

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 88000237

Date Listed: 3/31/88

Freethinkers' Hall
Property Name

Sauk
County

WI
State

Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Beth Boland
Signature of the Keeper

3/31/88
Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

- 1) The Freethinkers' Hall is significant under National Register Criterion B for associations with Eduard Schroeter.
- 2) Based on physical evidence, the bandstand has been dated as approximately contemporary with Freethinkers' Hall.

DISTRIBUTION:

National Register property file
Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

FEB 22 1988

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 Freethinkers' Hall
other names/site number Park Hall

2. Location

street & number 309 Polk St n/a not for publication
city, town Sauk City n/a vicinity
state Wisconsin code WI county Sauk code 111 zip code 53581

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> | _____ 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.
Signature of certifying official [Signature] Date 2/11/88
State Historic Preservation Office - Wisconsin
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. [Signature] 3/31/88
 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)

Social/meeting hall

Recreation and culture/ Music facility

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Social/meeting hall

Recreation and culture/ Music facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

Queen Anne

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Weatherboard

Shingle

roof Asphalt

other Wood

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Freethinkers' Hall is a two-story wooden frame building designed by the architect Alfred C. Clas and erected in 1884.* The building faces south from the northern boundary of the original plat of the village of Sauk City, Wisconsin, which was incorporated in 1854. The neighborhood surrounding the building is one of mid- to late 19th century houses, many of them closely spaced and built near the front of the lot. The park surrounding the Hall occupies an entire block measuring 300' north to south and 280' east to west. In the park is a stand of large oak trees. There are large pines and arbor vitae on either side of the Hall and along the east edge of the park. A tablet at the southwest corner of the building reads "Wisconsin Registered Landmark No. 52" and gives a brief history of the Hall. At the southeast corner a second tablet reads, simply, "Freie Gemeinde."

The style of the Hall is Queen Anne in its variety of massing and textures. Many decorative elements are Eastlakan, with scroll sawn brackets, machine-turned spindles and natural colors and textures in the interior. The design has qualities of lightness and airiness and the form of the building corresponds closely to the functions it was to serve. These are qualities advocated by the English architect Charles Eastlake.

The front entrance porch, which was added to the building about 1918 to replace an earlier shed-roofed porch, is decorated with extensive spindle trim, heavy brackets and large turned posts. There are shingles in an intricate pattern in a gable extending over the nine steps which rise from the sidewalk to the entrance. At either side of the porch, steps lead down to a basement entrance. The steps are protected by two shed roofs which are supported by turned posts and decorated with a spindle frieze.

The main section of the building is 64' by 40'. A center-front extension is 32' wide and 16' deep, not including the entrance porch. Across the front-facing gable of the building, framing the second-story windows, is a board-and-batten panel which becomes a decorative frieze on the side and rear elevations. The area above the panel is covered in fishscale shingles and features a decorated attic vent window and curved stickwork. This

*Clas' name appears on the original building specifications, as architect

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 |
|--|------------------------|-------------------|
| Social History | 1884-1937 | 1884 |
| Ethnic Heritage - European | | |
| Architecture | Cultural Affiliation | |
| | N/A | |
| Significant Person | Architect/Builder | |
| N/A | Clas, Alfred Charles | |

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

Freethinkers' Hall was built in 1884 by a group of German immigrants to Sauk City, Wisconsin. As noted in the Wisconsin Cultural Resource Management Plan prepared by the Division of Historic Preservation of the State Historical Society, "a small fraction of the state's earliest German settlers can be identified with the abortive Revolution of 1848." Freethinkers' Hall is significant in the social history of the nation as the meeting place of the Freie Gemeinde von Sauk County (Free Congregation of Sauk County). This congregation was one of the largest and the most enduring of the small but influential group of German-speaking humanistic organizations which grew out of the forced emigration of German liberals in the 1840s and 1850s. The Freie Gemeinde von Sauk County was a founding member of the Union of Free German Congregations. At its founding in 1868 the Union included groups in Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Sauk City. As the Free Thought League of America it survived into the 1940s, with member organizations in Milwaukee, St. Louis, Chicago, San Francisco, and Sauk City. The first two triennial meetings were held in Sauk City, in 1868 and 1871.

The Freethinkers' Hall in Sauk City is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places based upon its historical and architectural significance under criteria A and C. Architecturally the building is significant at the state level as one of Wisconsin's finest intact examples of Queen Anne/Eastlake design, particularly as assigned to a social, meeting hall facility. The integrity of the overall design, including the spectacular interior, is without compare in the state and boldly represents the aesthetic tastes of the late 19th century and the ideals of its builders.

