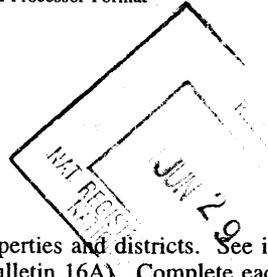


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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" on the appropriate line 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 BIG CREEK SCHOOLHOUSE  
other names/site number Polk City Schoolhouse, Polk City City Hall

2. Location

street & number 112 3<sup>rd</sup> Street N/A not for publication  
city or town Polk City N/A vicinity  
state Iowa code IA county Polk code 153 zip code 50226

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.)

Ronell G. Sake June 28, 2004  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
**STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA**  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ( meets  does not meet) the National Register criteria. ( See 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)

Edson H. Beall 8/11/04  
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

Big Creek Schoolhouse  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many lines as apply)

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

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one line)

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

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
<u>1</u>		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)

EDUCATION/School  
GOVERNMENT/city hall  
RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium  
RECREATION AND CULTURE/sports facility

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

GOVERNMENT/city hall

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

MID-19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY/Greek Revival

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Stone  
walls Synthetics/vinyl  
roof Asphalt  
other Glass

**Narrative Description**

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

Big Creek Schoolhouse  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" on one or more lines 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" on all the lines 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)

- EDUCATION
- POLITICS/GOVERNMENT
- RECREATION AND CULTURE
- ARCHITECTURE
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1863-1954  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1863  
1894  
1915

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

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

**Architect/Builder**

Schaal, John Adam  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Statement of Significance** - (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

**9. Major Bibliography 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):**

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

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historical Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository  
\_\_\_\_\_

Big Creek Schoolhouse  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of Property Less than one acre

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 | 15 | 4 4 0 6 3 5 | 4 6 2 4 3 5 0 |

Zone Easting Northing

2 | | | |

Zone Easting Northing

3 | | | |

Zone Easting Northing

4 | | | |

**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 William C. Page, Public Historian; Joanne R. Page, Project Associate

organization Big Creek Historical Society date August 30, 2003

street & number 520 East Sheridan Avenue (Page) telephone 515-243-5740; FAX 515-243-7285

city or town Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50313-5017

**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.)

name City of Polk City, Iowa

street & number 112 3<sup>rd</sup> Street telephone 515-984-6233

city or town Polk City state Iowa zip code 50226

**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**

Section number 7 Page 1

CFN-259-1116

Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION**

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is a large, public building, which has evolved as a series of additions and alterations. The 2-story, frame, main block was built in 1863 as a schoolhouse. The main block was converted into a city hall in 1894 and enlarged in 1915 with a 2-story, frame addition at the rear. The main block features a gable end façade surmounted by a cupola, which serves as a belfry.

Two more additions are attached to the main block. In 1964, a 1-story, frame addition was completed on the southwest corner of the main block. In 1984, a 1-story, frame lean-to was constructed on its north façade.

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is situated on Lots 5, 6, 7, and 8 in Block 10 of the original plat of the Town of Polk City, Iowa. The immediate site is generally level, although the surrounding land slopes slightly downward to the north and east. The property stands on the northwest side of South 3<sup>rd</sup> Street between West Van Dorn Street and West Broadway.

The Polk City public square stands across the street from the Big Creek Schoolhouse. It serves as a city park, dates from the original platting of the town, and features a frame bandstand, built in 1895 by W. J. Schaal, and renovated several years ago. The bandstand is located in the middle of the park with four pedestrian walks radiating outward to quadrisect the square. Commercial enterprises surround the public square on its north, east, and south sides.

South 3<sup>rd</sup> Street serves as the main north-south vehicular thoroughfare in Polk City. Saylorville Lake is situated about one-half mile to the west and southwest of Polk City where the Mile Long Bridge connects Polk City and its environs to the west shore of the lake.

Since the 1970s, Polk City has grown in size as a bedroom community for residents commuting to Des Moines for work and as a place for retirement. In spite of a 15 percent increase in population between 1980 and 1990, Polk City retains the feeling of an Iowa village, and the Big Creek Schoolhouse lends a New England atmosphere to town center.

**MAIN BLOCK**

The two-story mass of the main block dominates the edifice. The main block's footprint measures 31' x 58'. It rests on stone footings, is constructed of heavy, hewn timber frame, clad with narrow, clapboard siding (now covered with vinyl siding), and is covered with a façade gable roof. A cupola, which serves as a belfry, surmounts the east end of the roof.

The building originally provided a facility for school children in Big Creek so they no longer had to walk to a log schoolhouse north of town. On Sundays, the building provided a location for Sunday worship services, conducted by Rev. D. C. Marts, a Baptist minister.

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7

Page 2

CFN-259-1116

Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

Exterior

The east façade possesses three bays on each of the building's two floors. The main entrance is located in the middle bay on the first floor, flanked by windows. The entrance originally featured a transom and sidelight windows surmounted with a pediment. These architectural details have been removed. A modern steel door has replaced it, and the window openings have been filled. Windows feature 6/6, double-hung sash. Windows are situated in the three bays on the second floor, but their configuration consists of 2/2, double-hung sash. It is unclear if the original building included these two different window configurations.

The south and north facades originally featured five bays on each of the building's two floors. A door is located in the middle bay on the south façade of the second floor. A flight of exterior steps once accessed this door, but it has been removed. Most of the bays on the south façade feature 2/2, double-hung sash.

A blind, half-circular window is located in the gable end of the east façade. By circa 1966, a small window had been added beneath it. Other architectural details on the exterior included wooden hoodmolds surmounting the windows. These may or may not remain extant.

In plan view, the cupola is of octagonal shape. The cupola contains a belfry with eight louvered openings. A school bell is mounted in the cupola and dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cupola is covered with a shallow-sloped roof supported by a cornice and paired brackets located at the points of the octagon. A weather vane rising from a small dome, likely fabricated from sheet metal, once capped the cupola. The dome is nonextant, and a lightning rod has replaced the weather vane.

In 1894, the Big Creek Schoolhouse was remodeled and converted into a city hall. Although the second floor remained virtually intact, the floorplan of the first floor was substantially altered. An area for the town's fire department was built at the rear of the first floor. A door for vehicles was installed on the west side of the south façade to provide an entrance and egress for the town's fire equipment. (Officials rang the bell in the main block's tower to alert volunteer firemen in emergencies.)

Framing

Interlocking, heavy, hewn timber provides the structural framework of the main block. The framing is constructed like that of a barn. A series of five bents linked together with beams forms the building's skeletal structure. The bents are placed 10' o/c from each other and form four bays along the north and the south elevations of the building. If the bents are numbered one through five starting with number one at the east elevation of the building, the first and second bents consist of four posts, rather than two posts like the other bents. This provides added support for the cupola. Readers might recall seeing churches and town halls with cupolas in the eastern United States, whose cupolas tilt toward the rear of the building. This is not the case with the Big Creek Schoolhouse because of its excellent structural system. The posts, which form the first and second bents, are spaced 10' o/c apart.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**CONTINUATION SHEET**

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CFN-259-1116

Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

First growth black walnut provided the heavy timber for the Big Creek Schoolhouse. Builders harvested this wood from land around the Corydon Bridge, an area that today serves as the Sandpiper Beach at Saylorville Lake, a public recreational spot located a few miles south of Polk City. A tornado in 1895 destroyed all the remaining black walnut trees at the Corydon Bridge site. (Hines: n.p.)

Although most of this framing remains unexposed behind the building's plaster walls and ceilings, a portion of it is visible through an opening in the second floor.

Conversion to City Hall

In 1894, the City of Polk City purchased the building and converted it from a schoolhouse into a city hall.

Minutes of the Polk City town council note that the council authorized council member E. L. Meek to bid not in excess of \$600.00 to purchase the schoolhouse. (May 7, 1894) A subsequent meeting of the council learned that the town's bid of \$600.00 was successful. (May 14, 1894) The minutes for this same day document what then transpired:

Bullington moved to Bond the town of \$800.00 7% Bonds for the purpose of buying & repairing Old School House for City purposes. Said Bonds to be \$100.00 each & payable in five (5) years, carried by the following vote.

Bice absent [he had opposed bidding on the school house]. Burley yes, Bullington yes, Egleston yes, Gemricher yes, Meek yes, Mayor Hug. [abbreviated ?] yes.

By motion [W. J.] Schaal [the town recorder and John Adam Schaal's son] was instructed to go to Des Moines & have Bonds made & try to sell same & report at next meeting (carried). (Minutes: May 14, 1894)

It remains unclear how the City redesigned the building's interior of the building in this adaptive reuse. Council chambers undoubtedly figured prominently in the plan. One entry in city council minutes suggests that the council chambers were located on the second floor:

Motion by G. W. McLean that the council be instructed to paper and paint the hall, petition [*sic* partition] to be taken out and seats be placed over old stairway. Curtains purchased for all windows of hall upstairs including council room and outside stairway built. (December 7, 1908)

The fire department was housed on the first floor at the rear of the building. An historic photograph pictures the fifth bay from the east on the south elevation converted from a window to a vehicular doorway for use by fire equipment. The city jail and city offices also were located on the first floor. (See below.)

