper noted on March 27th that building materials had arrived at the site for the house, now pegged at \$12,000. And "Mr. [Charles] Weitz has the contract," a venerable and important contractor in Des Moines.



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Construction continued through the spring and summer of 1896. Construction records on file at The Weitz Corporation and the State Historical Society of Iowa show the progress. A May 5, 1896 receipt indicates that water was hooked up. On July 6 the leaded glass from J.R. Allward of Des Moines was paid for, and there is an August 31 receipt for "cutting and putting in pump pipes" for the house. An undated receipt suggests that the important Des Moines stoneworks of John Rowat supplied the "Johnson house stone." On August 8, 1896, the Saturday Review reported the family had moved into "their lovely new home" at this address.

Sanborn fire insurance maps for 1901, the first year the area was covered, show the house and carriage house in place. City directories confirm the house, then known as 1168 21st Street, was home to the Johnson family.

At his death in 1900 at the age of 71, Johnson was described in obituaries as "one of the best known men in central Iowa....He was an old sea captain, and the geography of the world was common place history to him." Following his retirement from farming, he served on the board, and then as president, of Valley National Bank in Des Moines.

Seven children survived Captain Johnson, as well as his wife. Following his death, Emma Johnson moved in with her daughter, Mrs. George F. White, at nearby 2118 University. She sold the house to Albert H. Mabis in 1902 for \$14,500. Mabis, who was secretary-treasurer for the Des Moines Saddlery Company, owned the property until the mid-1930s. The Mabis family was also part of city society, and when daughter Marie became engaged to John Given Chase in 1912, the event received front page coverage in the Des Moines Capital.

Esther and Roy Caldwell purchased the property in 1933 and converted it from a single-family home to a funeral home. The present owners, Karolyn and James Raddatz, bought the business from a former Caldwell employee, then owner, in the 1980s and have continued the funeral home business.

Numerous funeral directors across the country have converted large houses to funeral homes, and their efforts have preserved countless mansions. In Des Moines, most funeral businesses now operate out of buildings specifically designed for that purpose. The Caldwell-Brien-Robbins funeral home is one of a handful of converted houses to continue their funeral home function and is certainly the least altered and most elaborate example.

Despite the regular newspaper reports on construction progress of the Johnson House, no architect has come to light with certainty for the design. With its elaborate and masterful design, it seems likely that the house was designed by an architect. Among the important architects

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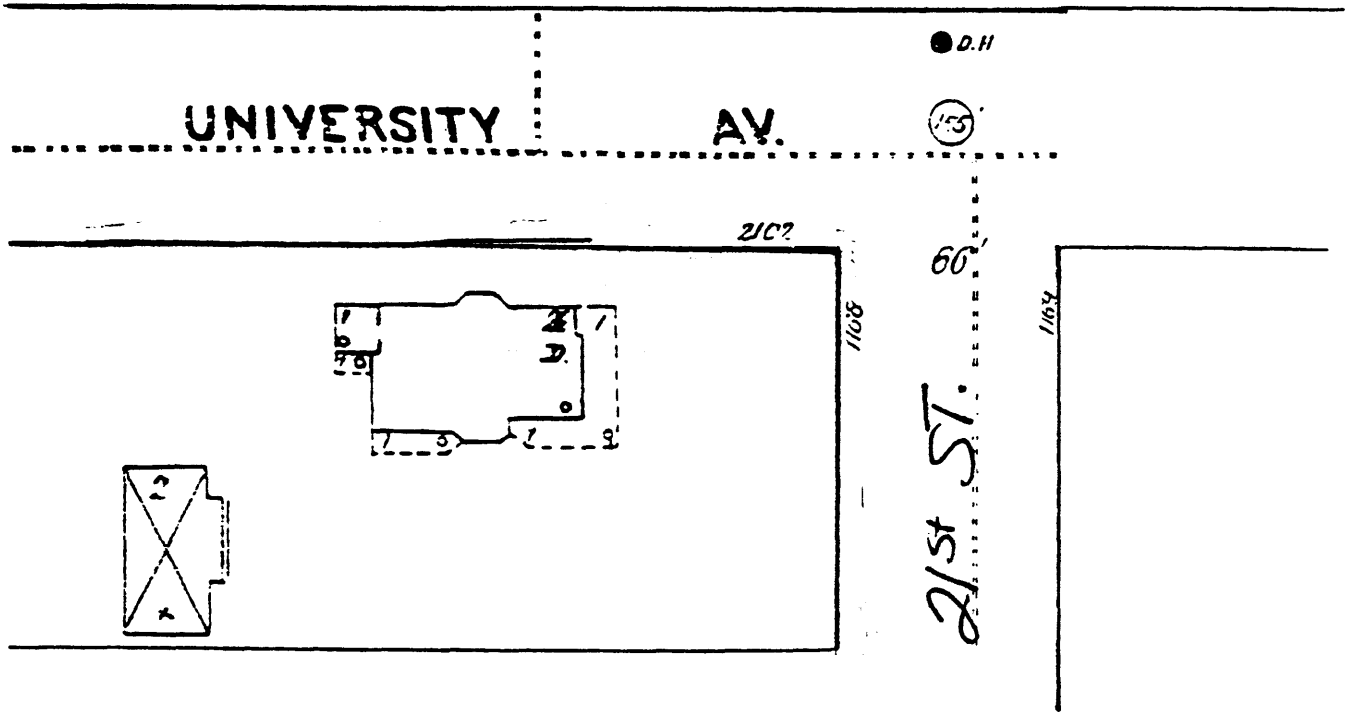
practicing in Des Moines in 1895 and 1896 was Oliver O. Smith. In 1895, when the Johnsons may have hired an architect, Smith was practicing with Edwin L. Merrill (Merrill & Smith). By 1896 the partnership had dissolved and Smith was with Foster, Liebbe and Smith. The trio, together and in other combinations, ranked among the state's leading architects during this period. Smith was architect for such important commissions as the Iowa State Historical Building, the Public Library of Des Moines, Mercy Hospital in Des Moines, and high schools in Stuart, Prairie City, Algona, and Winterset.

