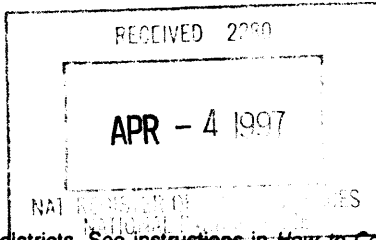


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAR 20 1997



National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Oxford Commercial Historic District

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Roughly west and east sides of Augusta Avenue not for publication N/A
between Wilson St. and Center St. alley

city or town Oxford vicinity N/A

state Iowa code IA county Johnson code 103 zip code 52322

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Patricia Churkin 3-31-97
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Patrick Andrews 5/2/97

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
16	4	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
16	4	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

- COMMERCE/specialty stores
- COMMERCE/restaurant
- COMMERCE/financial institution
- SOCIAL/meeting hall
- DOMESTIC/hotel

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

- COMMERCE/specialty stores
- COMMERCE/financial institution
- SOCIAL/meeting hall
- DOMESTIC/apartment building

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

- LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate
- LATE VICTORIAN/Romanesque

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

- foundation STONE
- walls BRICK
- CONCRETE
- roof ASPHALT
- other WOOD
- TAR-AND-GRAVEL

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
C a birthplace or grave.
D a cemetery.
E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F a commemorative property.
G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

COMMERCE

Period of Significance

1883-1917

Significant Dates

1883

1890

1917

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Seevogel, Henry C.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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

Name of repository:

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Name of Property

Johnson, Iowa

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.5 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	15	600560	4619680
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	15	600640	4619685

3	15	600640	4619660
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4	15	600680	4619520

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jan R. Nash

organization Tallgrass Historians L.C. date April 1, 1996

street & number 931 Maiden Lane telephone 319/354-6722

city or town Iowa City state Iowa zip code 52240

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

multiple--see continuation sheets name

street & number telephone

city or town state zip code

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 1

CFN-259-1116

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION

LATE 19TH & 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS/Classical Revival
LATE 19TH & EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS

MATERIALS

foundation	BRICK CONCRETE
walls	STONE
other	GLASS

SUMMARY PARAGRAPH

The Oxford Commercial Historic District is a one-and-one-half block commercial district in the heart of the small country town of Oxford, Iowa. The town sits among rolling hills and valleys, within the corn and hog producing countryside of east central Iowa. The district's 20 commercial buildings line the town's main street of Augusta Avenue, and form the four corners of the town's central intersection of Augusta and Main. Modest in scale and primarily constructed of common red brick, many of these buildings are nonetheless trimmed at the second level with decorative pressed-metal cornices and window hoods, and embellished with fancy oriel windows. Though no architect is associated with the district, many of the historic buildings, dating from 1883 to 1917, acknowledge the popular architectural styles of the period. The Romanesque style with its rough stone and round arches is represented, as is the Italianate style through the use of pressed-metal cornices and brackets. The last historic building constructed in the district, in 1917, has a stuccoed stepped-gable facade which reflects the influence of the early twentieth-century American movements. Integrity of most of the buildings is quite good, though they have not escaped the alterations common to commercial buildings. Some second story windows have been covered with plywood or have been replaced with smaller windows. Likewise many of the street-level shop fronts have been modernized with new plate glass windows and new brick bulkheads. Across the street along the east side of Augusta, north and

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 2

CFN-259-1116

south edges of the district are defined by the presence of highly altered and modern infill buildings. Beyond the district boundaries, either the buildings change to residential or the commercial buildings no longer possess the degree of integrity necessary of a historic district. What the remaining buildings in the historic district do exhibit however, is a very strong sense of time and place, unified by masonry construction and a singularity of purpose, and anchored by three especially significant buildings--the Oxford State Bank, the Saxton Livery, and William Poole's jeweler's shop.

DESCRIPTION

The district is comprised of 20 commercial buildings, spread over three half-blocks along Augusta Avenue, a north and south running street which is also the main highway through town (see Figure 1). Where Augusta and Main intersect, the two free-standing corner buildings on the east side of Augusta are included in the district also, because of the historical importance of this main intersection of town. North of the intersection, three more buildings on the east side of Augusta are included. North of these three buildings, the integrity of the historic block rapidly deteriorates. Buildings along the west side of Augusta share party walls except where separated by a street or alley. For purposes of discussion, the three westside half-blocks are described as the "Tremont Hotel block," the "Oxford State Bank block" and the "Poole block." The eastside buildings included in the district are described from south to north, commencing with the Masonic Hall.

Sixteen of the buildings are categorized as "contributing" to the district; while four are "noncontributing" because of poor integrity or modern construction dates. All buildings in the district are commercial buildings. The 16 historic buildings functioned as follows: 13 stores; 1 bank; 1 stable; 1 hotel; 2 taverns; 1 automobile garage. Each building in the district is described below.

General Background

Oxford was laid out on a hillside which slopes gently down from a northerly crest to the Rhine Creek at the southern foot of the hill. The creek meanders through town in a southeasterly direction, a course also followed through town by the straighter railroad tracks. Augusta Avenue is oriented in a north/south direction from the base of the hill where it crosses Rhine Creek, to the top of the hill where residential building predominates. The commercial district is located midway up the hill. To

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 3

CFN-259-1116



NORTH

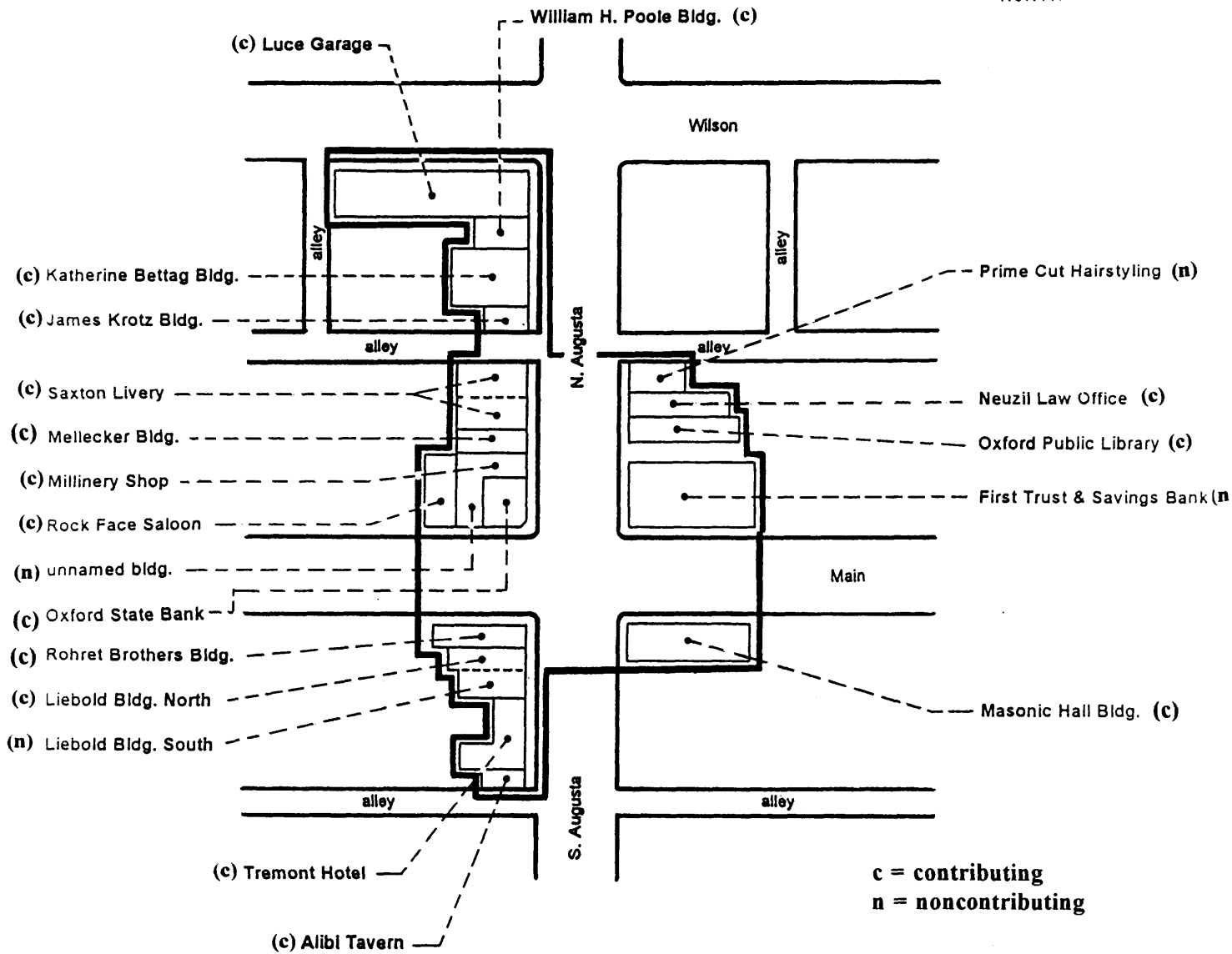


Figure 1. Map of the Oxford Commercial Historic District showing district boundaries and building locations.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 4

CFN-259-1116

walk from the Alibi Tavern at the southern border of the historic district to the Luce Garage at the northern border, one noticeably though not strenuously climbs the hill. Buildings along Augusta, their stone entrance steps, and the concrete sidewalks in front have had to accommodate the sloping street.