United States Department of the Interior  
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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

The original ceiling of the second floor was likely plaster. In November 1898, the city council approved a "bid for putting a new ceiling in city hall." (City Council Minutes) This ceiling might have been a pressed metal ceiling in the second floor, which is nonextant.

Rear Addition

In 1915, the City of Polk City enlarged the main block with a shallow, 2-story, frame addition at the rear of the building. A hipped roof, whose north and south planes tie into those of the main roof, covers this addition. The purpose of this addition was to provide extra space on the second floor for an elevated stage and likely to provide additional room for the municipal fire department on the first floor.

The construction of this addition is well documented. According to city council minutes:

Special session for the purpose of considering extension of City Hall.

Moved and seconded the council to instruct the Clerk to advertise for bids for extension of City Hall material furnished by the city. The bids to be placed in the hands of the Clerk by noon July 1<sup>st</sup> 1915. Motion Carried. (June 11, 1915)

Subsequent actions of the city council document the ensuing events:

- July 5, 1915  
The bid of \$189 of L. R. Glenn read and after consultation a motion was made and seconded that L. R. Glenn, be hired by the day to work and oversee the work to receive 35 cents per hour, also the privilege of working Dorr Glenn @ 30 cents per hour on work to be done on City Hall.  
  
Motion was made and seconded that the mayor appoint a committee of those to oversee the work on City Hall. Committee appointed—J. B. Crumm, Eddie Fenner, Frank Eggleston.
- Special Session, July 24, 1915  
Bill of L. R. Glenn for labor on City Hall read and motion moved and seconded the bill to the amount of \$95.37 dollars be allowed and ordered paid.  
  
Moved and seconded the Clerk be instructed to draw up two warrants of \$150 one hundred dollars each in favor of W. A. Sloane Lumber Co. for lumber to be used on City Hall.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

- August 2, 1915  
Moved and seconded that the city have a box social August 7, 1915. the proceeds of which to go towards furnishing the stage with curtains.  
  
Moved and seconded that the Clerk be instructed to rent the hall at \$4.00 per night for skating purposes. Shows at \$5.00 per night or 25% of proceeds and \$6.50 per night for dances.
- Special Session, August 16, 1915  
Bill of J. D. Sprague read, moved and seconded the amount of \$5.00 for plastering Chimney and putting in windows be paid.  
  
Bill of fees and lie read, moved and seconded that bill for fees and lie of \$13.20 for painting inside of City Hall. [Ed., in law, "lie" denotes something maintainable or admissible.]  
  
Moved and seconded bill to the amount of \$102.14 for lumber used on City Hall be allowed.  
  
Bill of L. R. Glenn for labor on City Hall read, moved and seconded that bill to the amount of \$69.04 be allowed and ordered paid.
- September 7, 1915  
Moved and seconded that Clyde Crabtree be allowed the use of the skating rink for two nights or as many nights as not in use for 35% of total receipts. (September 7, 1915)

These actions by the city council show that the 1915 improvements further increased the utility of the building's second floor and that local residents quickly patronized it as a result. It is also likely that this 1915 project expanded the space of the town's fire department on the first floor.

Interior

Today, the first floor of the main block reflects a remodeling completed in 1966 by Bob Marsh. The first floor consists of four areas. A vestibule is located directly inside the front door. The city council chamber is accessed by one step up from the vestibule. A restroom is situated to the north of the vestibule and a large closet or storage room is accessed from a door in the council chamber. The building's original floorplan is unclear given the following account of the 1966 remodeling:

To build the new paneled office, Bob had to get rid of the old jail cell and the old office.  
(*Ibid.*, n.p.)

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

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

The jail (actually a strap iron, self-contained box) was located where the restroom is now. The "paneled office" refers to the council chamber. In addition to the installation of this wood paneling to cover the walls, this remodeling also lowered the ceilings and constructed a raised dais for the council table and chairs located on the north side of the room. An exit door to the outside is located on the south façade of the main block.

The second floor consists of one large room with a staircase to the lower floor located in its northeast corner. A bank of benches for spectator seating is located adjacent to the east wall of this staircase. Portions of the stairs themselves have been removed. A raised stage, built in 1897 (City council Minutes, January 1897) and expanded in 1915, is situated on the west end of the room. A walnut wainscot, original to the 1863 building, runs around the south, east, and north sides of the lower walls. Although all of the windows are now covered up, one can see the building's original 2/2 double-hung sashes still in place on the second floor. A stairway to the cupola was removed during the 1966 remodeling of the building.

The second floor has changed functions over the years. In the early years, the second floor provided a gathering place for Sunday worship services. By the early 1900s, this large room was being used as a community hall, auditorium, and gymnasium. During the late 1910s and the 1920s, a roller skating rink was located here. High school basketball games also took place here. The room also served as a site for traveling shows. In 1908, an exterior flight of stairs, located on the south façade, was built to provide access to the upper floor by means of a door cut out of one of the windows. At the same time, spectator seating was added on the second floor, which covered over the interior staircase, which had previously provided access to it. When the building was remodeled in 1966, the exterior staircase was removed. Today, the second floor is not in use and only accessible by a ladder placed by the outside door. When the building's heating and cooling system was replaced, some of the ducts were placed on the floor of the second floor.

### **1-STORY ADDITIONS**

In 1964, the fire station at the rear of the main block was expanded with a 1-story, frame addition at its southwest corner. Measuring 24.5' x 33.5', this addition is covered with gable roof. In 2001, the addition's interior was remodeled and converted into chambers for the city council and offices for the city clerk.

In 1984, the city enlarged the main block with the construction of an 18' x 55' 1-story, frame addition attached to the north façade of the main block. This addition is covered with a shed roof and clad with asphalt shingles. Today, this addition contains offices for the mayor, city administration, and public works director. The city refers to this addition accurately as "the lean-to."

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
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CFN-259-1116

Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

**INTEGRITY**

The exterior appearance of the Big Creek Schoolhouse belies its integrity. Although cover-up siding and the presence of two additions detract from the building's appearance the preservation of the main block's original fabric remains substantially intact underneath it.

In the 1980s, the building was slip covered with vinyl siding and glass. Although these materials are visually distracting, this remodeling effort removed little of the building's original fabric. The window frames and double-hung sash, for example, were simply covered over with glass. Door frames, cornice, and narrow clapboard siding were similarly covered over with vinyl. The reversal of these materials can easily be accomplished.

Neither of the two additions permanently affected the main block. Both could be removed with a minimum amount of disturbance to the main block. Presently, the south addition provides a handicap entrance to the building.

The City of Polk City is presently exploring the option of constructing a new city hall. Such new construction would reduce the need for the Big Creek Schoolhouse to serve as the seat of local government. In 2003, the City and the Big Creek Historical Society, an institution focusing on local history, entered into an agreement for the Society to utilize the main block as a local history museum. Should city government move to a new site, all of the historic building might become available for society use. In the meantime, the City and the Society are exploring preservation options for the building. A plan is currently under study to remove the cover-up siding from the cupola and restore its original dome and weather vane. Because the restoration of this highly visible architectural element will capture public interest and call attention to the historical value of the property, the Society believes this modest effort is an appropriate way to begin long-term rehabilitation of the building. In 2003, the society entered into an agreement with preservation consultants to prepare a plan for the site's rehabilitation.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

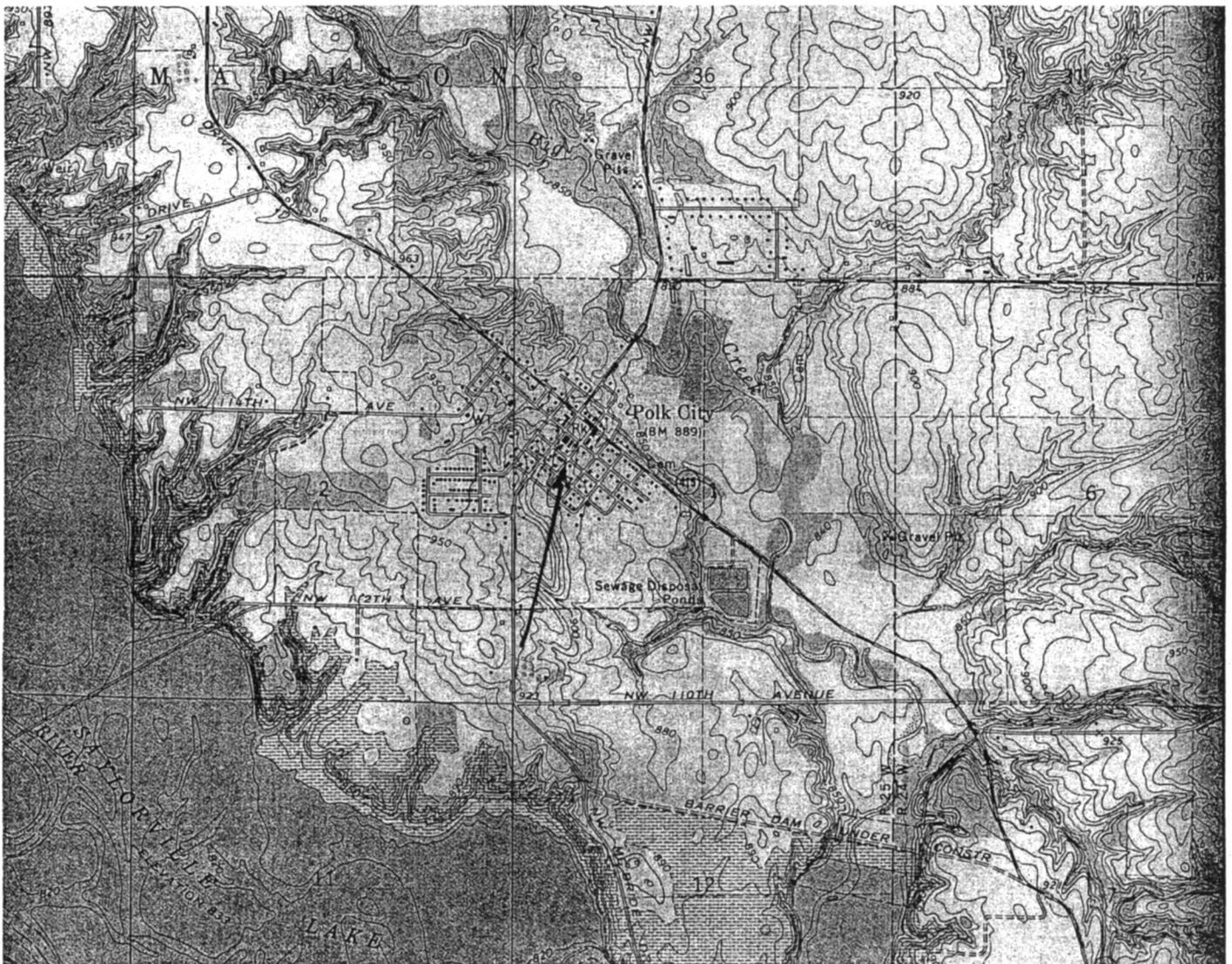
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