In the areas of Social History and Ethnic Heritage-European (German), the property is believed to be of local and national significance. The Sauk County Freethinkers' Hall, believed to be the last such historic hall still functioning in the U.S., can provide important contributions to our knowledge of the Wisconsin Free Thought movement and its broader role in the national scope of this unique 19th century humanist movement. The contributions of national movement leader Eduard Schroeter who served the local congregation until 1887 are also significant and mark an important aspect of the history of the site.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

"Anti-religion groups vows more action" Wisconsin State Journal Monday, March 9, 1987
Contemporary Authors Vol 4 new revision series, Detroit, 1981 "August Derleth"
Cooper, Berenice "Die Freien Gemeinden in Wisconsin" Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters 53:53-65 1964.
Ganzlin, Karl, Interview 1/25/87 Sauk City WI
Gilliard, Gerald Lee, Historic Preservation Program, Missouri Dept of Natural Resources, Correspondence, 9/8/87.
Lacher, J.H.A. "The German element in Wisconsin" in Milo Milton Quaife, ed. Wisconsin: its history and its people Chicago, Clarke, 1924
Lachmund, Irma Comments on activities at the Park Hall Sauk City 1934-35 (in the library of the Hall)
Liste der frei willigen bertrage zum bauder neuen halle collection of Ralph Marquardt, Sauk City
Marquardt, Ralph Interview 1/3/87 Sauk City

See continuation sheet

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:

negatives on file at the State
Historic Preservation office

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 2 acres

UTM References

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Village of Sauk City Original Plat, lots 1-12, inclusive, of Block 45

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

This is the entire property purchases by the Congregation in 1876 in order to build a hall. It is still maintained by the Congregation as a park.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jane Eiseley, Research Assistant
organization Dept of Landscape Architecture date March 12, 1987
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FREETHINKERS HALL, Sauk County, WI

decorative motif is carried over to each of the building's side dormers and rear gable. At the center of the second story, over the porch, a set of three windows is flanked by two panels made up square panes of stained glass. There is a similar set of windows on each side of the porch on the main floor. The roof edges are supported by large scroll sawn brackets and decorated with exposed rafter ends and carved bargeboards.

The main room of the Hall is 39' wide and 51' from the north end of the room to the point where a gallery overhangs it. At the center of each side wall of the room is a bank of three windows, each of which is 7' high and 11' wide. Above these windows are stained glass panels made up of squares in random shades of blue, green and yellow at the sides and rose and amber at the center. Overall the windows rise to a height of 22', which is the height of the ceiling. On the exterior these windows are seen to be placed in large gable-roofed dormers decorated with wood shingles, beaded stickwork and heavy brackets. The windows have simple wood surrounds. In the west side elevation is a secondary entrance with a decorated shed roofed porch. In the rear wall is a bank of windows identical to those in the side wall dormers. In each side wall, in addition to the large windows, are two single windows, 7' by 3'. The interior walls and ceiling are a cream color. They are joined by a very wide plaster cove cornice which is decorated with an exuberantly beautiful stencilled floral pattern in shades of tan, rose and blue. A stencilled geometric pattern in the same colors borders the cornice and ceiling panels. The latter are defined by four stained wood arches, carved with Eastlavian details, which cross the room from side to side. Despite some water damage from a leaking roof which was replaced in 1986, the stencils, together with the windows and the wooden arches form a composition of light and defined spaces which is at once cheerful and soothing.

In the ceiling are two round air vents, which have been sealed but which were opened and closed with a system of ropes and pulleys leading behind the ceiling to the gallery. Ten lamps hang on chains from the ceiling. There are two chimneys in the sidewalls, at the north end of the room. These served the original wood stoves.

The gallery at the south end of the main room spans the width of the Hall and is framed by one of the stained wood arches which span the room. The wooden railing has a pattern of inverted semi-circles and machine-turned spindles. The gallery is 12' deep and is reached by a stair from the east side of the entryway. The main room extends an additional 8' under the gallery. In the southeast corner of the room a stair leads down to the basement dining hall. At the center of the area under the gallery is the entryway. It is eight feet wide and extends 20' to the main entry. The entryway has rooms to either side. On the east is a coat room and a connecting room which was the ticket office. There is a ticket window in the east wall of the entryway near the front entrance. On the west side of the entryway is a parlor, 11' by 20' which is used as an office and meeting room. Marks in the wall of the parlor indicate that there was a stair from the southwest corner of the main room to the library at the second floor front of the Hall.

The library has been an important feature of the building. Its collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosophy and literature testifies to the interest of the Congregation in educating their members. There is also a collection of freethought periodicals and tracts which is of interest for the history of the Freethought movement in America. The library is separated from the gallery by a row of glazed windows set in a stained wood partition.

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FREETHINKERS HALL, Sauk County, WI

The main room of the Hall contains four pianos, a legacy of the musical interests of early members of the congregation. The other furnishings are rows of wooden straight chairs. There is a small stage, which can be extended by a pull-out section, at the north end of the room. On the stage are a table and chairs made of deer or elk antlers, said to have been made by Victor Wiscocil in 1866. Along the side walls of the main room is a low platform, approximately 3' deep, probably intended to protect seated spectators from collision during dances. The platform is described in the original building specifications, which refer to the room as the "dancing hall." The floor of the Hall is 3" maple flooring, laid parallel to each wall of the main room, with a diagonal joint from the north-south center line to each corner of the room.