Main Street, which never fully acquired the traditional *Main Street* status of Midwest country towns, is a level street that quickly changes from commercial to residential in nature as distance from its intersection with Augusta increases. Historically, there once were a few more commercial buildings along either side of Main, especially east of Augusta, but with the passage of time many of these buildings have been removed. Main Street's secondary status as a building location for commercial operations may reflect a simple miscalculation about where commercial operations would develop. In 1859, when the railroad was constructed through western Johnson County, the town of Oxford did not exist but a post office had been established at the top of the hill to the north.¹ The railroad located its tracks near Rhine Creek at the foot of the hill and stationed a few workers there to supply passing steam engines with wood and water.² When the owner (whose wife's name was Augusta) of land near the station filed a modest plat for the town of Oxford nine years later in 1868 (see Figure 2), Main Street was its northernmost street. It was a nice level street located away from the hustle and shanties of the railroad grounds. The street named in honor of Augusta Wilcox, however, linked the railroad grounds with Main Street, the post office beyond, and a wagon road a mile north of town. It was Augusta Avenue that ultimately won out as Oxford's *Main Street*. Four years after the original town was platted, the same property owner platted the first addition to the town. This addition brought in land lying north of the original town and acknowledged the direction of commercial development by orienting its narrow commercial blocks to face Augusta rather than the side streets (Figure 3).

¹The post office's location was a roughly a mile south of a major east/west wagon trail between the larger settlements of Iowa City and Marengo. Charles Ray Aurner, *Leading Events in Johnson County Iowa History*, (Cedar Rapids: Western Historical Press, 1912), p. 162.

²The railroad workers stationed by the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad (precursor to the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad) built shanties nearby and began to call the station "Tanktown." Some of the town's families of Irish descent may have the railroad to thank for their presence in Oxford. Biographical sketches for some of Oxford's early residents include one man, born in Galway, Ireland, who retired from railroad work to clear 160 acres near Oxford and become a farmer; another man born in Ireland "came to Oxford Township as a construction foreman of the C.R.I.&P. railroad." *Oxford Iowa Centennial 1869-1969*, (Oxford: n.p., 1969), 14.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 5

CFN-259-1116

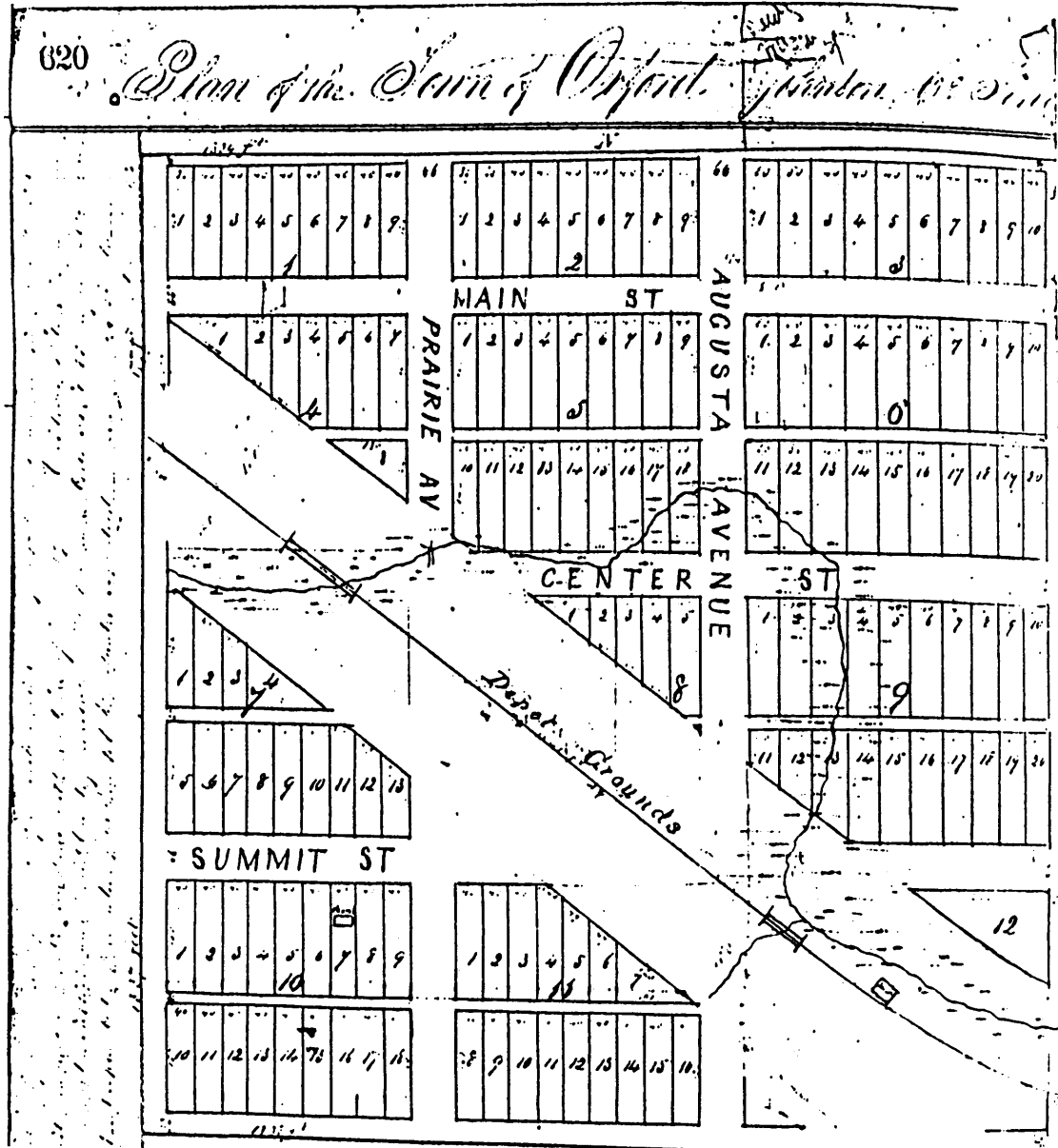


Figure 2. Original Town plat of Oxford, Iowa, 1868.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 6

CFN-259-1116

MAP OF
THE CITY OF
OXFORD
JOHNSON CO.
Scale 300 ft. to 1 inch.
THE HUEBINGER SURVEYING AND MAP PUBLISHING COMPANY
DAVENPORT, IOWA.
1900.
Copyrighted.

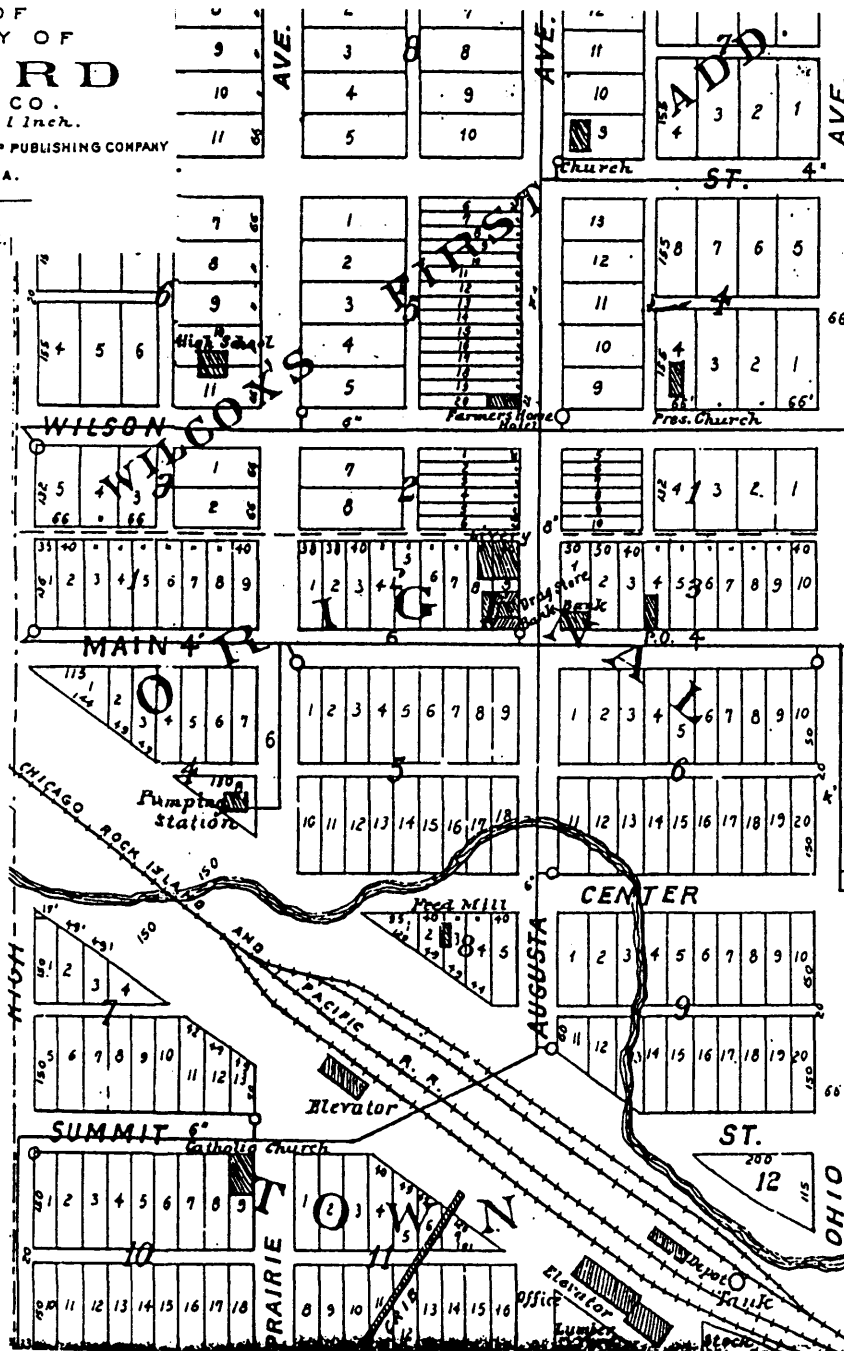


Figure 3. Detail map showing relationship of Wilcox's 1st Addition (1872) to the Original Town plat of Oxford, Iowa.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 7