## SITE MAP

ARROW LOCATES PROPERTY



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 7

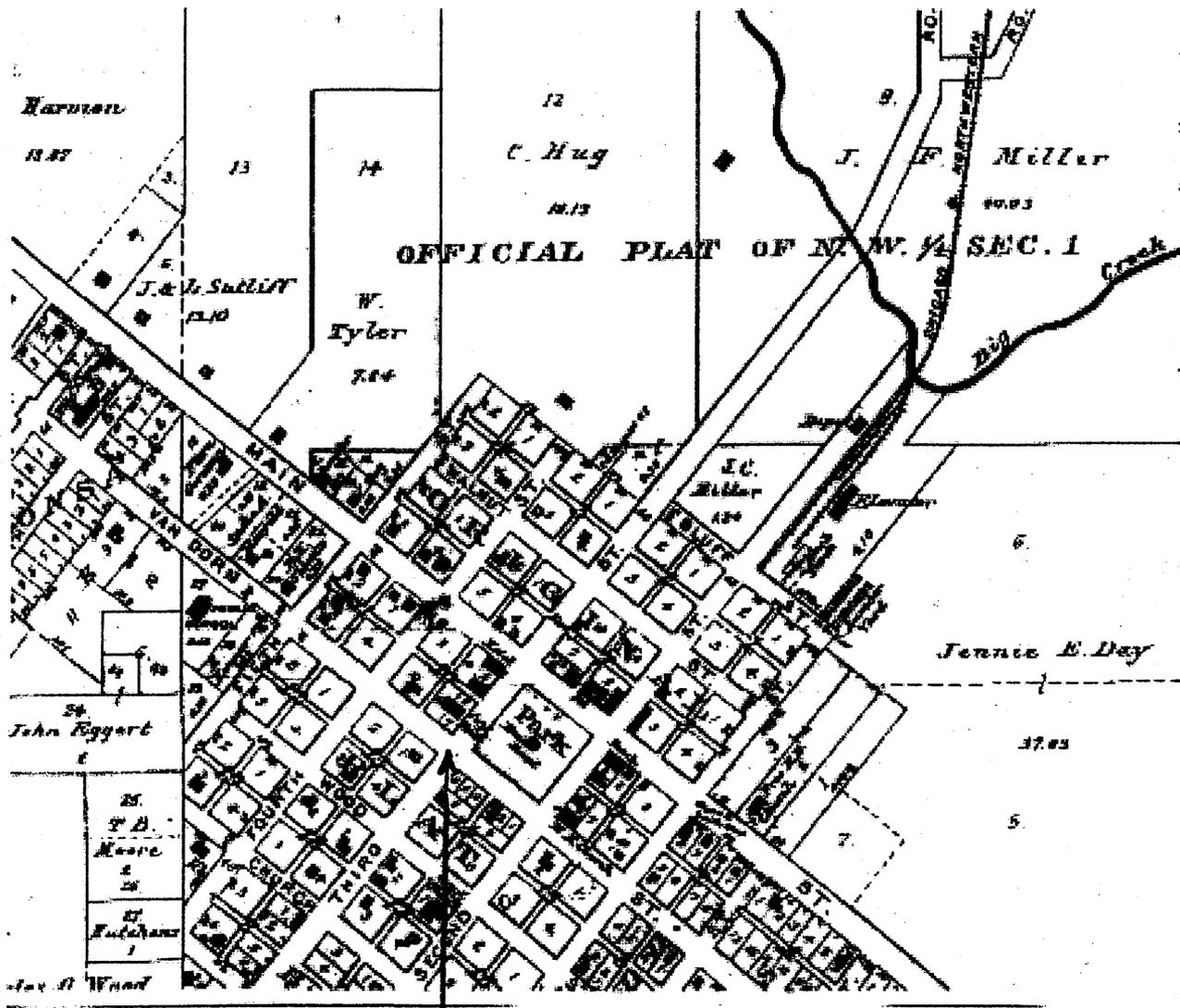
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

## MAP

### ARROW LOCATES PROPERTY



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 7

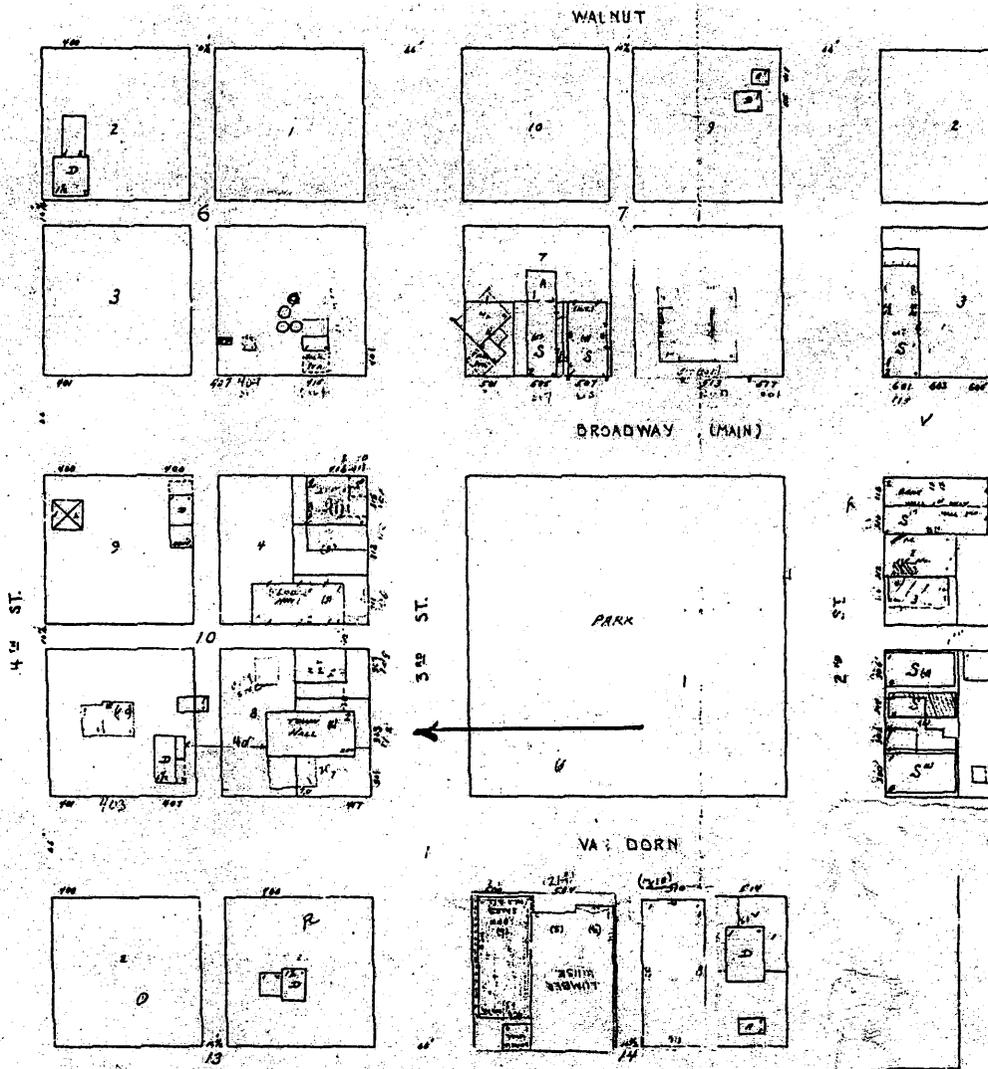
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

## 1934 FIRE INSURANCE MAP UPDATED

ARROW LOCATES PROPERTY



This map pictures the surroundings of the Big Creek Schoolhouse, including the Polk City central park and commercial properties edging it. The footprint of the schoolhouse is shown on the next page in a larger scale.