The entryway and the main room are wainscotted with varnished shiplap to a height of four feet. The shiplap is beaded. The door and window trim is of the same varnished wood with fluted center panels. The vertical elements of the window and door frames extend above the horizontal top members, emphasizing the verticality of the windows and doors in the interior decorative composition of the room.

The basement dining hall, beneath the main room of the Hall, is furnished with long refectory tables. It too is light and airy, with large windows in the foundation walls. The floor is poured concrete; the ceiling has been covered with acoustic tile. Supporting the floor of the main room above are exposed heavy chamfered wooden posts. A modern addition at the north end of the basement houses a furnace. There is a kitchen at the north end of the dining hall; at the south end is a barroom, reached from the outside by the steps on either side of the main entrance. There are also lavatories at this end of the basement. There was at one time a wood fired furnace which heated the south end of the building. Prior to installation of the modern kitchen there were large wood burning cook stoves at either end of the dining hall and a cake room at the southwest corner which dispensed the rich desserts which were a feature of many events at the Hall. Behind the cake room is a closet which has a toilet seat mounted on the wall. With a bucket, this served when debility or weather prevented the use of the outside latrines.

The outside of the Hall is painted a grey-blue with white trim. From the outside the Hall appears quite massive, as it rises 41' from ground level. It is covered in clapboard siding. In 1986 the gable roof was stripped of a layer of pine shingles and a layer of slate tiles and covered with asphalt tiles. Two of the four original chimneys rise through the east side of the roof. These were originally the height of the ridgeline but have been shortened to about 3'. The foundation appears in an old photo to be made of local dolomite. It has been plastered with cement and painted.

The size of the surrounding park affords a good view of the building from any angle. A 13' by 18' basement addition extends from the north wall but does not rise high enough to obscure the view, from inside the Hall, of a small, picturesque bandstand. The bandstand sits on a low stone foundation and is detailed with simple wood trim and curved brackets. It is octagonal, with a curved metal roof and a railing on all sides. It stands 67' from the northeast corner of the Hall.

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FREETHINKERS HALL, Sauk County, WI

Standing at the edge of the original plat of Sauk City, the Park Hall is an appropriate reminder of the unique history of the village. Its architectural features express the progressive views of the Congregation that built it and Alfred C. Clas, the member who designed it. Neither church nor recreation hall, its form succeeds in conveying the celebration of life which characterized the Free Congregation of Sauk County.

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Although the present-day congregation has affiliated itself with the Unitarian Fellowship, it remains conscious of its distinct origins and appears to be the only group descended from the freethinkers of the mid-19th century which has an unbroken tradition on the same site. Inquiries were made to the Historic Preservation offices in Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Missouri and California, states deemed the most likely to have sites associated with the Freethinker Movement. Only Missouri responded that they have historic buildings associated with the Freethinkers. In St. Louis a shule is the surviving building from a three-building complex. Located in a historic district, it is used today as a community center. In Hermann, Missouri, the Deutsheim State Historic Site included the home of a prominent freethinker and founding member of the town, and there is also a hall which was a meeting place of the Freethinkers. Neither building is used by an active freethinker group today. None of the other references cited in Section 9 identify any other site or group active today. Rather, each of them discusses the general demise of the German humanist movement.*

* Perhaps the most prominent self-declared freethinker of modern times is the author Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut tells in his autobiography, Palm Sunday, of the effects on his family and on American culture of the "lobotomy" effected when German-American culture was suppressed during World War I.

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Despite its failure to endure as a national movement, humanism continues to influence the cultural history of the nation, as for example in recent court challenges on the separation of church and state and the Alabama case in which humanism was barred from public school textbooks, on the paradoxical ground that it is a religion. The Freethought movement has been nationally significant for its impact on many areas of professional and artistic achievement, a result of the high standard of education it espoused and its emphasis on freedom of inquiry and cultivation of the individual talents of its members.

The long-time President of the University of Illinois, Edmund James, writing in 1906, and quoted in 1924 by J.H.A. Lacher in Wisconsin: Its History and Its People, credited the Freethinkers with a crucial role in the nation's history, and gave a clue as well to some root causes of their eventual obscurity: *

"The influence of the 'forty-eighters' at this great critical time (i.e. the Civil War period) of our national life was, to my mind, decisive. They turned the balance of power in favor of universal liberty. And if sometimes they were obstinate and difficult material, this very defect was perhaps an outgrowth of their virtues. They might not have been the tower of strength they were for the Union cause if they had not had the very defects which sometimes irritated and tired us."