CFN-259-1116

Tremont Hotel Block (within Block 5, Original Town of Oxford)

The Tremont Hotel Block is the southernmost half-block of commercial buildings to be included in the historic district. It runs from Original Town Block 5's bisecting alley on the south, north to Main Street. Buildings face east onto Augusta Avenue. When viewed as a streetscape of attached commercial buildings, the Tremont Hotel Block has enough decorative details to feel vaguely Italianate. This is especially true of the Liebold Building North with its pressed metal cornice, brackets and window hoods. Of the three half-blocks in the district, the Tremont Hotel Block's mid-1880s buildings best exhibit the earliest extant construction of downtown Oxford. Five discreet building facades exist and are described, from south to north, as follows:

The Alibi Tavern -- 125 S. Augusta Ave. (1908) [contributing]

Most likely this little rock-face concrete block building was constructed in 1908 for J.A. Peters.³ Its original function is unknown, however it was used as an office in 1933.⁴ Its one-story walls are capped with tile coping; its roof is flat. Original facade fenestration consisted of a single door at the north end and two narrow windows. Over these openings are two small "eyebrow" windows. Around the corner on the alley side, three more narrow windows pierce the wall. The concrete blocks of the building were molded to have the appearance of rough stone. This appearance was enhanced by tuckpointing the blocks with a beaded mortar. Today, the building houses the Alibi Tavern. The door has been moved to the central window space, and the original door space was filled in with matching rock-face blocks. On the south side, two windows are filled with smooth concrete block.

³With the exception of the Masonic Hall, which has a date block, the construction dates for all buildings were arrived at through a combination of Johnson County land transfer records, contemporaneous newspaper articles reporting on local construction events, and written histories published in 1869, 1883, and 1912. Where sources conflict or are too vague to firmly establish a date of construction for a building, "circa" or "c." was used.

⁴Iowa Insurance Service Bureau fire insurance map, 1933. (Collection of State Historical Society of Iowa.)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 8

CFN-259-1116

The Tremont Hotel -- 117-119 S. Augusta Ave. (1883;1891) [contributing]

The first hotel operation in this building goes unnamed, for only its owner is known. After Susan Staley acquired the land in 1881, Charles Staley constructed a brick hotel on it two years later.⁵ When, in 1890, fire destroyed the original Tremont Hotel located one full block to the north, Henry Vanderlip (who had run a hotel in Oxford since 1864) purchased the Staley brick hotel, expanded and remodeled it, and reopened it as the new Tremont Hotel, or Tremont House, in 1891. Part of the expansion included taking over the store front adjacent to it on the north.⁶ This explains the awkward street level fenestration, the presence of an intact storefront on the north end, and the asymmetrical arrangement of second story windows. In any event, the building, as it stands today, has the appearance of Henry Vanderlip's Tremont Hotel, and not the earlier one owned by Charles Staley.

The Tremont Hotel is a two-story building constructed of red brick now painted green. Its massing is more wide than tall and when viewed as a part of a streetscape its profile is low. Contributing to this low profile is the wide decorative cornice at the roof line. Street level fenestration is roughly broken into three units: the first consists of a single door at the south end and a narrow window; in the center, is an asymmetrical storefront-like arrangement (perhaps the hotel entrance and lobby); and the third, northernmost unit is a symmetrical storefront with a recessed central door flanked by large display windows. Overhead on the second level are window openings with stone sills and segmental arches. These are unevenly spaced across the entire facade. Alterations appear to be limited to smaller-than-original replacement window sashes on the second floor, street level doors, and the replacement brick bulkhead of the central "storefront." Both storefronts have cast-iron posts supporting wooden beams over the display windows and entrances. The building's current use is residential.

⁵Johnson County land transfer records; *Oxford Iowa Centennial 1869-1969*, (Oxford: n.p., 1969), 11.

⁶Reporting on business movements after the disastrous fire of 1890, the local weekly reported that W.H. Hilborn & Son" moved their clothing store temporarily into Liebold's hall because Henry Vanderlip was taking over their space for his hotel. *Oxford Weekly Journal*, 03/19/1891.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 9

CFN-259-1116

Liebold Building South -- 107 S. Augusta Ave. (1886) [noncontributing]

This brick building is the southern half of a two-part building constructed in 1886 while under the ownership of M. Liebold. In 1899 it was a general merchandise store, with apartments overhead.⁷ Later fire insurance maps indicate it was still a store in 1933. While the ornate pressed-metal cornice it shares with its neighbor is still extant, the building facade has been heavily altered elsewhere. All window openings have been altered and are covered now with a thick layer of stucco. Two, new three-part windows have been installed, each consisting of a central fixed pane flanked by two smaller sash windows. One window is centered on the upper level; one at street level. Current use is residential and commercial.

Liebold Building North -- 105 S. Augusta Ave. (1886) [contributing]

By 1899, the northern half of Liebold's two-part building housed a clothing, boot and shoe store at street level and a lodge hall upstairs. The lodge was reached from the street by a staircase centered in the two-part building. The store front features large display windows separated by cast iron columns and an offset entrance. Overhead the four large windows permit light into the staircase and lodge hall. The pressed-metal cornice, brackets and window hoods are intact. Alterations included smaller replacement windows and bulkhead bricks under the display windows at street level. Current use is residential and studio space.

Rohret Brothers Building -- 101 S. Augusta Ave. (1884) [contributing]

Though it presents a narrow facade to Augusta Avenue, this large brick corner building occupies a pivotal site at the heart of Oxford's historic downtown. Occupied by the Rohret Bros. store downstairs and a Masonic Hall upstairs (prior to 1895), its construction on the southwest corner of the intersection of Augusta and Main sealed the direction of future commercial development west of Augusta. Two stories, this building extends deep into its lot and exposes a good portion of Main Street to its side wall where towards the rear (west) two small offices were located. Originally the Augusta Avenue facade included a store front at street level with a recessed central entrance flanked by display

⁷H. Bennett Insurance. Cedar Rapids, fire insurance map, 1899. There are only two fire insurance maps for Oxford, 1899 and 1933.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 10

CFN-259-1116

windows and, overhead at the second level, three segmental-arched window openings. Second floor windows around the corner on the building's Main Street side are similar. Metal cornices at the roof line and at the signboard level of the storefront, are intact as are the cast iron columns of the storefront. Alterations principally affect the facade window glass, both at the street level where small sash windows and wood boards now fill the large display windows, and at the second level where small replacement windows fill the original openings. Current use is residential.

Oxford State Bank Block (within Block 2 Original Town of Oxford)

The Oxford State Bank Block could just as easily be called the Saxton Livery Block, for it is bookended physically by two of the three most significant buildings in the district. The block is the central half-block of the district and includes the northwest corner of the intersection of Augusta and Main and two buildings around the corner on west Main Street. These two buildings, the Rock Face Saloon and an unnamed, noncontributing store building share party walls with each other and with the west wall of the Oxford State Bank. They face south onto the long side wall of the Rohret Bros. Store. The Oxford State Bank Block runs from Main Street on the south, to the bisecting alley at the north. This alley is historically the demarcation line between the Original Town of Oxford (1868) to the south and Wilcox's First Addition (1872) to the north. When viewed as a streetscape of attached commercial buildings, the Oxford State Bank Block presents the most irregular physical profile and diversity of function. Stylistic influences run from the Italianate decoration of the Oxford State Bank, to the neoclassical lintels and oculus window of the Mellecker Building, to the straightforward vernacular brick masonry of the Saxton Livery. In addition to the two Main Street Buildings, four discreet building facades exist along Augusta Avenue. All six buildings are described from south to north as follows.

Rock Face Saloon -- 110 W. Main St. (1895) [contributing]

This two story, red brick and limestone veneered saloon building also housed a lodge hall on the second floor. The saloon front is marked by two large round openings, one of which houses a recessed entrance. A window fills the second arched opening. On the second level, three windows have stone sills and metal lintels. At the roof line a cornice is decorated by a flower garland detail. Though the rock facing and round arches reference Romanesque architecture, the neoclassical feeling

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 11

CFN-259-1116

of the straight cornice and the Adamesque flower garlands is unmistakable. Currently the building is used as a tavern.

unnamed building -- West Main St., east of 110 W. Main [noncontributing]

This altered building is the Main Street portion of an L-shaped building which wraps around the west and north sides of the corner building, the Oxford State Bank. It may have been the southern leg of the Doty Drugstore, constructed in 1889. The surface of the building is entirely covered with plywood except for fenestration and the visible doors and windows are not original. The integrity of this building, if it is the 1889 south leg of the Doty Drugstore, appears to be destroyed. Current use is unknown.