Smith used the Winterset design in his advertisements, and its roofline and other details bear notable similarities with the Johnson house. One of the construction receipts, for leaded glass, also ties Smith to the Johnson house. On it is written "Glass O.K. Smith." Like the Johnson house, the interiors of the Historical Building and Public Library are rich and elegant. Although attribution cannot be firmly stated, the timing, documentary evidence, design motifs, and stature of Smith's career suggest that he may have designed the Johnson house.

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History and Business Directory of Madison County, Iowa. Des Moines: Mills & Co., 1869.

The History of Madison County, Iowa. Des Moines: Union Historical Co., 1879).

Notice of building permit. Iowa State Register. February 25, 1896.

Announcement building materials at site. Iowa State Register. March 27, 1896.

Johnson family moves in. Saturday Review. August 8, 1896.

"Capt. Johnson Dead." Daily Iowa Capitol. December 3, 1900.

"Death of N.W. Johnson." Iowa State Register. December 4, 1900.

Johnson obituary. Des Moines Leader. December 4, 1900.

"N.W. Johnson's Obsequies." Des Moines Daily News. December 4, 1900.

"Death of Capt. N.W. Johnson." Mail & Times. December 8, 1900.

"Mrs. Emma Johnson Dead." Register & Leader. July 22, 1910.

Mabis engagement announcement. Des Moines Capitol. September 16, 1912.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. Des Moines. 1901.

Polk County Assessor's Office Records.

Bureau of Historic Preservation. Architects in Iowa Files.

Des Moines City Directories. 1895-1909.

U.S. and Iowa Censuses. Lee Township, Madison County, 1880, 1885.

Halstead, Mary. "A Legacy of Excellence. The History of Des Moines Funeral Service." Prepared for Hamilton's Funeral Home. 1984.

Long, Barbara Beving. "Des Moines. Center of Iowa." Survey of Historic Sites. Des Moines Plan & Zoning Commission. 1983.

Schroder, Alan M., comp. Directory of 19th Century Iowa Architects.

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Iowa City: SHSI, 1982. (pp. 20, 35, 45.)

Contractor's Receipts (all refer specifically to the Johnson house):  
--SHSI Archives: J.P. Kirkpatrick to Charles Weitz, July 9, 1896; Des Moines Water Works Company to Charles Weitz, May 1, 1896; J.R. Allward to Charles Weitz, no date.  
--The Weitz Corporation Archives: John Rowat to Charles Weitz, no date; Des Moines Plumbing Co. to Charles Weitz, August 31, 1896.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is lot 1 of Cottage Grove Replat.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lot that has historically been associated with the property. Although the house is not centered on the lot--it occupies the north half of the lot--the entire lot has historically been part of the site.