Because of its unbroken history of use by the Freie Gemeinde and their descendent, because of its style which was intended to express their beliefs, and because of the importance to the movement of the Sauk City congregation, the Hall is a uniquely appropriate and valuable resource in the history of German humanism in America. Built in 1884, three years before the death of Eduard Schroeter, the Hall represents the crowning achievement of this national leader of the Freethought movement. Schroeter came to Sauk City in 1853 after having organized congregations in New England and throughout southeastern Wisconsin. Schroeter's thirty-four year tenure was the foundation of a congregation that continued to grow and flourish for an extended period after the Freethought movement was in decline elsewhere. The Hall was an important factor in the continued vitality of the Sauk City congregation as it was the site of lectures by visiting notables as well as a Sunday School. Theatricals, concerts, banquets, festivals and dances were enjoyed by the entire community and surrounding area. These activities dominated local social life up to World War I and continued during the period leading to World War II. Well into the twentieth

*
p. 167 Lacher.

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FREETHINKERS HALL, Sauk County, WI

century the Hall continued to be the venue of frequent lectures by nationally known speakers as well as faculty from the University of Wisconsin, at Madison.

The Hall is significant for its role in the development and transmission of German ethnic heritage. The building was, and to some extent still is, a gathering place in which to perpetuate the ideals of German humanism. This philosophy developed in Germany in the early years of the nineteenth century and became a social movement in the period leading up to 1848. It was brought to America by emigrants many of whom were forced into exile due to their political activism, and anti-clericalism. Sauk City attracted a number of these emigrants, probably due to the fact that the Wisconsin frontier was the locus of rapid settlement at this period, which was a high point of German-speaking influx. The German language and German literature and music flourished in the Freethinkers' Hall. The Hall includes a library of German classics which was used to educate the congregation and promulgate its values. German classical and popular music was a part of the life of the Congregation from its beginning. The Hall was the scene of frequent concerts and recitals by members and visiting artists. German continued to be the language of the Congregation until 1937, when English was formally adopted. The Freethinkers are also famous locally for the German cuisine which was a feature of their many public picnics, banquets and festivals. German specialities continue to be featured by restaurants in the area and to be enjoyed in local homes. The Hall includes several features related to food, including the large basement dining hall with a special room for the storage and sale of cakes, and an adjacent barroom with a separate entrance. The two enormous cookstoves which sat in the west corners of the dining area have been replaced by a modern kitchen which is used to prepare special dinners and refreshments following events in the main room above.

The Hall was for its first three decades the entertainment and recreational center of the Sauk City area. The Freethinkers had an annual cycle of four festivals. Their Spring festival (Freuhlingsfest) in particular attracted the local populace for a day of entertainments, food and drink. The philosophy of the Freethinkers emphasized growth of the spirit through celebration and expressions of joy. In the period between the World Wars there were masquerade balls and theatrical productions which were advertised in the community and attracted large crowds. The park surrounding the Hall was maintained by the Congregation as a public recreation ground; the public schools held their picnics there and local musical groups used the bandstand and the building. Thus the Hall is significant for its place in the entertainment and social recreation history of the area.

The Hall is architecturally significant for its distinctive blend of Queen Anne and Eastlavian design, and as an example of the work of the prominent Wisconsin architect Alfred C. Clas. The massing and rich contrasting textures of the design place it in the Queen Anne category while the extensive detailing, with scroll sawn brackets, incised woodwork and machine turned spindles are typical of American Eastlavian design. In its use of natural colors and textures and a design which follows function the building follows the precepts of the English architect Charles Eastlake. The architect, Alfred Clas, was the son of a founding member of the Congregation. The building reflects in its design the uncommon beliefs of the Freethinkers, who eschewed designation as a religion but organized themselves as a congregation to meet their shared needs. Designed for large public events, the Hall was an important factor in maintaining the social and political hegemony of the Freethinkers in Sauk City, and represents a fairly unique building type. **

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Even in their early period, their very insistence on freedom of thought made it difficult for the Freethinkers to establish lasting institutions. In this context the rapid growth of the Sauk City congregation, in numbers and in the fullness of its life as a community, is exceptional. The contribution of Schroeter to the stability of the group is acknowledged in several memoirs. His teaching inspired the generation that was coming to adulthood in 1887 and who maintained the community into the twentieth century. Thus he may be said to have realized posthumously his dream of a German-speaking community where absolute freedom of thought and conscience was practiced in concert with high moral values and the cultivation of the arts and sciences. In this evolution the existence of the Park Hall played an essential part.

The first members of the Congregation included the naturalist F.G.T. Lueders, author of two books on astronomy published in Germany. His son, Herman, was trained as a botanist. He published in 1895 in the Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters an inventory of the flora of the Sauk prairie. Carl Duerr, organizer and first speaker of the congregation, founded the Pioneer am Wisconsin, one of the first German-language weeklies in the state. Other original members who were instrumental in the building of the Hall were Charles Halasz, cousin of the legendary Count Harazthy, founder of the town, and Charles Naffz, founder of the public school and justice of the peace, town clerk and treasurer in the nearby town of Merrimac. Naffz moved to Sauk City in 1882, where he opened a store, founded the bank, was town president and treasurer of the town, the fire company and the canning company. Naffz was also director of the maennechor, or mens' chorus. His sons became druggists in Sauk City, Madison and Wausau. His daughters taught the Sunday School and were dominant forces in the many festivities at the Hall into the 1930's.