Oxford State Bank -- 101 N. Augusta Ave. (1885; 1910) [contributing]

The main portion of the Italianate-styled Oxford State Bank was constructed in 1885 by the Linebarger family who had operated a private bank in Oxford for many years. Its two story walls are of red brick (now painted buff) and sit on a stone foundation. The entrance is located at the prominent southeast canted corner of the building and faces the center of the intersection and the Masonic Hall building beyond. Over the door is a heavy looking, bracketed pediment hood. This detail is repeated over the window immediately above the door and over the windows along the east side (Augusta side) of the building. At the top of the building is a metal cornice crowned at the canted corner by a tall pediment. Window openings on the second story south (Main Street) side, on the other hand, have simple segmental brick arches. At street level, large plate glass windows were installed on both the Augusta and Main Street sides. Heavy steel lintels with rosettes top these windows and just below the metal beams are lavender prism-glass transoms. The bank's large street level windows are possibly a 1910 alteration, made when the bank expanded into the store to its north. Currently it appears vacant on ground level, with residential quarters above.

Millinery Shop -- 105 N. Augusta Ave. (c. 1889) [contributing]

Land transfer books and archival records leave an unclear picture of the construction and use of this building. It may have been the surviving portion of the Doty drugstore (later Robinson, Doty & Co.) after the Oxford State Bank expanded. Its facade appears to be older than 1910, however, so it is

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 12

CFN-259-1115

likely the Doty building on Augusta was constructed as two separate storefronts from its inception. This building was in use in 1899 as a millinery shop, with offices on the second floor. Like most of the buildings in the historic district, its two stories are constructed of brick with a stone foundation. At the street level it has a large store front with display windows and an offset entrance. Overhead is a signboard cornice. Above the cornice is a large centered oriel window. The oriel's window aprons are decorated with applied flower garlands and the windows on either side of the oriel have window hoods with an incised decoration. At the roof line, from the appearance of the top courses of brick, a cornice has been removed. Other alterations include the replacement of window glass, bulkheads, and doors at the street level. Its current use is commercial (video rentals).

Mellecker Building -- 111 N. Augusta Ave. (1892) [contributing]

This tall, narrow brick building presents the most ambitious profile, for its size, of any of the buildings in the district. In 1899 it housed a furniture store, although F.X. Mellecker is known to have operated a restaurant and acted as a barber during the time period. The building is a single store front wide and its second story has two wide three-part windows each topped with a straight classical lintel. Above these windows the wall rises another half-story until it finally terminates in an ornate metal cornice and tall central pediment complete with finials. The name "Mellecker" appears in this pediment. A large round window opening (now filled with plywood) is centered above the second story windows, immediately below the cornice pediment. Store front alterations include replacement of the original glass with safety glass and replacement of the window bulkhead with newer bricks. Its current use is commercial (hardware store).

Saxton Livery -- 121 N. Augusta Ave. (1890) [contributing]

This brick livery stable, one of three pivotal buildings in the district, was constructed on the site of an earlier frame stable just two months before a devastating fire destroyed everything in the block across the alley to its north. Constructed of soft red brick, the stable's masonry walls (along with a favorable wind) were credited with blocking the fire from spreading south. The building was made in two sections, a two-story block along the alley to the north, and a one-story office section towards the interior to the south. The brick walls sit on a stone foundation and are laid in a simple common bond, with asymmetrical openings for narrow windows, single doors and wagon doors. At the roof line the mason, Henry Seevogel from Iowa City, altered the plane of brick courses to create a decorative

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 13

CFN-259-1116

sawtooth detail and projecting cornice. Alterations to this stable include the filling in of the front wagon door with glass and conversion of an office door to a window. On the alley side, two new windows have been added and the original hinged wagon doors have been replaced with a single door that slides on an overhead track. Its current use is commercial (appliance sales).

Poole Block (Lots 6,5,4,3,2 & 1, Block 2, Wilcox's 1st Addition)

The wood frame buildings that had been constructed on this half block, from the alley north to Wilson Street went up in flames one hot August night in 1890. After the fire, two merchants acted quickly to rebuild their shops in brick as did J. Wimmer, owner of a second livery business, whose frame stable behind the wood stores on Augusta had burned also (Wimmer's brick barn is nonextant). Harness maker James Krotz and jeweler William Poole both rebuilt their small shops within three months. Their nearly identical brick stores then sat on the block for more than ten years before another major brick building was constructed between them by Katherine Bettag in 1901. Finally, more than fifteen years later the last two empty lots--occupied before the fire by Henry Vanderlip's first Tremont Hotel--were filled with the Luce Garage in 1917. This block, then, best shows the last development of Oxford's historic commercial district. It's the block that rose from the ashes of the big fire.

James Krotz Building -- 125 N. Augusta Ave. (1890) [contributing]

This building and William Poole's jewelry shop show a great similarity, not unexpected under the circumstances of the time. Mason Henry Seevogel and his men were called to Oxford after the fire to rebuild the harness maker's shop. The result is a building of modest size and of sturdy brick construction. It is two stories in height, but still not a tall building when compared to its neighbors. The store front has a central recessed primary entrance, flanked by large display windows and cast iron columns, while a secondary entrance for the stairs to the second floor is offset along the north wall. The signboard cornice and roof line cornice of pressed metal, are complemented by pedimented hoods over the second story windows. Alterations are limited to the primary entrance where a metal door has replaced the original. Currently the building appears lightly used or vacant.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 14

CFN-259-1116

Katherine Bettag Building -- 129 N. Augusta Ave. (1901) [contributing]

This yellow-brick faced building sits on a stone foundation in the space formerly occupied by Thomas Combe's wooden warehouse--the ignition point of the 1890 fire. Neoclassical in feeling, the building appears to have been built to hold two businesses. Two entrances, each with the appearance of a primary entrance, are present. One is at the southern end of the building, the other at the north end. In between are three very large windows. Overhead at the second floor, four openings are filled by three simple windows and one large oriel with three angled sash windows. Topping the building at the roof line is a classical entablature with dentils. The pilasters and entablatures of the entrance surrounds for the two street doors are also classical. The integrity of this building has been seriously compromised by fenestration alterations. Glass block fills the street windows, the south entrance has been altered, and one of the upper level windows has been replaced with a casement window. Still the double-front width of this building, and its higher profile give it an imposing historic appearance which is not lost by the alterations. Currently the building is used as the American Legion quarters.

William H. Poole Building -- 133 N. Augusta Ave. (1890) [contributing]

The last of the three especially significant buildings in the district, this brick shop was built immediately after the big fire by jeweler and long-time merchant William Poole. Mason Henry Seevogel and his men were able to build Krotz's new shop and Wimmer's new stable within four weeks after the fire, and upon the completion of these buildings, they likely turned their attention to Poole's new building. Like harness maker Krotz's shop, Poole's building was two stories high. Its store front has a central, recessed primary entrance of double doors, and an offset secondary entrance at the north end. Large 4-light display windows were installed on either side of the recessed entrance and cast iron columns support the glazed store front. Over the store is a cornice at the signboard area and above that are three window openings, the central one of which houses a double window. All four windows still have their two-over-two lights. Pediment hoods with brackets top each of the three window openings and at the roof line is an elaborate cornice with brackets and a dentil-like detail. This is an exceptionally intact Late Victorian store building. No alterations are visible from the street. Currently it is used as a residence.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 15

CFN-259-1116

Luce Garage -- 147 N. Augusta Ave. (1917) [contributing]

The final building to be constructed in the historic district came after a lull in building activity along the west side of Augusta and marks the turning point in district history. Constructed with a facade of wire-brushed brick and clay tile, and finished with a stuccoed step gable, this building's physical appearance, construction materials and function differed from the rest of the district, though the differences are mainly confined to the Augusta Avenue facade. The Luce Garage was constructed by R.K. Luce in 1917 to house an automobile sales and service garage. It is a low, wide building which straddles two lots along Augusta. Built on the corner of Augusta and Wilson, this building like the Rohret Bros. store one block south, presents its long side to the intersecting street of Wilson Street, where its segmental arched windows and brick walls are visible. The building hides its two-story height behind the facade's step gable, below which are wide expanses of display windows. Over the windows, prism-glass lights in the transom cast light into the interior of the showroom. Today these transom lights are blocked from the interior and the transom over the primary entrance now houses an air conditioner. Its current use is commercial.

*Eastside Buildings from Main Street to the alley south of Wilson Street*Masonic Hall Building -- 100 S. Augusta Ave. (1895) [contributing]

Together with the Oxford State Bank, the Masonic Hall Building represents the more elaborate and architecturally important buildings which once graced three of the four corners of this town's main intersection. Missing today is the similarly large and imposing Farmers State Bank, which was built on the northeast corner in the late 1890s but demolished in 1994. All three buildings had canted corner entrances acknowledging the importance of the intersection to the town. The Masonic Hall housed the Miller Hardware and Implement store downstairs when it was built. Constructed of red brick, the building is two stories tall and has a large square oriel window centered on the second level just under an elaborate roof line cornice which bears the building's construction date. The store front along Augusta Avenue has three very large glass display windows and an offset entrance located at the canted corner of the building. Since the wall is canted only from ground to the second level, the overhanging second story is supported by a cast iron column. A metal cornice at the signboard level visually ties the display windows together with the corner entrance. Today most of the upper level windows are covered with plywood, however the windows are still intact underneath. The town's post

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District
Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 7 Page 16

CFN-259-1116

office occupies quarters in the Main Street side of the building and a fitness center operates in the Augusta side space. The Masonic lodge still owns the building.

First Trust & Savings Bank -- 112 E. Main St. (1994) [noncontributing]

This is a modern brick-faced bank building which replaced a historic bank and opera house, and two other store buildings. Though of handsome design, the building's low profile and prominent hipped roof appear out of scale with surrounding nineteenth-century neighbors.