Source: Iowa Insurance Service Bureau map, August 1934 updated to December 1948.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

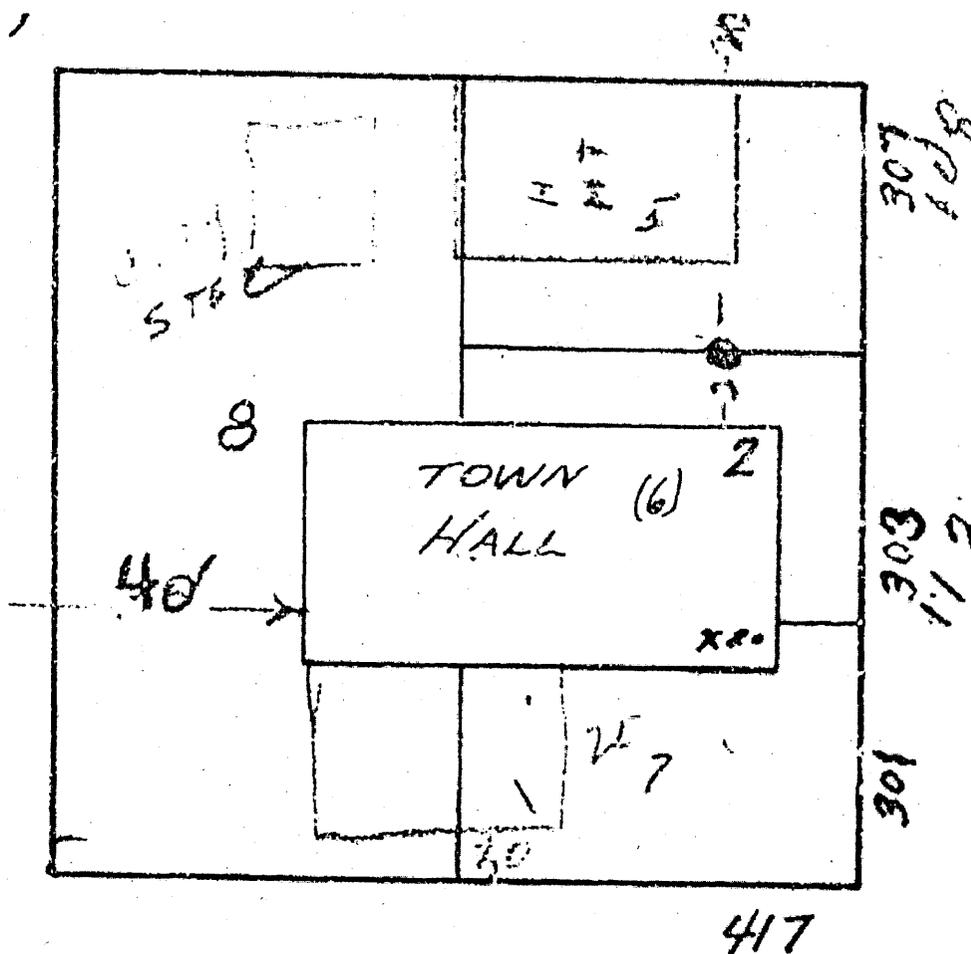
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

## 1934 FIRE INSURANCE MAP UPDATED



This image of the Polk City Schoolhouse-Town Hall pictures the building's footprint in 1934. Roughly drawn lines on its south elevation picture an addition, which was not constructed until 1964.

Source: Iowa Insurance Service Bureau, August 1934 updated to December 1948.



United States Department of the Interior  
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

**HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH**

CIRCA 1908



The outside stairway to the second floor was built in 1908. It was removed in the 1960s. Hitching posts appear in the southwest corner of the Polk City public square in this photo.

Source: *Bridging the Past with the Future.*

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

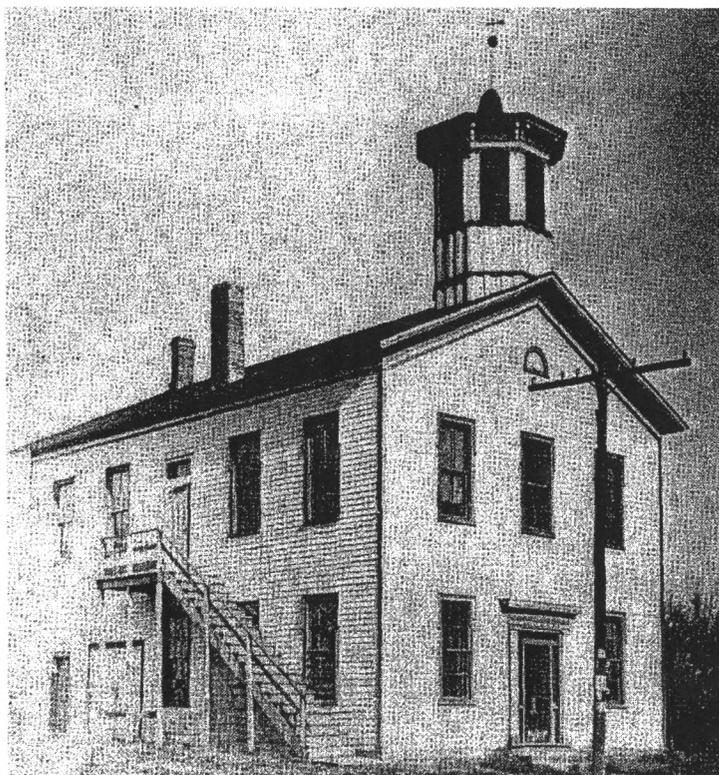
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

### HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH

1915



This photograph pictures the south façade of the building (left) before the 1915 addition to the building that extended it to the rear.

Source: *Bridging the Past with the Future*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

### HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH

CIRCA 1966



This photograph pictures the north façade of the building (right) after the 1915 addition to the rear of the building. Although difficult to detect, the north façade appears to possess six bay openings instead of five. The drawing on the next page pictures them more clearly. The gable end appears now to have a window below the semi-circular blind window.

Source: *Bridging the Past with the Future.*

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

### WAGNER DRAWING

1967



By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Big Creek Schoolhouse had become a landmark in Polk County. William J. Wagner, an early preservationist, selected it as one of his subjects. This and other of his pen and ink drawings were used as calendar art and distributed in the 1960s and 1970s by several savings and loan associations. These pictures promoted the preservation movement in Iowa. This drawing documents six bay openings on the second floor of the building's south facade, as well as the nearby firehouse (right) and single-family dwelling (right), both now nonextant.

Source: *Sixty Sketches of Iowa's Past and Present*.

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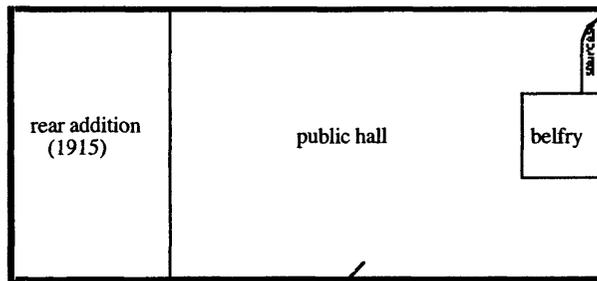
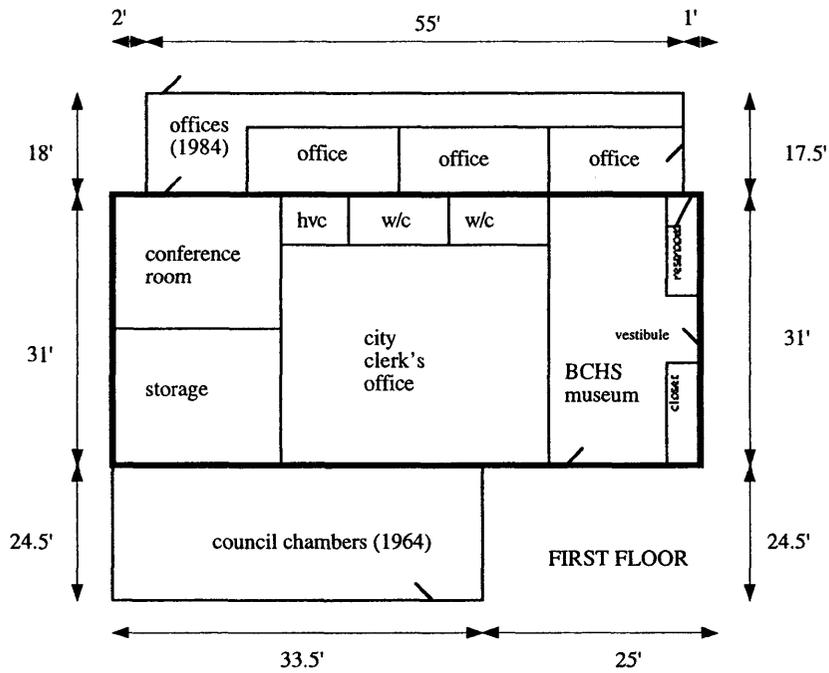
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# FLOOR PLAN SKETCHES

2003



SECOND FLOOR

- = Footprint of historic building (1863 and 1915).
- = 1-story additions

Source: Tom Cox. Not to scale.