During the period leading up to the building of the Hall the Congregation had a school, taught by Elise Cunradi Schroeter wife of the Speaker, and Emilie Schramm Crusius. Schroeter himself conducted weekly sessions for the older children. The main offering to the adult membership was addresses by Schroeter and a wide variety of imported speakers. The Hall was the setting for many lectures which attracted audiences from Madison and towns surrounding Sauk City.

Thus educated, many of the children of the Freethinkers went forth from the Hall to enter the University and thence into the professions. Among those who became prominent nationally was Albert Ochsner (1858-1925). Ochsner became chief of surgery at Augustana Hospital in Chicago and was several times President of the American Medical Association. His brother Edward was surgeon at Cook County Hospital and a President of the Illinois State Medical Society, while their sister Emma was an

** (from page 8-2)

Two other meeting sites associated with the Freethinker's movement in Wisconsin are known to still exist (Painesville, Honey Creek). However none are of the scale, elaborateness or level of integrity of the Sauk City site, and neither maintained the dominant role of the Sauk location.

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FREETHINKERS HALL, Sauk County, WI

anaesthetist who worked for the US government in the Phillipines. Albert encouraged a family tradition of healing that began before their emigration. In all some 25 members of the Ochsner family became doctors, including Alton, a cousin and protege of Albert, who founded the Ochsner clinic in New Orleans.

Other notable persons who grew up in the Sauk City Free Congregation include Marcus Bach, theologian and professor at the University of Iowa, Paul Conger of the Smithsonian Institution, Edward Keller, a metallurgist with the US Bureau of Mines, and Frederick Merk, author of The Economic History of Wisconsin During the Civil War and later professor of history at Harvard University. Mark Schorer, professor of English at the University of California-Berkeley, and biographer of Sinclair Lewis, grew up in Sauk City and was one of those who had his friendships among the Freie Gemeinde although his family were not members.

Freethinkers' Hall also had an impact at the state level. The congregation contributed to the state a University Regent, Clara Theile Runge. The architect Alfred Charles Clas (1859-1942) was born to founding members and grew up in Sauk City. He entered a partnership with the Milwaukee architect James Douglas in 1881. After 1890 his firm, Ferry and Clas, became the best known in the state, designing buildings and parks in Milwaukee and acting as advisor to the State during the building of the Capitol. The firm won gold medals at expositions in Chicago in 1893, Paris in 1900 and St. Louis in 1904. The Park Hall itself represents Clas' work from the period of his partnership with Douglas. A small meeting house 5 miles west of Sauk City at Honey Creek, owned by the congregation, was built by Clas' father, Adam Clas, in 1861.

Probably the son of Sauk City who is best known in the State is the regional author August Derleth (1900-1971). Never a member of the Freie Gemeinde, Derleth nonetheless was a constant presence there. He drew upon its membership for his friendships and for much of the material in the more than 100 books which he produced. Of the Hall itself Derleth wrote, "The very air in that great old building seemed to stand positively for freedom of thought, as were the Park Hall a repository of freedom itself. The old building stood in the days of my youth as a tangible encouragement to think and act with complete freedom, respecting the rights and happiness of others." Derleth was also a writer and publisher of fantasy and horror tales. His publishing company, Arkham House, is located in Sauk City.

The dedication of the Hall in 1884 was itself an event of statewide importance. The Milwaukee delegation arrived the day before, and a special excursion train from Madison brought 200 celebrants. The \$3300 needed to build the Hall was raised through contributions which came from Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Boston as well as from local citizens both in and out of the congregation.

The local significance of the Hall centers on three annual festivals of the Freie Gemeinde: Founder's Day in October, Tom Paine's birthday in January, and the Fruehlingsfest (Spring Festival) in June. The latter was especially a community event. A memoir by member Irma Lachmund, written in 1934-35 recounts the events of a Fruehlingsfest:

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FREETHINKERS HALL, Sauk County, WI

"Everybody in town was fitted out from head to foot for that important occasion. The countryside for miles around gathered at Sauk City on the second Sunday in June. The lecture in the forenoon, the big dinner at noon, the town band in full uniform, reunion with friends not seen for perhaps a full year, people driving all the way from Baraboo, across the bluffs, for a cup of coffee and real German coffeecake in the afternoon, later the six o'clock hot supper - potatoes and pork sausages - and at night the grand ball which lasted until dawn, with its midnight dinner. For that wonderful ball the frizzles were frizzed extra frizzly, or pompadours piled extra high, ruffled petticoats and dimity skirts given an extra starching, and Herman and Alois, with wise forethought, tucked away an extra celluloid collar in the spick and span top buggy, to see them through the strenuous program of waltzes, quadrilles and polkas."