Oxford Public Library -- 112 N. Augusta Ave. (c. 1905) [contributing]

This is the southern half of what appears to be a two-part building, though the store front treatments, facade heights, and cornice decorations are different. What unites the two parts and makes these two store buildings inseparable is the shared brickwork design over the store windows. Constructed of dark brownish red brick, each store is a single story, has a store front of large display windows, and a centrally located doorway. Over the windows, yellow bricks form a pattern of alternating large circles and diamonds. At the roof line, the Oxford Public Library's slightly taller profile is due to its more elaborate brick corbeling. Alterations include removal of transom glass over the entrance and plywood in the circles of the decorative brickwork. Currently the building is used as a public library.

Neuzil Law Office -- 116 N. Augusta Ave. (c. 1905) [contributing]

The partner to the Oxford Public Library, this store building is made of brick also, but its roof line is slightly shorter than its neighbor. Above the store front, which is comprised of a central recessed entrance flanked by large display windows, the yellow-brick diamond-and circle pattern runs across the entire facade. Plywood fills the brickwork circles here, too, and also covers the transom over the display windows. The two stores were almost certainly constructed at the same time and may have replaced a two-story farm implements store owned by Thomas C. Carson, a successful Iowa City hardware and implement merchant. It is currently used as a law office.

Prime Cut Hairstyling -- 118 N. Augusta Ave. (1956) [noncontributing]

This little block building replaced an earlier store building. It post dates the development of the

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetOxford Commercial Historic District
Oxford, Johnson County, IowaSection number 7, 8 Page 17

CFN-259-1116

historic district. It is currently used as a hair styling shop.

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The Oxford Commercial Historic District is an excellent example of the *Main Street* business districts that developed in thousands of Midwest country towns during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, constructed for merchants and artisans who provided services and manufactured goods to area residents. Built between 1883 to 1917, Oxford's commercial district formed after the town's settlement phase had passed and the frontier had moved well into the central Dakotas. The district endured and rebounded from the 1890s despite a disastrous local fire and a nationwide financial crisis, and grew to the brink of the automobile age. Significant under Criterion A, the historic commercial district may be understood within the context of a Middle West country town in transition, when social life and business activity were undergoing significant changes. During this time, transportation moved from the horse to the automobile, farming became mechanized, and the effects of industrialization nationwide brought stiff competition for the country merchant and artisan, forcing them to adapt or fail.

The architecture of the district reflects the popular styles of the day seen in both residential and commercial buildings. Though utilitarian in purpose and vernacular in design, Oxford's masonry commercial buildings also are decorated to reflect the entrepreneurial success of the town's merchants and artisans. In terms of construction materials, the overwhelming use of brick in the district reflects a justifiable concern for fire safety and a widespread tradition of masonry construction for *Main Street* buildings. Unlike the houses of the Middle West, the vast majority of which were balloon frame wood construction during this period, country town commercial districts commonly were built in brick. The district, then, is significant under Criterion C because its commercial masonry buildings represent a significant and distinguishable property type in Oxford and have the distinctive characteristics of Late or High Victorian commercial buildings of Iowa country towns. Three of its buildings, the Oxford State Bank, the Saxton Livery and the William H. Poole Building, are individually significant in their own right.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 18

CFN-259-1116

Criterion A

Evolution of a Commercial District: 1880-1895

Oxford in 1880 had just finished a decade of town growth. Informally founded in the late 1850s as a result of the railroad stationing a few workers near Rhine Creek to supply passing engines with water and cordwood, a nearby landowner finally filed the plat for the original town of Oxford after the Civil War in 1868. What followed was a decade of booming growth. Population by 1870 was already nearly 900 souls and the original town boundaries were too small.⁸ A series of additions were rapidly filed during the early 1870s: McDonough's (1870), Wilcox's 1st (1872), Waterman's (1874) and Wilcox's 2nd (1875). While most of these were residential additions, Wilcox's 1st plat included two blocks of narrow commercial lots facing Augusta Avenue, just north of the original town's commercial district.

Many of the town's most prominent business and professional men arrived in the 1870s. Francis X. Mellecker and merchant George Rentz arrived in 1871. Physician J.R. Ward arrived in 1873. Livery stable owner Walter Saxton arrived in 1874 and built his first wood stable on Augusta Avenue, while hardware store owner A. J. Miller located in Oxford in 1875. Artisans who manufactured goods for the local trade also moved into Oxford during the 1870s. Many of these artisans produced goods associated with the use and ownership of horses, such as blacksmith Chris Luther who arrived in 1872, carriage maker Lewis Watson (1873), and harness maker John Fisher (1879). In 1877 jeweler William Poole built his wood-frame shop along Augusta Avenue. New mills were constructed in 1871 and 1874, and Oxford's first newspaper printed its inaugural edition in 1878.⁹ Railroad shipments of livestock and cash crops during the decade reflect the rising importance of hogs and corn to the area's

⁸Oxford's population was reported at 891 people in 1869 (*History of Johnson County, Iowa...1836 to 1882*, (Iowa City: n.p., 1883). In 1990, population was 663 people (Johnson County Auditor's Office).

⁹Commerce activity is recorded in *History of Johnson County, Iowa...1836 to 1882*, (Iowa City: n.p. 1883), p. 47-48.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 19

CFN-259-1116

farming economy and the shift away from wheat as the principal crop.¹⁰

Business life for Middle West merchants and artisans was relatively autonomous as they entered the 1880s:

Small-town business felt little external control. Though manufacturers and wholesalers were beginning to advertise directly to consumers the unique virtues of their own special packaged, branded and trade-marked wares, which finally would compel retailers to stock such items, general stores still carried coffee and calico, not a variety of package or labelled brands. Storekeepers were relatively free to select their own stock...and local banks enjoyed a measure of independence unknown in federal reserve and deposit-insurance days... Artisans flourished in the relatively isolated and unspecialized economy. Blacksmiths were able and willing to build wagons and plows; harness shops, both made and sold harness; shoemakers and tailors turned leather and cloth into finished goods.¹¹

By the early 1880s Oxford's business community offered an array, amazing by today's standards, of goods and services to residents of the town and surrounding rural area, and to travelers on the railroad line. It boasted no fewer than eight competing grocery and dry goods stores, two druggists, three hardware and farm implement dealers, two liverys, and six hotels and saloons. The variety of hand manufacturing goods available for the local trade was also impressive. Consumers could purchase locally produced goods from a furniture maker, two wagon and carriage makers, two shoemakers, and a harness maker. A brickmaker and four carpenter/builders offered their talents to local residents

¹⁰Statistics from the "Oxford station" from 1875-1879 record the number and content of railroad cars shipped out of Oxford. Corn, hogs and wheat occupied most of the cars with 5-year totals of 804, 532, and 437 cars, respectively. Wheat bearing cars precipitously declined from 137 in 1875 to only 42 in 1879 (*History of Johnson County, Iowa*, p. 47). Oxford's agricultural history in this respect is consistent with the rest of Iowa where the production of wheat consistently shifted further west after the Civil War. See Donald L. Winters, "The Economics of Midwestern Agriculture, 1865-1900," in *Agriculture and National Development: Views on the Nineteenth Century*, Lou Ferleger, ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), p. 83.

¹¹Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954, reprinted 1984), 42-43.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 20

CFN-259-1115

planning to build. And women consumers could shop from other women in the Oxford business community. Two milliners and a dressmaker were listed in the 1882 business directory.¹²

Though the rapid growth of the 1870s was not matched in the 1880s, steady building of permanent business establishments along Augusta Avenue took place throughout the decade. Buildings constructed during the 1880s were both of wooden and of brick construction. The brick buildings remain, the wooden ones are gone, replaced or consumed by the 1890 fire. Extant brick buildings include: the 1883 Staley hotel (enlarged and renamed the Tremont Hotel after the fire); the 1884 Rohret Bros. store; the 1885 Oxford Bank; Liebold's double building in 1886; and the 1889 millinery shop now housing the Prime Time Video store.

Of individual significance, Oxford Bank was constructed in 1885 by the Linebarger family who also had an interest in the local grain elevator. Lewis Linebarger, a Civil War veteran and senior member of the family, established the Oxford Bank (incorporated as the Oxford State Bank in 1891) as an unchartered private lending institution in 1883 and sent his son Henry from the family home in Illinois to act as cashier. Lewis joined his son in Oxford in 1886 and promptly assumed the prominent position expected of a country town's banker. By 1893, Lewis Linebarger had served as "Justice of the Peace, a member of the City Council, City Clerk, and one of the School Board."¹³ His bank building continues to occupy a similarly prominent position among the business buildings of Oxford's historic commercial district.

Though highly respected because of their power, bankers were seldom popular. People knew that they stood at the very center of the small group of local men who manipulated village affairs...The banker's withdrawn existence in his own day...came directly from the symbolic functions which he performed...[M]oney symbolized basic aims. It meant so many hogs or cattle or acres of land to the farmer; it measured store goods and business buildings for the merchant...The banker was expected to be conservative, closemouthed, wise

¹²Mrs. V. Rawlins and Mrs. Eva Hartwell were milliners; Mrs. A.L. Davis was listed as a dressmaker. Business listings from the early 1880s can be found at pages 742-743 of the *History of Johnson County, Iowa....1836 to 1882*.