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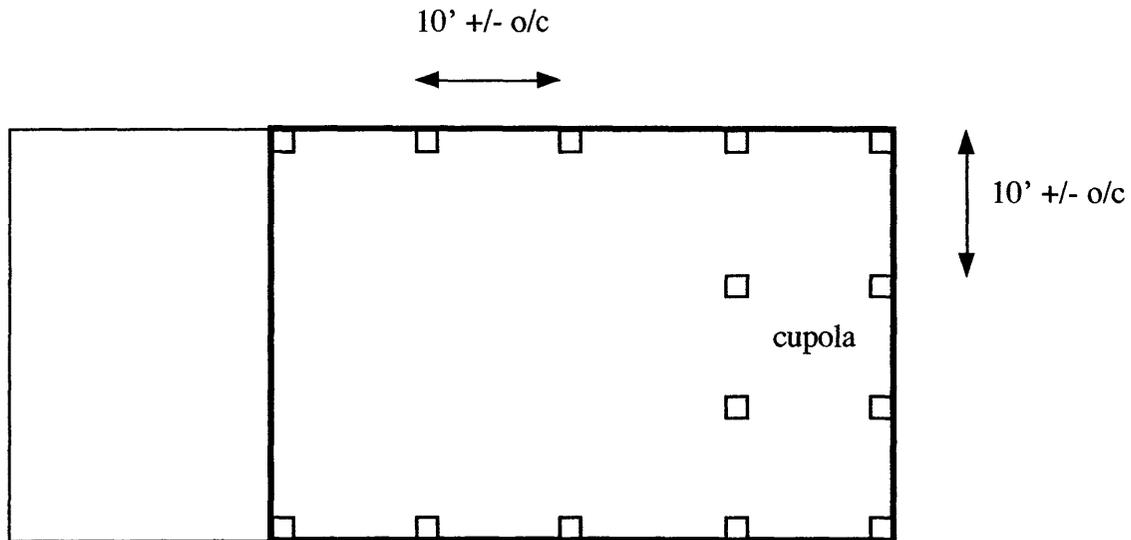
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

## LOCATION OF MAIN POSTS



—— = Footprint of 1863 building.

- - - = Footprint of 1915 addition.



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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

**SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Erected in 1863, the Big Creek Schoolhouse is locally significant, under National Register Criterion A, as the most tangible expression of Polk City's aspirations to become a major metropolis in central Iowa during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the railroads bypassed the community (then known as Big Creek) and scotched these hopes, as the largest building in the community, the Big Creek Schoolhouse became the center for public education, social events, entertainment, and worship. In 1894, the building became Polk City's town hall, and the construction of a two-story, rear addition in 1915, including an auditorium stage, redoubled the building's utility as a community center. Thus, the Big Creek Schoolhouse evolved as a meeting place for village life instead of a magnet for settlement, and in so doing became a potent symbol of the community's common heritage and enterprise.

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is significant on the local level and under National Register Criterion C. It is the finest surviving work of master builder John Adam Schaal. The edifice shows how Schaal used his considerable skills to adapt heavy timber framing for the construction of a schoolhouse.

The period of significance, under Criterion A, is 1863-1954, the historic era when the building served as a community center. The period of significance for the property, under Criterion C, is 1863, the year in which the building was completed and first placed into service. Significant dates include 1863, for the reason mentioned above; 1894, when the building became a town hall; and 1915, when the rear addition was completed.

Criteria Consideration A has been satisfied because this property derives its primary significance from its historical role as a center for education, government, recreation, and culture, and from its construction by John Adam Schaal.

The property contains one resource for this nomination, which is counted as contributing and classified as a building.

**COMMUNITY ENTERPRISE**

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is significant under National Register Criterion A because it calls attention to the aspirations of local residents during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to grow their town into a major metropolis in central Iowa. Although these efforts failed, the Big Creek Schoolhouse evolved as the center of village life in Polk City.

Background

The area around Polk City enjoyed a prominent position as an up-and-coming settlement during the earliest period of Anglo-American settlement in Polk County. In 1843, three commissioners selected Fort Des Moines as the county seat for the newly established Polk County. The commissioners also considered the area around Big Creek (the former name of Polk City) and several others as candidates

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for the designation. A similar event transpired in 1857, when Fort Des Moines was selected over Big Creek as the site to relocate the seat of state government.

During the late 1840s, a settlement cluster had arisen in the Big Creek area, now a part of Madison Township of Polk County. These pioneers hoped to acquire government land to farm. George Beebe was the earliest of these pioneers. In 1848, he built a cabin on land near the Des Moines River. (Hines: n.p.) A county road had been laid out the previous year between Des Moines, Polk City, Swede Point (now named Madrid), and points north. For much of its course, this road formed the route of today's Iowa Highway 415. In 1849, Beebe established a saw mill, powered by steam machinery in Big Creek. By 1874, it had become a large operation, housed in a large 3-story building with attached wings and exceptionally tall chimney.

In 1850, Beebe laid out a town in this area and named it Big Creek. The town's prospects seemed promising because of its location. The Western Stage Company established its route from Des Moines to Boone with Big Creek as a station stop along the way. The ambition and boosterism of Big Creek's community leaders aided its settlement. By 1859, Big Creek boasted the following: three physicians, druggist & grocer, two flour mills, carpenter, wagon makers, livery stable, millinery & dress shop, two harness shops, blacksmiths, four sawmills, hardware store, meat market, several general merchandise establishments, hotel, furniture & undertaker, two carpenters, grocery store, shoe-shop, and a horse mill. (Hines: n.p.)

The construction of the Big Creek Schoolhouse in 1863 contributed to this wave of community growth. Victorian land developers frequently established schools to lure new settlement and economic development. Drake University, Des Moines University, Highland Park College, and Grand View College in 19<sup>th</sup> century Des Moines exemplified this phenomenon. The Big Creek Schoolhouse was intended to serve the same purpose. Earlier examples included the Vernon Schoolhouse and Bentonsport Academy in Van Buren County, and Troy Academy in Davis County, Iowa.

Scotched Aspirations

In spite of Polk City's ambition, serious setbacks occurred to dampen its prospects. In 1846, Fort Des Moines was selected as the county seat for Polk County to the detriment of Big Creek's aspirations. In 1857, the General Assembly of Iowa selected Des Moines for its new capital, again over Big Creek's dreams. The subsequent loss of railroad connections came as a final blow.

The conclusion of the Civil War had ushered in a great era of railroad construction across the nation and in Iowa. Scores of towns and villages arose as newly created station stops. Existing towns now bypassed languished. This is what happened to Polk City. In 1865, the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad built a line from Des Moines to Boone, and two years later, the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific built a line through Des Moines. Both of these roads bypassed Big Creek and wreaked havoc with the community's prospects.

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The arrival of a narrow gauge railroad through Big Creek from Des Moines to Ames in 1874 brought some relief, but when the Chicago Northwestern acquired that line in 1878, the company removed the track, and laid new line to Ames about two miles east of Big Creek. Although outraged local residents responded with a court suit, which forced the railroad to build a spur to Polk City, the community subsequently entered a period of commercial stagnation and population decline. Between 1880 and 1920, the town's population slipped from 443 to 277 residents, a decrease of almost 40%. (Goudy: Table 1) Still, the town survived as a minor market center for the farm families in the surrounding countryside. In 1875, the residents of Big Creek voted at a referendum to incorporate the community as a town and to change its name to Polk City.

Village Hall

The Big Creek Schoolhouse originally served for the education of town children so they could avoid a walk to a country school located north of Big Creek. The building continued to serve as a school until 1893; but it also served multiple purposes because it was the largest public building in the community. During the early years, Rev. D. C. Marts held religious services in the schoolhouse. It was also used for a Sunday school. The first public school master was John Demoss.

The conversion of the building into the town hall for Polk City in 1894 expanded the building's uses and increased its stature as a community symbol. This is an extremely early example of reuse. While the second floor continued to be used as a community center, city offices and a jail were installed on the first floor. The school bell now changed its function and announced fire emergencies instead of class time. As one local resident, born in the 1880s, later recounted, "We'd all grab a pail and run when we heard the bell ring at the 'Old Schoolhouse.'" (Niven Lee quoted by May Belle Davis Larson) This bell remains in the schoolhouse belfry to the present day.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city decided to expand the Big Creek Schoolhouse to increase its utility as a community center. The plan included provisions for a stage to be built on the second floor. (See Section 7.) As city council minutes show, the council carefully deliberated any expenditure of public money for city improvements; and, after making such a decision, sought to obtain the most favorable terms possible for them. Within this context, it is evident that the idea to expand the building struck a popular chord in the community.

In 1915, the new addition was completed. Public entertainments, such as traveling medicine shows, now had a platform for their performances. The second floor continued to serve as a meeting place for social events. It was now also used as a gymnasium for basketball and other sports events and as a roller-skating rink.