In addition to the festivals, the Freethinkers held numerous public concerts, picnics, lectures and dramatic productions during the years between 1884 and World War II. Some of the lecture topics are listed by Clara Runge in her essay. Before his death Schroeter had undertaken subjects ranging from "Easter Thoughts of a Freethinker" to "Communism, Its True and False Side." Later lectures were given by speakers from Milwaukee, St. Louis, Minneapolis and Philadelphia, by members of the congregation and faculty from the University at Madison. Thus the Hall provided to Sauk City an unusual and unlikely level of stimulation and sophistication.

The Hall, as noted by Derleth, is a symbol of the beliefs of the Freethinkers. These beliefs are expressed in the original articles of incorporation, translated by Clara Runge. They begin with a ringing statement of anti-clericalism:

"The united German Free Congregation is our name for our organization, for we wish to unite the enemies of clericalism, official hypocrisy and bigotry, the friends of truth, uprightness and honesty to be found scattered among all religions, creeds, churches and sects. By means of such united strength we intend to erect a strong fortification against the pernicious power of the churches, sects and clericalism."

There follows seven articles:

1. "Our first objective...we are focussing on the Germans (but) we will make it our object to enter into friendly relations with all friends of harmonious reformatory movements..."

All privileges of this organization apply equally to all members, men and women...

2. The foundation of this organization is reason...

3. The object therefore (is) not the subjection of man to extraneous authority of one person or book for the purpose of rendering him blest, but on the contrary the intellectual and moral freedom of man, his independence and individuality...

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Section number 8 Page 6 FREETHINKERS HALL, Sauk County, WI

4. Means to this end are...speech, song and reciprocal exchange of opinions. Neither do we object to ceremonies so long as they are sensible, beautiful and voluntary...
5. We have no dogmas or decrees...
6. We do not accept a priesthood...However we recognize speakers or teachers whom the congregation voluntarily chooses...Especial importance is placed upon the education of our youth for mental and moral freedom...It is therefore one of the first duties of the teacher scientifically to instruct the young people...in history and ethics...to strengthen their moral judgement and feeling, to awaken their respect for and good will toward all human beings, to imbue them with hatred against serfdom and love for freedom, to practice them in self-control...
7. Declaration of membership consists in signing this document and pledging to contribute toward the needs of the organization according to best ability."

The hegemony which the Freethinkers had in the intellectual and social life of Sauk City was not entirely without opposition. Irma Lachmund records that the much respected local historian William Canfield undertook on one occasion to preach to the revelers at a Freuhlingsfest but could find no place in the thronged town to tie up his horse nor anyone who would listen. Serious opposition did exist in some of the local churches but the aristocratic origins of many of the Freethinkers and their preeminent role in business, farming and the professions insulated them from any adverse consequences.

Locally prominent members of the Freethinkers included Henry Ochsner, father of the doctors Ochsner, a successful farmer who was the first to introduce several new types of farm machinery to the area. His son Art Ochsner was a well known socialist who gave jobs on his farm to many new arrivals from Germany and also, by arrangement with Superintendent Pestolozzi of the Milwaukee public schools, a number of truant boys. The contributions of the Naffz family have been mentioned. The lumber company begun by Charles Halasz continued until the early 1950's under the ownership of Carl Lachmund, descendent of several founding families. Ralph Marquardt, a descendent of Elise Cunradi's brother, is a long time Sauk City realtor. Member Josephine Merk was town librarian and played an important role in maintaining the Congregation's emphasis on youth during the 1920's and 30's. Member Karl Ganzlin, who taught in the public schools for many years, recalls that half or more of most high school classes went on to college, an unusual proportion for a village that is primarily a market town for the surrounding farms.

The traditions of food and festivity continued into the 1930's, when masquerade balls were frequently held at the Hall. These were advertised in the community and attracted large crowds to dance the fox trot and the waltz. The public schools held their picnics in the park, and dramatic productions were staged in the Hall. The tradition of bringing in speakers continued. Frequently the lecturers were faculty from the University at Madison, including members of the German Department and the well known philosopher Max Otto.

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After World War II German was no longer taught in the schools and the younger members of the congregation were no longer fluent in German. English had been formally adopted as the language of the congregation in 1937. Sauk City remained liberal in its politics, in contrast to adjacent Prairie du Sac and the surrounding towns, into the 1950's and 60's. The Sunday school ceased to meet about 1920, and the grandchildren of the founding families began to join or marry into other denominations. Many of the second and third generation had gone on to careers elsewhere. Another explanation for the gradual decrease in numbers and influence was offered by Clara Runge, who once remarked that eight of the women in her generation remained unmarried. "If the eight of us had married," she concluded, "the Park Hall would be full today."

While the Hall is no longer the center of village intellectual and social activity, it remains a symbol of an illustrious past and continues to serve as the site of occasional lectures and concerts and as a meeting place for the congregation.

Through its association with a unique aspect of 19th century German immigration and a rather radical social movement of its time, the Sauk City Freethinker's Hall is a clear candidate for National Register listing. Its added distinction as the only identified site of continual historic use by such a society places it significantly beyond just the local level as a symbol of our diverse cultural heritage.