¹³*Portrait and Biographical Record of Johnson, Poweshiek and Iowa Counties, Iowa*, (Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1893), 123.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 21

CFN-259-1116

and dignified...The external pattern of the banker's life harmonized with his calling. As a temple of wealth...extravagant display [in his bank building] was avoided. Figures stating capitol and surplus appeared in gilt on the front of the building...Bearded, conservative farmers sat on the board of directors, thus emphasizing the source of banking wealth. Unlike twentieth-century banks, which often belong to a chain and are subject to the heavy hand of government supervision, nineteenth-century banks were relatively sovereign...¹⁴

The bank expanded its building in 1910, no doubt due to the prosperity of the surrounding agricultural economy. Its reliance on the farm economy and the value of the farmland surrounding Oxford, though, may have led to the bank's rapid closure but two short weeks after the stock market crash in 1929. When the bank closed its doors, on November 12, 1929, blame was laid on "excessive loans on real estate and steady withdrawals."¹⁵

By the end of the 1880s, Oxford's commercial district was well formed and in 1890 Walter Saxton made plans to replace his wooden livery stable with a new brick one on the same site.

Livery stables served those who could not afford to own rigs or who had temporary and unusual demands. Young people courted and eloped with livery stable teams...Drummers employed drivers and rigs to haul their sample trunk on two- and three-day side trips to hamlets lacking railroad connections...In cold and rainy weather farmers paid the modest fee necessary to stable their teams in commercially operated feed barns and livery stables. As a focal point in the age of horse-drawn transportation, the livery stable had a form, a personality, and an odor as distinctive as that of its twentieth-century successor, the garage and automobile showroom. Brick construction, feed chutes connected directly with the hayloft, and running water in stalls and washrooms marked the more pretentious establishments...[but] all stables had the same mingled smell of horse urine and manure, harness oil, feed and cured hay. The livery barn was universally condemned by pious mothers who rated it only slightly above the town saloons...The livery stable also served as a loafing place...It was distinctly a

¹⁴Atherton, 148-150.

¹⁵*Iowa City Press-Citizen*, front page, November 13, 1929.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 22

CFN-259-1116

man's world and hence a fascinating one for small boys.¹⁶

During June, 1890, the editor of the *Oxford Weekly Journal* regularly commented on the business environment in town and the activities at Saxton's Livery. "Notwithstanding there has been a steady improvement of our town, our growth has been slow the last six years...but the tide is about to change, and more good buildings will go up this season than have been built in the preceding five years...there are other parties about ready to build...Business is rapidly improving in Oxford." About Saxton's new project, he continued, "One very important improvement will be that of W.K. Saxton. He will remove the old Livery Barn and erect a brick building the full size of his lot sixty feet square, two stories. Being in the center of the business part of town, it will add very materially to the appearance of the town, while giving the proprietor a large, roomy comfortable and convenient business house. We congratulate friend Saxon on his enterprise and public spirit."¹⁷ A month later, in the July 17 edition, the editor noted "The Old Livery Barn of Saxton & Son is a thing of the past. It has been torn down and hauled off, and the masons, Sefogle [*sic*] and his men of Iowa City, are putting in the foundation for the brick structure."

By the time August, 1890, rolled around, Saxton's new brick barn was finished and just as the editor predicted, the town was about to embark on a new period of extended building activity. Unfortunately, the building activity would be necessary because of a disastrous fire rather than because of economic growth and prosperity.

"Oxford's Holocaust"

When the *Oxford Weekly Journal's* September 4, 1890 issue came out it contained the story, under the headline "Oxford's Holocaust," of the inferno that destroyed a major portion of the town's business district on the previous Sunday night, August 31st. Apparently set by an arsonist who shredded the town's fire hoses, the fire was started in Thomas Combe's warehouse, just two buildings north of Saxton's new brick stable (see Figure 4). South of Combe's warehouse sat Sesterhen's saloon and

¹⁶Atherton, 33-41.

¹⁷*Oxford Weekly Journal*, 06/19/1890.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District
Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 23

CFN-259-1116

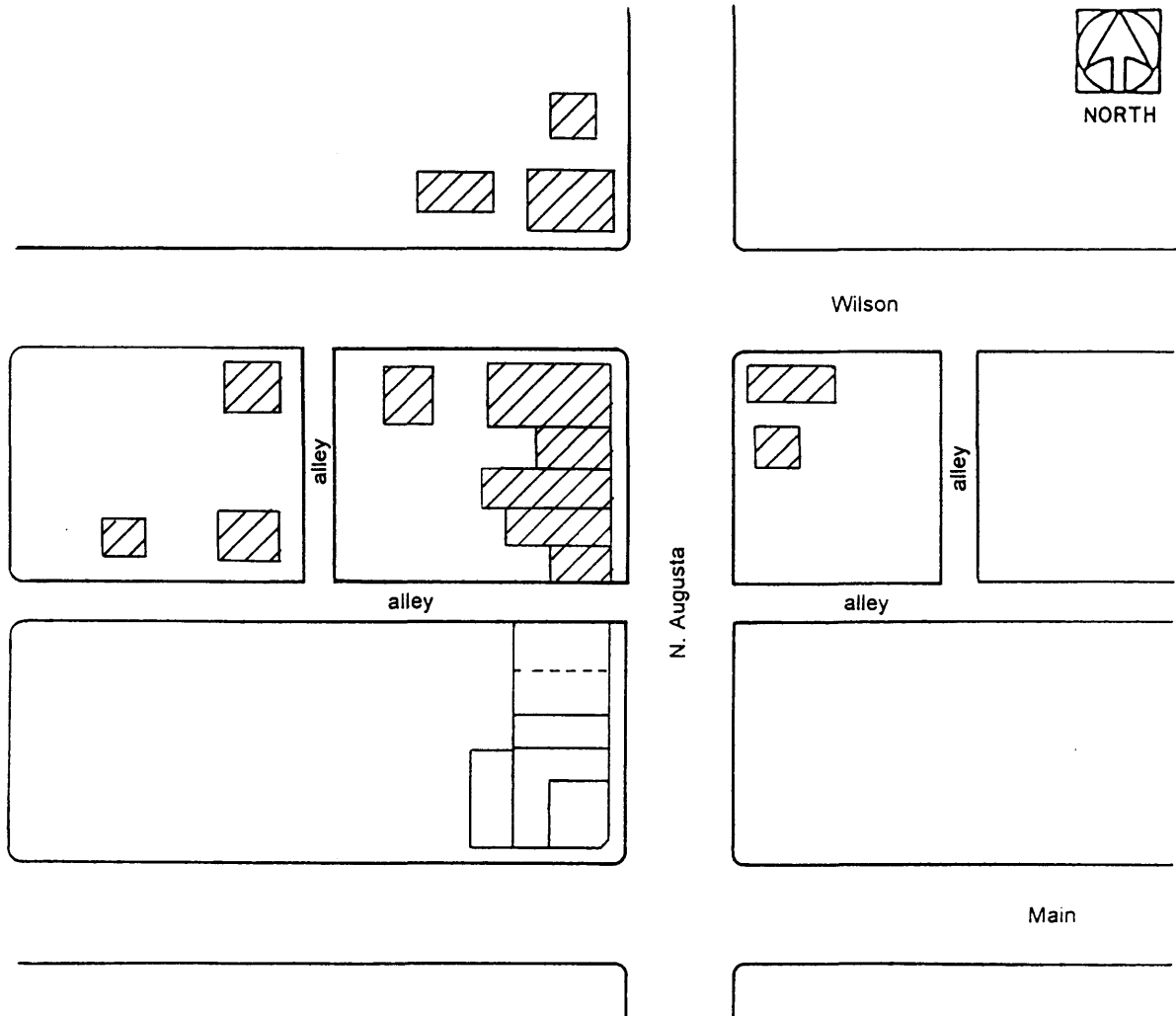


Figure 4. Businesses destroyed by the August 31, 1890 fire in Oxford's commercial district. Size and location of buildings are approximations based on reports of the fire contained in the *Oxford Weekly Journal*, 9/2/1890.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 24

CFN-259-1116

restaurant, and Krotz's harness shop on the alley. North of the warehouse were Poole's jewelry shop and the original Tremont Hotel on the corner of Augusta and Wilson. Behind (west of) these Augusta buildings were a residence, an ice house and Joe Wimmer's livery barn. All these businesses were in wood buildings and all burned to the ground. Additionally, the fire spread north across Wilson Street where it destroyed another few stores and houses, and jumped across Augusta Avenue to the east where it destroyed several more. Some of the town's residents rallied to form an old style "bucket brigade" to fight the fire, while others went to work saving horses from the livery and merchandise from the stores. Firemen assessed the situation and made a stand against the fire at strategic locations. Other buildings, deemed beyond hope, were left to burn. The new brick-walled Saxton stable was one location where the firemen made a successful stand, saving most of what today is included in the historic commercial district.

Rebuilding commenced nearly immediately and, aided by a mild early winter, many of the merchants and artisans who had lost their buildings quickly rebuilt them in brick. Iowa City mason, Henry Seevogel, and his men could not have been kept busier.¹⁸ While Seevogel was working on James Krotz's new harness shop, Wimmer and Poole readied their lots for rebuilding. While Seevogel's men worked on Wimmer's stable, Poole had three rail cars of stone brought in for his store's new foundation. One by one, the buildings on this block, described earlier as the "William H. Poole Block." were reconstructed in brick. Among the first to open his new store, James Krotz placed an ad in the November 6, 1890 *Journal* which stated: "Having removed into my new brick store room, I am prepared to promptly supply my customers with everything in my line, Saddlery, Harness, single and double, Whips, Curry Combes, Brushes, etc. etc...All kinds of repairing done with neatness and dispatch. Call and examine my immense stock."