Following World War II, the Big Creek Schoolhouse waned as a center for community activities. Modern buildings were constructed with convenient, first floor facilities. In 1966, the outside staircase to the second floor (its only access) was removed, spelling the end to its function as a community center since 1863.

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

**JOHN ADAM SCHAAL**

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is locally significant under National Register Criterion C as the most prominent surviving work of master builder John Adam Schaal. "For a third of a century as a contractor and carpenter, Mr. Schaal was associated in some way with the erection of almost every building in the northern portion of Polk County." (*Des Moines Leader* 1912) Schaal's list of this work (see below) constitutes a rare, surviving record of a Victorian master builder in Iowa. The Big Creek Schoolhouse calls attention to his considerable skills in construction.

Biography

John Adam Schaal (1832-1912) was born in Wuerttemberg, Germany, with the given name "Johann." He emigrated to the United States in 1849. Although Schaal's political leanings as a young man are not presently known, many subjects of Wuerttemberg and other German principalities emigrated abroad following the widespread Revolutions of 1848 in central Europe.

Schaal initially settled in Erie County, Pennsylvania, where he trained and worked as a builder. Although he documented his work there (see below), the present status of these buildings is unknown. In 2003, Zephreny Parmenter of the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office searched that office's historic buildings records for Erie County and Dippert Township (identified in the inventory). No mention of John Adam Schaal was found. Schaal was a young man at this time. He likely served as an apprentice, and buildings would not have been associated with his name.

In 1856, Schaal relocated to Polk County, Iowa, where he became a successful carpenter-builder. He

actively engaged in working at the carpenter's trade, having had the contracts for the majority of the fine farm houses and barns in the [Crocker] township. He has held various offices of trust which conclusively shows the esteem in which he is held by the citizens of his community. January 14, 1858, he married Miriam Lichty, a native of Ohio. They have nine children: John W., Mary S., A. F., Ricka, Elizabeth, Francis D., Caroline, Charles D. and Ernest A. He has a farm of 181 acres, all under fence, the same being well-improved. He has one of the finest farm houses in the township, built by himself. (Union Historical Co.: 991)

Schaal later recorded a list of the buildings he constructed. A transcription of this list follows. This inventory, whose orthography reflects Schaal's native land, constitutes a rare documentation of an early master builder in Iowa and provides an important insight into the early architectural history of Polk City, its environs, and greater Polk County.

Schaal's list includes many property types, including houses, barns, churches, schools, "shops & stores," a scale house, and sheds, but singles out houses and barns as his standard work.

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa

***bueld Houses and Barns  
in Erie County Pa.***

Bueld 1 Hous for Charly Folsom  
Bueld 1 House Fargo Erie co: Pa  
Bueld 1 Harniß Shop for Dippert Pa.  
Bueld 1 House for Sam Merarea Pa.  
Bueld 1 Barn for F[?]rachy Pa.  
Bueld 1 Barn for Robert Chanon  
Bueld 1 Barn for Sqire Nagel  
Bueld 1 House for Sqire Nagel  
Bueld 1 Barn for Jakob Buedler  
Bueld 1 Barn for John Beudler  
Bueld 2 Barn for Jakob Shanon  
Bueld 1 House for Jak Shanon  
Bueld 1 House for Robert Shanon  
Bueld 2 Houses for John Marts  
Bueld 3 Houses for Dafid Marts  
Bueld 2 Barns for Henry Gawner  
Bueld 1 House on Farm for Henry Wagner  
Bueld 1 Barn for Mathias Sexauer  
Bueld 1 Cattel Shead for Math Sexauer  
Bueld 1 Scail Hous for Math Sexauer  
Bueld 1 Hous for Henry Sexauer x1  
Bueld 1 Barn for Georg Shelhard  
Bueld 1 Barn for Manual Joung (Young)  
Bueld 1 Barn for John Wilson  
Bueld 1 Barn for Ira Erwin  
Bueld 1 Barn for Robins  
Bueld 2 Houses for Peter Sutter  
Bueld 1 Barn for Peter Sutter

***John Adam Schaal Bueld Houses and Barns in Iowa***

i bueld 1 Hous for Frank Marts  
i bueld 1 Barn for Frank Marts  
i bueld 1 House for Wirauch  
i bueld 1 Barn for Wirauch  
i bueld 1 Barn for Richard Albrecht  
i bueld 1 Barn Shad for Ed Parmenter  
i bueld 1 Hous for Ed Parmenter  
i bueld 1 Barn for Jim Louis

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i bueld 2 Barns for Conrad Deads  
i bueld 1 Hous for Nofinger  
i bueld 1 Church by Richart Albrecht  
i bueld 1 Hous for Adam Jakobs  
i bueld 1 Hous for Jakob Sexauer  
i bueld 1 Lutheran Church in Des Moines  
i bueld 1 House for Joseph Tira  
i bueld 2 Houses for Plio Okean  
i bueld 1 Hous for John Wartburg  
i bueld 1 Barn for John Wartburg  
i bueld 1 Barn for Ulruh Moeckly  
i bueld 2 Houses for R B. Armstrong (1875)  
i bueld 2 Stoor for R B Armstrong (1875)  
i bueld 2 Barns for Philip Graeber  
i bueld 1 Hous for John Neuschwander (1860)  
i bueld 1 Hous for old Latty old Manz  
I bueld 1 House for Will Latty  
i bueld 1 Hous for Norman Brown  
i bueld 1 Hous for Harison Buechler  
i bueld 1 Hous for Cap Wager  
i bueld 1 Barn for Will Hurbert  
i bueld 1 Hous for Emes Horner  
i bueld 1 Barn for Dafid Mauch  
i bueld 1 Hous for Conrad Intligfert [?]  
i bueld 1 Hous for old McBrid  
i bueld 1 Hous for Frank King  
i bueld 1 Hous for Hafner  
i bueld 1 Hous for tom Mclean  
i bueld 1 Hous for Jim Tomson  
i bueld 1 Hous Brenton Marts  
i bueld 1 Barn for Jeck Marts  
i bueld 1 Barn for Georg Marts  
i bueld 1 Barn for Dafid Marts  
i bueld 1 Barn for Old Buechler  
i bueld 1 Barn for Bill Hanger

i bueld 1 Hous for Stephen Harvey  
i bueld 1 Barn for Stephen Harvey  
i bueld 1 Hous for Ulrich Liechty  
i bueld 1 Barn for Ulrich Liechty  
i bueld 1 Barn for Bristo  
i bueld 1 Hous for Messnert  
1 Druckstoor [drugstore?] for Mathis ? in DesM.  
1 Stoor for N. R. Kuntz in Polk City  
i bueld 1 House for Hulsy near Sheldon  
i bueld 1 Barn for Hariuson Bechler  
i bueld 1 Hous for Peter Bernhardt  
i bueld 1 Barn for Will Earey Sack County  
i bueld 1 Stoor for Isak Williams, Sack co.  
i bueld 1 Hous for Tom Spenzer, Polk City  
i bueld 1 House for Al Dafis  
i bueld 1 Hous for Charly Clark Polk City  
(1863) build 1 School Hous in Polk City  
i bueld 1 Barn for Randolph  
i bueld 1 Barn for Swerdfeger  
1 bueld 1 Stoor Odfellow Polk City  
i bueld 1 Stoor for Kellosen Polk city  
(1868) bueld 1 House for Will D. Schall  
(1868) bueld 1 Barn for Will D. Schaal  
(1868) bueld 1 Cattel shead 100f. long for W. D.  
Schaal  
(1879) bueld 1 Barn for A. J. Schaal  
bueld 1 dobbel corngrib 26-48 f. for J. A. Schaal  
(1858-1867-1876) bueld 3 Houses for J. A. Schaal  
bueld 1 Church in Lincoln twship  
i bueld 4 Schoolhous in Crocker twship  
i bueld 2 Churches in Polk City  
i bueld 1 Harnis Shop for John Fett Polk City  
i bueld 1 Shoo Shop for Scheutz Polk City  
i bueld 1 tinshop in P. city for John Kreptie  
i bueld 1 Hous for N. R. Kuntz Farm  
i bueld 1 Barn for N. R. Kuntz  
i bueld 1 House for Fred Gfeller [illegible] Perie

This list—which attempts to retain Schaal’s original orthography but does not claim perfect transcription—calls attention to the exceptional pride, which Schaal took in his craft, and to his meticulous attention to detail. The several dates supplied above in parentheses were added to the list at a later time by his descendants.

Although most of Schaal’s projects clustered in the Polk City vicinity, they ranged as far north as Sheldahl (having built a house for Hulsy near that town) and Sac County, Iowa, (a barn for Will Earey

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and a store for Isaac Williams). Contracts toward the end of the list tend to be in the Polk City vicinity, although the final entry suggests a building in Dallas County, if "Perie" is intended to indicate Perry, Iowa, which is likely.

This list should not be construed as complete. Virginia L. Schaal has noted that in addition to the barn built by John Adam for Ulrich Moeckly, "It is thought he also built the house even though he doesn't list it." (*Schaal Family History*)

Several, but by no means all, of the 29 structures listed by Schaal in Iowa have been located. Two barns are known to remain extant. The John Wartburg Barn is located on NE 29<sup>th</sup> Street one-quarter mile north of County Road F22 near Elkhart, Iowa. (The Wartburg Farmhouse, also built by Schaal, is no longer standing. An historic photograph pictures it as a gable-front-and wing, 1.5-story frame house.) The Wartburg Barn features heavy timber framing and vertical siding.