The property meets criteria consideration A as a "religious property deriving its primary significance from its historic importance."

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"Specifications for the materials to be furnished and the work to be done in the construction of a balloon frame building designed for a hall for the Freie Gemeinde on their lot in Sauk City Sauk County State of Wisconsin, Alfred C. Clas architect" in the collection of Ralph Marquardt, Sauk City

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Section number _____ Photographs Page 1 FREETHINKER'S HALL, Sauk County, Wisconsin

PHOTOGRAPHS

Name of Property: Freethinker's Hall
Location : Sauk City, Sauk County, WI
Name of photographer: Thomas Jackson
Date of photograph: Winter 1987
Location of negative: State Historical Society of Wisconsin

Photo # 1 of 21
Front (south) elevation

Photo # 2 of 21
Plaque. SW corner of building.

Photo # 3 of 21
Basement front entry and plaque (south elevation)

Photo # 4 of 21
Detail, basement entry

Photo # 5 of 21
View from the west.

Photo # 6 of 21
West elevation. Side entrance & window.

Photo # 7 of 21
Rear elevation and bandstand.

Photo # 8 of 21
Interior. Facing south.

Photo # 9 of 21
Interior. Gallery.

Photo # 10 of 21
Interior. Basement bar.

Photo # 11 of 21
Interior. Ticket window.

Photo # 12 of 21
Detail. SE corner.

Photo # 13 of 21
Detail. 2nd story - facade (south)

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Photographs continued...

Photo #14 of 21
View from the west.

Photo #15 of 21
Detail Bandstand.

Photo #16 of 21
East elevation.

Photo #17 of 21
Interior. Facing north.

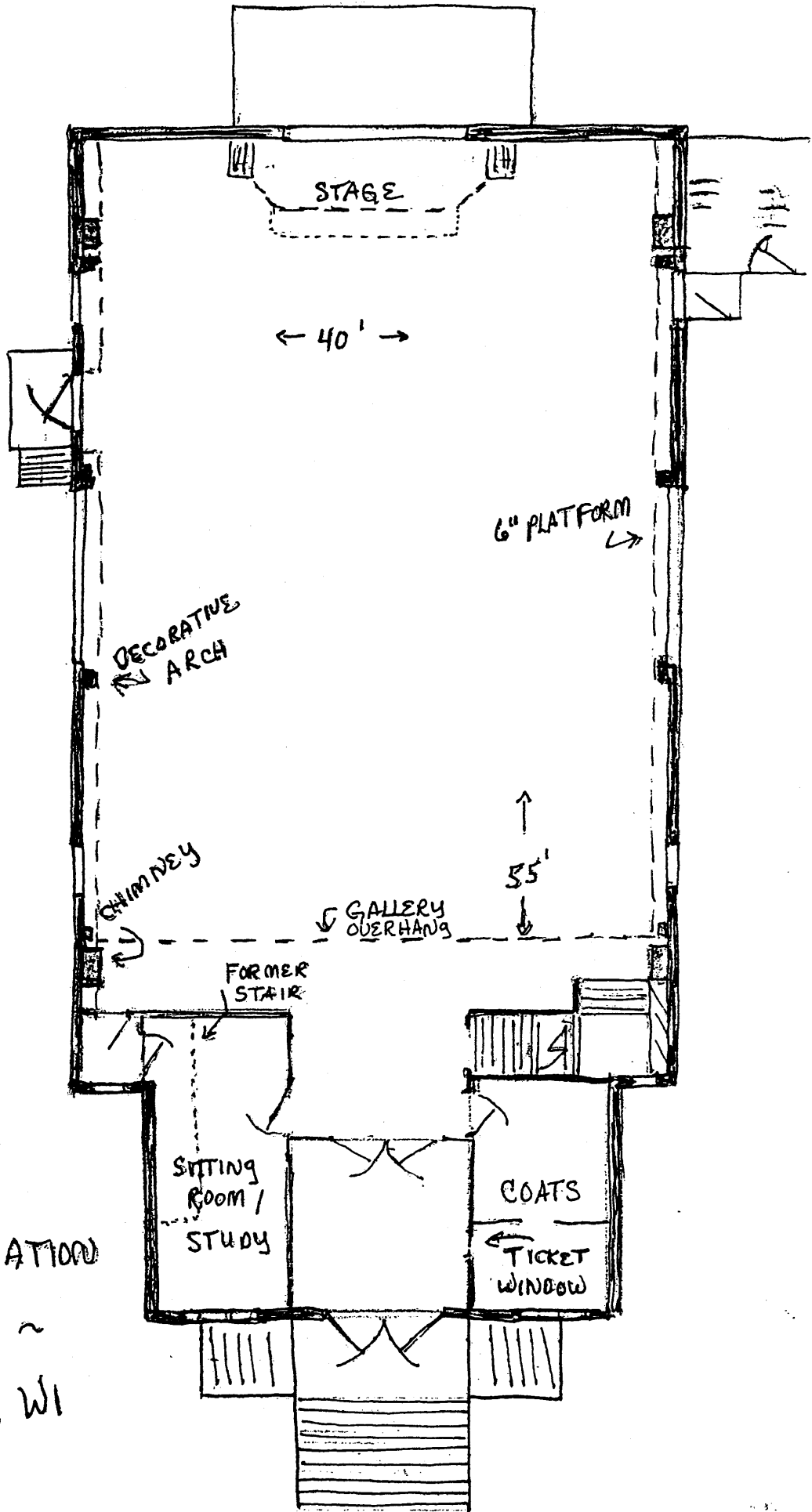
Photo #18 of 21
Interior. Cornice stenciling detail.