The lack of a hotel over the winter months of 1890-91, however, was of great concern for the town. On September 25, 1890, the *Oxford Weekly Journal* editor lamented: "What we need most of all now

¹⁸Henry C. Seevogel was a "stone mason and brick layer" born June 28, 1830 in Hanover, Germany. He arrived in this country in 1866 and immediately located in Johnson County. *History of Johnson County...1836-1882*, 915. Though responsible for many of Oxford's commercial brick buildings, nothing is known about any Iowa City buildings he may have built (Irving Weber, Iowa City historian, to Jan Nash, 3/11/1996.)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 25

CFN-255-1116

is a good hotel building. Here is a chance for a man who knows how to keep hotel." On October 9th, he again commented, asking "Is Oxford going to be without a hotel this winter?" And on November 20th, "There is a good brick building built a few years ago for a hotel, but it is so badly arranged that no man with a practical knowledge of the business would go into it unless very material changes were made and an addition put to it...As the building season is about over we can hardly expect the opening of a hotel before spring, but there will certainly be one then..." This "good brick building" was indeed remodeled and reopened as the extant Tremont Hotel.

The Country Town in Transition

Today it is not easy to understand the concern expressed by the nineteenth-century editor for the need of a hotel. Oxford, after all, was a town of less than 900. But small town life and business were changing in the 1890s and competition from out-of-town sources was increasingly felt in country towns such as Oxford. On the one hand, without a hotel the town would lose its lodging business to neighboring towns. As the local editor put it, "There is probably no town in the state of equal size where so many strangers may be seen within its gates every day in the week as in Oxford, and most, if not all are obliged to go to Iowa City or Marengo to spend the night."¹⁹ On the other hand, the "strangers" in town were probably there to sell something. These strangers may have been from nearby Iowa City, or they may have represented business interests from much farther away. Once again the editor complained:

It is said those Chicago grocery peddlers are again at work throughout the country canvassing for suckers. A great many have found them to be swindlers heretofore, and it is not probably that they have reformed since. They cannot possibly sell you the same quality of goods cheaper than your home merchants will. Their only hope of success is through swindlers. Give them a wide berth.²⁰

The same tension that exists in the editor's conflicting attitude about the need for a hotel verses the

¹⁹*Oxford Weekly Journal*, November 6, 1890.

²⁰*Oxford Weekly Journal*, December 11, 1890.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 26

CFN-259-1116

desirability of having peddlers in town, also is found elsewhere in the newspaper where numerous ads for Iowa City businesses ran side by side next to the ads for Oxford merchants. Clearly the newspaper wanted and needed the advertising dollar from outside merchants, but this left some Oxford businesses pleading their case. One ad for a local business, published in the November 6, 1890, *Oxford Weekly Journal*, is bordered by large letters saying "We Deserve Your Trade." The accompanying text says:

Some things you know. You know we keep the best goods made. You know we keep the largest and most complete stock. You know we have the necessary experience to provide for your wants. You know that we have the enterprise to keep up with the times. You know you can get what you want when you call for it. You know we will save you time and trouble. Knowing all these things it is certainly to your interest to give J.R. McCleery Co. your trade.

Next to this ad appeared a large ad for Pratt & Strub, an Iowa City dry goods store; the next week, Bloom & Mayer, an Iowa City clothing merchant ran a huge ad in the paper. Smaller ads by Iowa City-based lawyers and doctors were present also.

Local artisans, too, had to respond to increasing competition from distant manufacturers. "Artisans as a whole were rapidly turning to the retailing of manufactured products. Silver and goldsmiths were settling down to keeping jewelry stores, their earlier craftsmanship now finding an outlet in watch repairing and fitting eyeglasses. Perhaps most interesting of all was the change from carpentering and cabinetmaking to the building of coffins, and the resulting historical connection between furniture and undertaking..."²¹ In Oxford, harness maker James Krotz "had on hand the largest stock of Horse Blankets ever offered for sale in Oxford...[and also did] all kinds of repairing..."²² Jeweler William Poole was a watchmaker and did watch repair. After the fire of 1890, he quickly announced that "through the magnanimity of Messrs Swartchild & Co., of Chicago, I have been enabled to procure a new set of tools and am now able to do all kinds of work in a strictly first class manner and on short

²¹Atherton, 61.

²²*Oxford Weekly Journal*, 11/06/1890.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 27

CFN-259-1116

notice."²³

Though the ways of country town commerce changed dramatically from the Civil War to the end of the century, the most complete revolution in small town life was brought about by the arrival of motorized vehicles after the turn of the century. "Community relations, stockyards, bakeries, eating places, livery barns--every aspect of village life felt the impact of truck and automobile."²⁴ In Oxford, the advent of the age of the motor vehicle was greeted with enthusiasm by businessman R.K. Luce when he built his new Ford sales and service garage in 1917. Luce grasped the new opportunities presented by the automobile and truck; other local businesses adapted by changing old ways. Country towns like Oxford--increasingly rare survivors from an age of small trade areas and local markets--are still adjusting to the tremendous revolution of the motor vehicle. Business owners in such surviving towns continue to look for new uses for their historic buildings.

Criterion C

The majority of buildings in Oxford's historic commercial district are two stories in height and were built to house first floor commercial space, into which the public was invited, and more private space on the second floor. Second floors were devoted to residential quarters for either the owner or a renter, storage space for the store below, or lodge hall space for one of the numerous fraternal organizations that existed in Oxford during the period of significance. Commercial buildings such as Oxford's have been described as "two-part commercial blocks...the most common type of composition used for small and moderate-sized commercial buildings throughout the country."²⁵ Though origins of the two-part commercial block can be traced to "Roman antiquity, when many urban buildings

²³*Oxford Weekly Journal*, 09/25/1890. Fire insurance maps from 1899 mark the Poole building as "watchmak'g & reprs."

²⁴Atherton, 239.

²⁵Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to Commercial Architecture*, (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987), 24.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 28

CFN-259-1116

contained shops at street level and living quarters above,"²⁶ its construction in this country prevailed during the 100-year period from the 1850s to the 1950s. Eventually, due to the increased cost of land in denser urban areas, the two-part block became taller than two stories and gave up its residential space to become wholly commercial.

During the last few decades of the nineteenth century--the Late Victorian era--when Oxford's commercial district developed the:

...principal change [to the two-part commercial block] is an increase in the amount ornament and the variety of elements and materials employed. Often a much larger portion of the wall surface is covered with decorative patterns in wood, stone, brick, cast iron, or, by the 1880s, stamped iron. Two or more of these materials may be incorporated into the same facade. Windows and entrances are frequently of several shapes and sizes. Sometimes turrets, towers, oriel windows, gables and attic stories with high-pitched roofs are employed to generate picturesque effects.²⁷

These changes are evident in Oxford's district. The use of attractive cast iron columns between a store's entrance and display windows is common in the district, as is the use of pressed or stamped metal cornices at the roof and over the signboard area. There are several oriel windows and the Mellecker Building's tall facade and ornate peaked metal cornice are certainly picturesque.

By the turn of the century a more restrained treatment, based on classical traditions, became popular--Oxford's Katherine Bettag Building, with its pilasters and entablatured doorways is a good example--and an increasing array of building materials become available. "Brick came in numerous colors and textures...A number of substitute materials appeared on the market, including art stone and concrete block...Improvements in stucco made the application of that material widespread..."²⁸ The Luce

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35. Longstreth uses the term "High Victorian" rather than Late Victorian.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 29

CFN-259-1116

Garage's wire-cut brown brick and stucco facade and the Alibi building's rock-face cast concrete block, are good examples of this new diversity. Long used for its fire-retarding quality, the common red brick seen in many of the Oxford district's earliest buildings is complemented in its later buildings by the use of different colored and textured brick.

The increasing variety of building materials available at the end of the nineteenth century also is reflected by the standard store fronts seen on the Krotz and Poole buildings. Complete store fronts such as theirs were available for rail shipment from distant manufacturers. Though the manufacturer of the Poole building's store front is unknown, it closely resembles the store fronts available through Curtis Brothers & Company of Clinton, Iowa and other Midwest suppliers. Figure 5 is a sample page of store fronts available in 1899 through the Curtis catalog. Because it is essentially unaltered, the Poole building is an especially good example of a common single store front of the 1890s. Store buildings such as Poole's have been vulnerable to being remodeled at the street level by merchants attempting to maintain a modern appearance for their customers. The wooden bulkheads and large divided windows are often replaced by newer materials, as are second story windows. Poole's jewelry shop, built immediately after the catastrophic fire, shows none of these alterations.