The Ulrich Moeckly Barn is located on NW 118<sup>th</sup> Avenue 1.7 miles east of Polk City. It is a large, bank barn with heavy timber framing and vertical siding. A new foundation was built for it following World War II. "It is said that Bullington, John Schaal and Conrad Hug would walk out there carrying their lunch and work all day on the barn." (Hines, n.p.)

Historic photographs survive of the John Adam and Miriam Schaal farm ("the Home Place"). Built in 1876, the farmhouse was a 2-story, gable-front-and wing, frame building. Several 1-story wings were attached at the rear. The barn, built in 1879, featured a stone foundation, bank drive, and board and batten cladding. (*Schaal Family History*) Neither is extant.

R. B. Armstrong, whom Schaal credited with two houses and two stores, was a Polk City medical doctor and a prominent resident of the community. His portrait and a view of his residence and office were included in the 1875 *Andreas Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*. (Andreas: 180) In 1979, Armstrong's small, 1-story, brick office building (one of the two "stores") was relocated from Polk City to Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa. It now serves as part of that outdoor museum complex. In 1875, R. B. Armstrong owned property north of Polk City in Section 18 of Madison Township. (*Ibid.*: 181) This might have been the site of one of Schaal's houses for Armstrong, although nothing of it remains extant.

N. R. Kuntz, whom Schaal credited with one store in Polk City and one house and one barn in the country, was a local merchant. His portrait was also included in the 1875 *Andreas* publication. (*Ibid.*) None of these improvements remains extant. The Ed Parmenter Farmstead ("i bueld 1 Barn Shad," "i bueld 1 Hous") was located in Section 22 of Crocker Township, about two miles west of Downtown Ankeny, Iowa, today. (*Ibid.*) This farmstead is nonextant. Schaal's house for "Old Latty Old Manz" may have been a farmhouse for F. Manz, which stood in Section 20 of Lincoln Township. (*Ibid.*) This building is nonextant.

An historic photograph of the I.O.O.F. Building ("Buld 1 Stoor Odfellow Polk City") pictures a 2-story frame, building with a front gable roof. (Hines: n.p.) The second floor housed the lodge hall; the

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first floor housed a druggist. Fire destroyed this building in 1902. It stood on the east side of the square south of the alley.

Other descriptions survive of buildings erected by Schaal:

Several old landmarks, beside the house I was born in, are still standing. Most of them were built by my father. One, the old Neuschwander house & large barn, are at the present time [1930s] being improved and converted into a summer home for some capitalist. It has a magnificent, vaulted cellar under the house, walled and arched with cap-stones supporting or binding the masonry, built in 1860. It is 1/4 mile from my old home.

Another old house—the Beebe home. It was always designated “where the Mormon family lives” by people passing thru. It is at the top of the hill at the entrance to town of Polk. Still another is the old Tavern; and the old Schoolhouse—where I went to School the year I lived in Polk with my parents. It is at present serving as the city hall. When my father was building this school house, he took his oldest son on the roof where the men were laying shingles and had him drive nails in a group of them, saying to his 7 year old son he would never forget the adventure; and he never has. The largest building my father ever helped erect was his father-in-law’s barn. It is not standing—having been destroyed by a cyclone after grandfather moved to Oregon. (Mary S. Rogers in *Schaal Family History*)

The Schaal list contains four schoolhouses in Crocker Township. By 1875, nine schoolhouses stood in the township. (*Ibid.*) None of these remains extant. Of course Schaal’s buildings might have been constructed at a later time.

Schaal’s daughter later described his work method:

He would walk miles, Monday morning, to some out of the way prairie farm which was being built up into a home, and would not return until Saturday unless the distance was less than 5 miles. (*Ibid.*)

Construction and Architectural Design

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is architecturally significant because it shows how John Adam Schaal employed heavy timber framing to construct a public building. Few heavy timber frame buildings survive in central Iowa from the Civil War era, and the Big Creek Schoolhouse calls attention to this building technique.

The two-story portion of the building possesses a series of heavy timber main posts. (See Continuation Sheet 7-17.) These posts support heavy timber beams, which run the width of the building. The joists for the second floor rest on these beams. The floor joists run the length of the building.

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The timber used for the schoolhouse was taken from the area known today as Sandpiper Beach along the shores of Saylorville Lake. George Beebe's saw mill likely cut this timber for Schaal's use.

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is sometimes claimed locally to be the largest walnut structure "in Iowa" and/or "in the world." Such claims notwithstanding, the fact remains that local residents have associated the lusty employment of this first growth timber as part of the building's significance, particularly in light of that material's subsequent value as a cabinet wood. This extravagant use later saved the building, when the local American Legion in Polk City in the late 1940s proposed to remodel it substantially. The plan was shelved because the building's heavy timber construction posed structural problems for the scheme.

The structural integrity of the Big Creek Schoolhouse was confirmed in the late 1990s, when civil engineers, hired to evaluate the stability of the building, pronounced its walnut framing to be fast and firm. Although metal siding currently slipcovers the building, its original walnut clapboard remains intact underneath it.

Schoolhouse

Schaal used the time-honored conceit for schoolhouses—a belfry—as an architectural feature to denote the function of the Big Creek Schoolhouse. Its design includes an octagonal-shaped cupola with wide eaves supported by paired brackets. As the most detailed feature of the building, the belfry draws the viewer's eye upward and visually resonates its purpose to the viewer's ears.

The design of this belfry stands in nice comparison with that of Schaal's Polk City Methodist Episcopal Church. This church is attributed to John Adam Schaal by the writer as one of the two churches he built in Polk City. This attribution is justified by the building's date of early construction and its design.

Built in 1866 and now nonextant, the Polk City Methodist Episcopal Church stood on the southeast corner of the public square in Polk City. It visually anchored the south side of the square as the schoolhouse anchored its north side. An historic picture of the church reveals its architectural design. (See Continuation Sheet 8-32.) This 1-story, frame building features a front gable façade surmounted with a belfry and crowned by a steeple.

The belfries of the church and the schoolhouse are remarkably alike. Both are octagonal in plan and feature wide eaves supported by paired brackets and louvered openings. For good lines, the school's belfry is somewhat taller than the church's, where the steeple achieves those ends.

For the church, however, Schaal has placed eight dormers above the belfry as to transition its octagonal shape to that of the coned-shaped steeple. Their steep pitch lends a feeling of Gothic Revival to the building. The arched windows on the façade and the arched openings to the belfry further accentuate this.

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Already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, employed a bell tower to announce the building's purpose and lend authority to it. American town halls and meetinghouses employed bell towers for a similar reason. The steeple dates to a much earlier time and signals the viewer's attention to heaven. Both of these architectural devices were likely known to John Adam Schaal as a boy in Germany and reinforced on him in Pennsylvania. What makes the Big Creek Schoolhouse significant within this context is that Schaal transplanted these building traditions to a small village on the Iowa frontier during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Questions about the Big Creek Schoolhouse remain unanswered. Was a plan book the source of design for the building? Did John Adam Schaal build the schoolhouse as a speculation? Did Schaal employ the same framing technique for the Big Creek Schoolhouse, which he employed for barn construction? These questions provide the subject matter for further investigation.

Greek Revival Style

The Big Creek Schoolhouse shows the influence of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Greek Revival styling on its design. The most pronounced element of this influence is the building's principal façade, which presents the image of a classic Greek temple. The placement of the building's main entrance in the middle of the primary façade lends symmetry to the design. The two engaged piers flanked by sidelights, which historic photos show framing the main entrance, are other popular features of the style. These photos picture shouldered architrave trim, which cap the windows on the primary façade, another Greek Revival influenced feature. The blind demi-lune window, which these same photos picture, is suggestive of a pediment, which in a more developed example of the style would be present. (The removal of the vinyl siding, which presently clads these areas of the building, would reveal whether these decorative features remain extant.) The moderately pitched roof gives the building a classical feeling, which stands in marked contrast to later Victorian styles such as the Gothic Revival, Romanesque Revival, and Chateau, where the roof becomes a more important design element with steep pitches and massive lines.

Finally, the cupola, which caps the building and lends an air of authority to it, is redolent of other Greek Revival government buildings, like the Tennessee State Capitol Building at Nashville, the Old Capitol at Iowa City, and other public buildings constructed across the nation from the 1820s to the 1860s. As John J.-G. Blumenson has written, Greek Revival styling "was ideal for state capitols in the young United States, when the idea of democracy still seemed to excite and motivate citizens and elected officials alike." (Blumenson: 27) The design of the Big Creek Schoolhouse achieved that same end at the time of its construction and continues to exert a feeling of authority and presence to the present day.

Another early building by John Adam Schaal reflects the influence of Greek Revival styling on its design. In 1858, Schaal built a 1-story, frame house for his family on the east side of Big Creek about one mile east of Polk City. It featured a side-gable roof and a symmetrical front façade with front door flanked by windows. Cornice returns on the gable ends are simple yet characteristic details of Greek Revival influence on vernacular architecture in Iowa. The Schaals lived there until 1867, when they

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moved into Polk City. This house itself was later moved into Polk City, as a photograph of it in 1943 attests. (*Schaal Family History*) Its present status is unknown.