Photo #19 of 21
Basement dining room.

Photo #20 of 21
Interior. South to front entry.

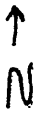
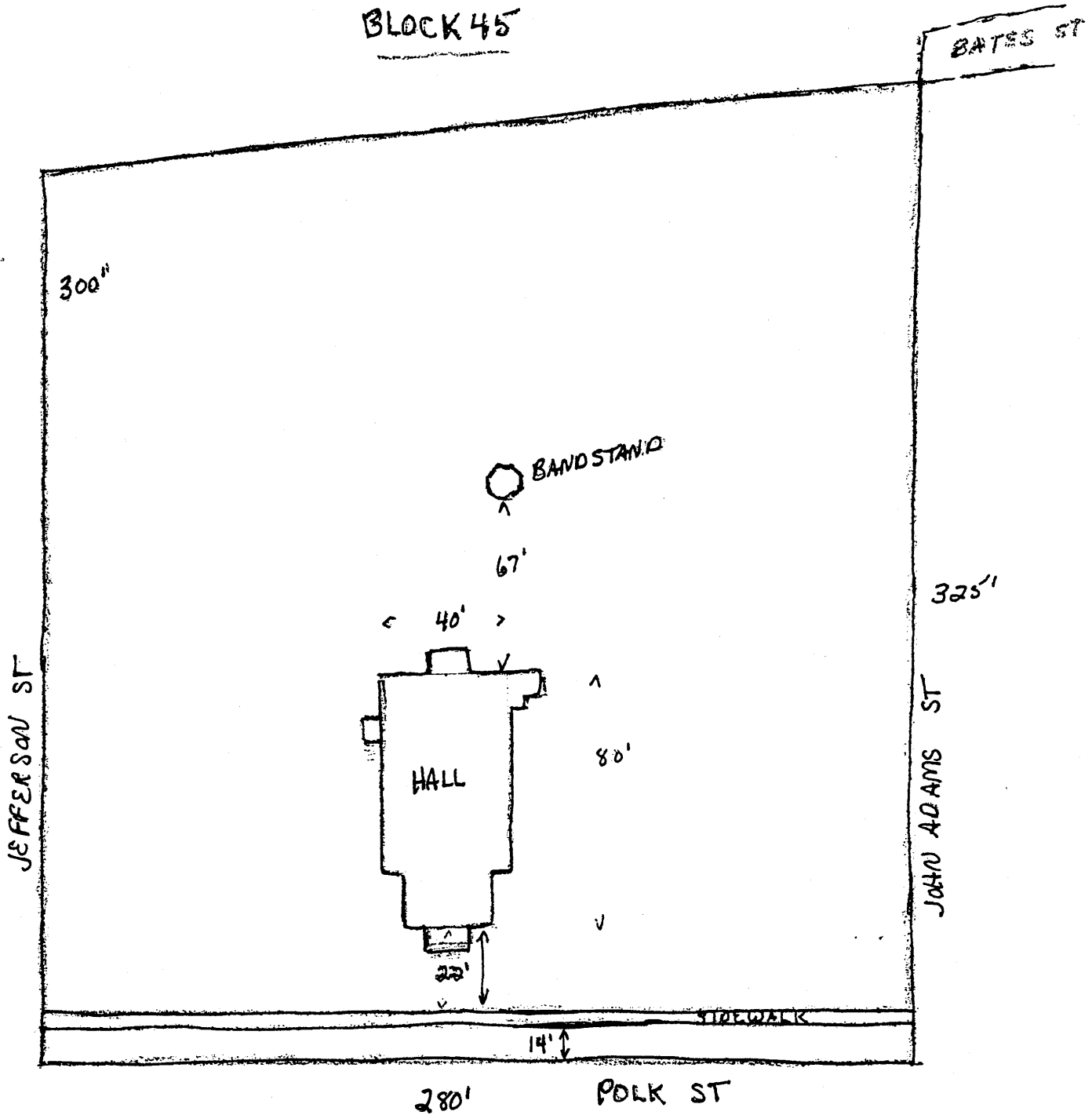
Photo #21 of 21
View to north from interior.

FREE CONGREGATION
PARK HALL ~
SAUK CITY, WI



not to scale

BLOCK 45



FREE CONGREGATION

PARK AND
PARK HALL

SAUK CITY, WI