The architecture of the district, then, reflects the popular styles of the day for both commercial and residential architecture and the transition from Late Victorian exuberance to the more restrained preferences of the early twentieth century. Vernacular in design, utilitarian in function, and constructed of materials desired for fire safety, Oxford's extant buildings form a commercial district which exemplifies the local community's own variation of the traditional *Main Street* district. Clustered together, at the heart of the town, these buildings nicely represent the distinctive *types* of commercial buildings found in turn-of-the-century country towns--stores, bank, livery stable, hotel, etc.--as well as the characteristic building materials and decorative details found in such towns. Oxford's district was created by individual merchants who increasingly responded to competitors located well beyond their local trade area. These merchants wanted then, just as today's merchants want now, practical and efficient buildings which also projected a comfortable come-in-and-do-business-here appearance to their customers.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District
Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 8 Page 30

GFN-059-1116

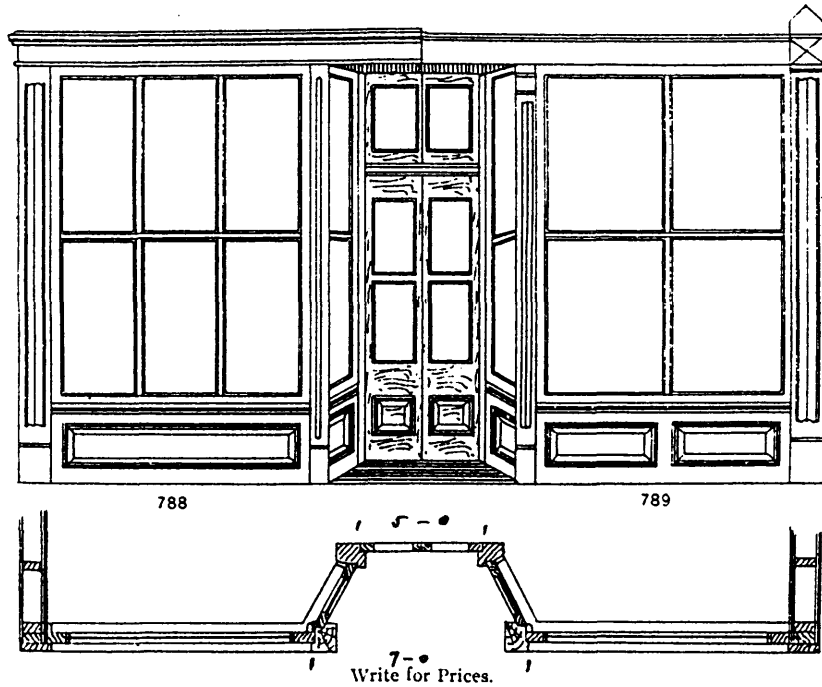
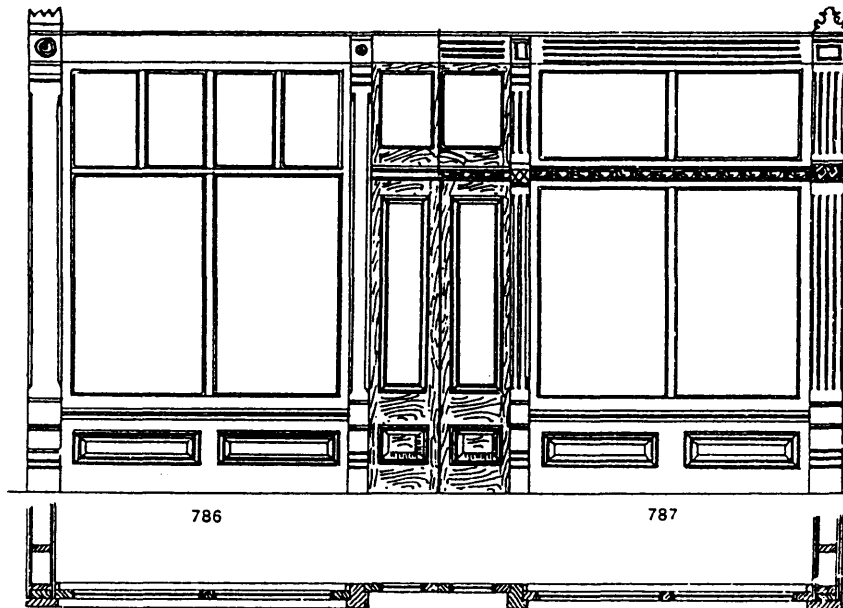


Figure 5. Store fronts available through the 1899 "Book of Designs" catalog from the Curtis Brothers & Co., Clinton, Iowa. (Collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa.)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 9, 10 Page 31

CFN-259-1116

9. Major Bibliographic References

Atherton, Lewis. *Main Street on the Middle Border*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954, reprinted 1984.

Aurner, Charles Ray. *Leading Events in Johnson County Iowa History*. Cedar Rapids: Western Historical Press, 1912.

Bennett Co. fire insurance map of Oxford, Iowa, 1899.

History of Johnson County, Iowa...1836 to 1882. Iowa City: n.p. 1883.

Iowa City Daily Republican. "The Fire Fiend," 9/1/1890.

Iowa Insurance Service Bureau fire insurance map, Oxford, Iowa, 1933.

Johnson County Assessor's Office land transfer records.

Longstreth, Richard. *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*. Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987.

Nash, Jan R. "Intensive Level Architectural and Historical Survey of the Oxford Historic Commercial District." Unpublished report to the Oxford Project Main Street, August, 1995.

Oxford Iowa Centennial 1869-1969, Oxford: n.p., 1969.

The Oxford Weekly Journal, multiple issues, 1890-1891.

10. UTM REFERENCES

5. Zone 15 E 600680 N 4619520

6. Zone 15 E 600600 N 4619520

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number 10 Page 32

CFN-259-1116

10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

Only that portion of the following blocks and lots which is occupied by a building described herein: Original Town Block 2, lots 7, 8 & 9; Block 3, lots 1, 2, 3, & 4; Block 5, lots 8 & 9; Block 6, lots 1 & 2; and in Wilcox's First Addition, Block 2, lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6. Vacant land remaining behind the buildings on such lots is not within the district.

Boundary Justification

The nominated historic district includes all historic buildings associated with the town's earliest commercial district which retain historical integrity.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District

Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number _____ Page 33

CFN-259-1116

Property OwnersOwnerBuilding(s) OwnedJames E. Portwood
P.O. Box 225, Oxford, IA 52322current name: Alibi Tavern
address: 125 S. Augusta Ave.Larry/Sharon Schuttenhoffer
221 S. Augusta Ave., Oxford, IA 52322historic name: Tremont Hotel
address: 117-119 S. Augusta Ave.Randy/Carol Loan
2080 SW Rohret Rd., Oxford, IA 52322historic name: Liebold Bldg. South
address: 107 S. Augusta Ave.John Andrews
P.O. Box 244, Oxford, IA 52322historic name: Liebold Bldg. North
address: 105 S. Augusta Ave.Terry Aubrecht
P.O. Box 43, Oxford, IA 52322historic name: Rohret Brothers Bldg.
address: 101 S. Augusta Ave.Marcia/Ronald H. Hummer, Jr.
P.O. Box 17, Oxford, IA 52322historic name: Rock Face Saloon
current name: Nowhere Bar
address: 110 W. Main St.Don Saxton
P.O. Box 122, Oxford, IA 52322current name: unnamed
address: West Main Street, east of 110 W. Main St.historic name: Oxford State Bank
address: 101 N. Augusta Ave.historic name/use: Millinery Shop
current name: Prime Time Video
105 N. Augusta Ave.Al/Mary Wyborny
P.O. Box 489, Oxford, IA 52322historic name: Mellecker Building
current use: Oxford Hardware
111 N. Augusta Ave.historic name: Saxton Livery
address: 121 N. Augusta Ave.

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District
Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Section number _____ Page 34

CFN-259-1116

Peter Feldstein/Josephine Tornabane
P.O. Box 252, Oxford, IA 52322

historic name: James Krotz Bldg.
address: 125 N. Augusta Ave.

American Legion Post 537
P.O. Box 189, Oxford, IA 52322

historic name: William H. Poole Bldg.
address: 133 N. Augusta Ave.

Pat Kinney
P.O. Box 199, Oxford, IA 52322

historic name: Katherine Bettag Bldg.
current name: American Legion Post 537
address: 129 N. Augusta Ave.

R. & A. Hennes, c/o Jim Hennes
P.O. Box 7, Oxford, IA 52322

historic name: Luce Garage
current name: Oxford Beverage
address: 147 N. Augusta Ave.

Ralph Neuzil
119 Wright Street, Iowa City, IA 52240

current name: Prime Cut Hairstyling
address: 118 N. Augusta Ave.

City of Oxford
P.O. Box 481, Oxford, IA 52322

current name: Neuzil Law Office
address: 116 N. Augusta Ave.

First Trust & Savings Bank
c/o Vic Rathje
P.O. Box 486, Oxford, IA 52322

current name: Oxford Public Library
address: 112 N. Augusta Ave.

Canopy Lodge #290, A.F.&A.M.
P.O. Box 165, Oxford, IA 52322

current name: First Trust & Savings Bank
address: 112 E. Main St.

historic name: Masonic Hall/Miller Hardw.& Implmts.
current name: Masonic Hall/Oxford Fitness Center
address: 100 S. Augusta Ave.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Adtl. Information

Section number _____ Page 35

Oxford Commercial Historic District
Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

CRN-259-1116

Augusta Ave., Oxford, Ia.

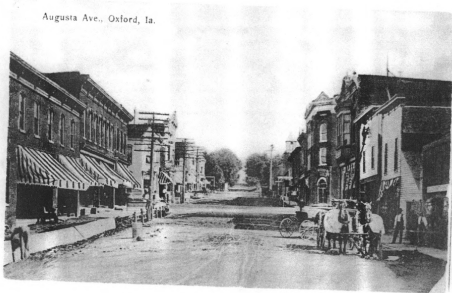


Figure 6. Postcard dated 1911 of Oxford's commercial district, looking north up the Augusta Avenue hill. (Collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa.)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Oxford Commercial Historic District
Oxford, Johnson County, Iowa

Addl. Information
Section number _____ Page 36

CFN-259-1116

PHOTOGRAPH KEY