Architectural Context

The Big Creek Schoolhouse is among a rare group of early, 2-story Iowa schoolhouses. Few such Civil War or pre-Civil War era schoolhouses remain extant. They include the Bentonsport Academy (NRHP), a brick structure with a bell tower and Italianate detailing in Van Buren County; the Troy Academy (NRHP) in Davis County, a 2-story, frame structure with a bell tower with Gothic Revival-inspired, arched windows; the Maysville School in Franklin County (NRHP), constructed to provide employment for veterans returning home from the Civil War; and the Lansing Schoolhouse in Lansing, Allamakee County, a stone structure. Each of these buildings is unique among its peers for the reasons mentioned. Also noteworthy is the diversity of their building materials—stone, brick, and frame—yet fashioned employing the commonality of a rectangular footprint with the narrow end forming the main façade. The bell tower stands as another point in common. While conforming to this pattern, the Big Creek Schoolhouse is distinctive within this context because of its site. The building's placement next to the town square lends an air of authority to it as an institution central to the community.

Within the context of John Adam Schaal's own work, the Big Creek Schoolhouse is one among five schoolhouses listed on his opus--four in Crocker Township and one in Polk City. The former included the Schaal Schoolhouse and the Marts Schoolhouse outside Polk City (Rogers in *Schaal Family History*), which were country schools, frame, and 1-story in height. None is known to remain extant. The Big Creek Schoolhouse is exceptional within this context because of its size and prominent location facing a town square.

**POTENTIAL FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY**

The site's potential for archaeological significance is, as yet, unevaluated. Historical archaeological investigations may uncover traces of previous construction on the site--such as privies or other nonextant outbuildings.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND REGISTRATION**

The work of John Adam Schaal deserves further survey and evaluation work. This will require intensive research and fieldwork. A good beginning would be determining the whereabouts of the buildings enumerated on the list of his work, transcribed above. Land records should help in this identification.

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author acknowledges with appreciation the assistance of the Big Creek Historical Society, which underwrote this nomination and contributed to its preparation, and to the City of Polk City, Mary Burton, Mayor, for supporting the nomination.

Tom J. Cox, president of the BCHS, researched city council minutes and uncovered a mine of buried information about the building's evolution during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thanks are also due to local historian Dixie J. Hines, chairperson, and the 1975 Centennial Committee, for the publication of a local history of Polk City in celebration of its first 100 years.

Finally, Mabel Hudson and Virginia L. Schaal, granddaughters of John Adam Schaal, and other of his descendants, deserve special commendation for their extensive genealogical research and written compilation of their family history. (*Schaal Family History*) This multi-volume work leaves no doubt about the significance of John Adam Schaal for local history.



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### SCHAAL FAMILY

1886



Left to right (seated) Ernie, Mary, John Adam, Bernice, Robert (at J.A.'s feet), Miriam, Charles.  
(Standing) Elizabeth, Fred, Rica, Will, Carrie, David.

Source: Family Scrapbook.

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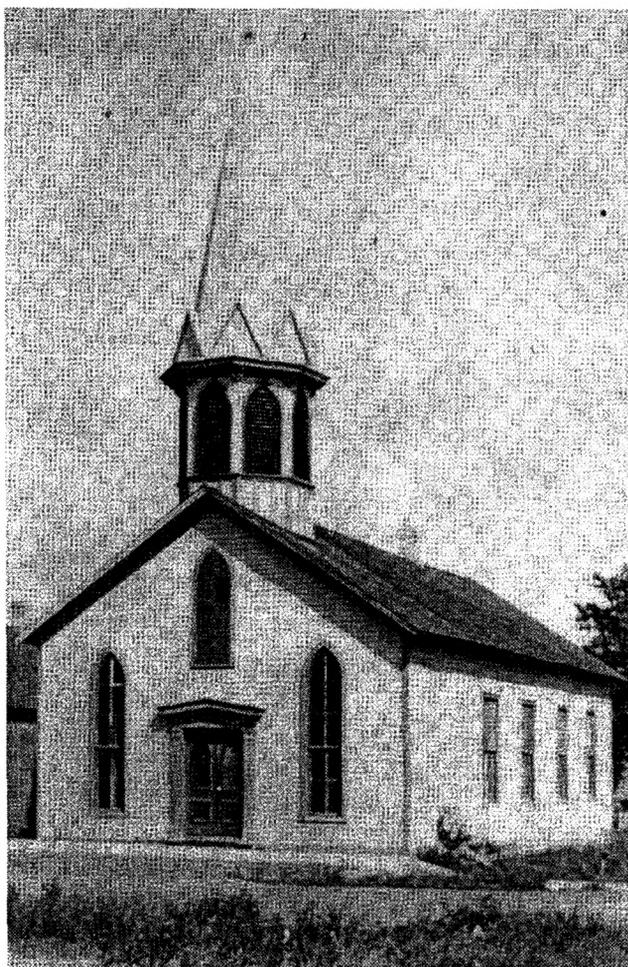
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# METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

CIRCA 1900



The Methodist Episcopal Church in Polk City, built by John Adam Schaal in 1866, stood on the southeast corner of the public square. The building is nonextant.

Source: *Bridging the Past with the Future.*

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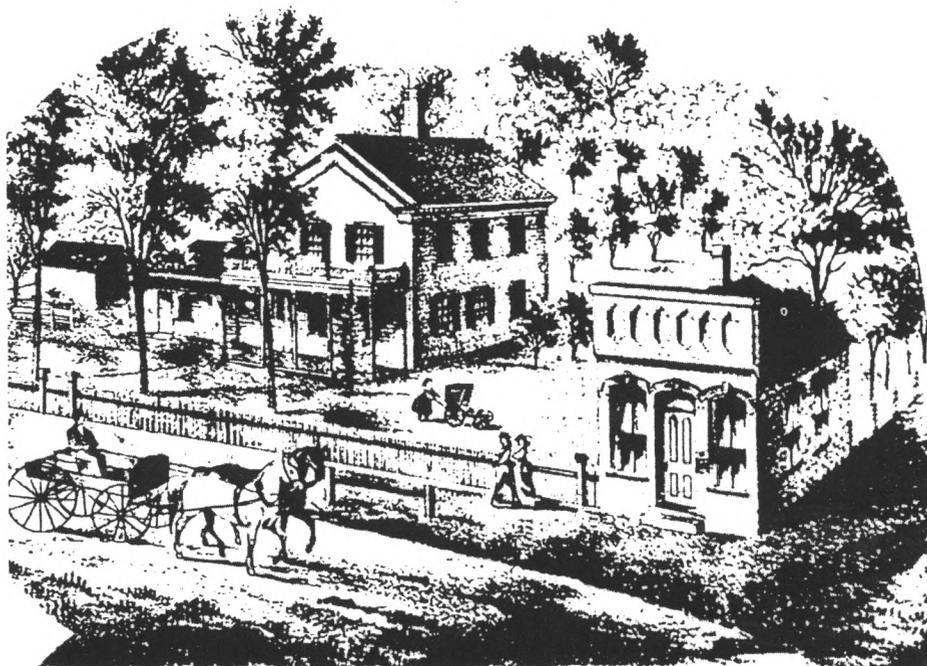
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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

### “BUELD 2 HOUSES, 2 STOOR FOR R. B. ARMSTRONG”

1875



OFFICE AND RESIDENCE OF R. B. ARMSTRONG, M. D., Polk City, Polk Co.

This historic view pictures Dr. Armstrong's residence and office in Polk City, built by John Adam Schaal. The office was dismantled and re-erected at Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa, in 1979. The house is nonextant.

Source: *Andreas Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa.*

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

#### **ORAL HISTORY**

Cox, Tom J., with William C. Page, various times during 2002 and 2003. Cox is president of the Big Creek Historical Society. He shared information about the Big Creek Schoolhouse he had gathered and the work of the Big Creek Historical Society to convert the building into a local history museum.

Huennekens, James E., with William C. Page, March 6, 2003. Huennekens, long-time resident of Polk City, shared information about the Big Creek Schoolhouse and the evolution of its uses and alterations.

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

Lots 5, 6, 7, and 8 in Block 10 in the Original Town of Polk City, Iowa.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The boundaries contain all the land historically associated with the resource.

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Big Creek Schoolhouse, Polk County, Iowa.

### **LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS**

1. Big Creek Schoolhouse  
112 South 3<sup>rd</sup> Street  
Polk City, IA 50226  
Looking west  
William C. Page, Photographer  
May 1, 2003
  
2. Big Creek Schoolhouse  
112 South 3<sup>rd</sup> Street  
Polk City, IA 50226  
Looking north  
William C. Page, Photographer  
May 1, 2003
  
3. Big Creek Schoolhouse  
112 South 3<sup>rd</sup> Street  
Polk City, IA 50226  
Looking east  
William C. Page, Photographer  
May 1, 2003
  
4. Big Creek Schoolhouse  
112 South 3<sup>rd</sup> Street  
Polk City, IA 50226  
Interior detail: original 4/4 double-hung sash,  
First floor storage room  
Looking east  
William C. Page, Photographer  
May 1, 2003