

SEP 23 2008

NPS Form 10-900  
No. 1024-0018  
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

1042



### 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 any 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 Hobson Block  
other names/site number Woodard Insurance and Real Estate

#### 2. Location

street & number 110-114 South Vine Street not for publication N/A  
city or town West Union vicinity N/A  
state Iowa code IA county Fayette code 065 zip code 52175

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets      does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant      nationally      statewide X locally. (     See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Bonnie A. Mitchell, DSHPO Sept. 29, 2008  
Signature of certifying official Date

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA  
State or Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register  
     See continuation sheet.  
     determined eligible for the  
National Register  
     See continuation sheet.  
     determined not eligible for the  
National Register  
     removed from the National Register  
     other (explain):     

Signature of Keeper Sinda McClelland Date of Action 11/07/08

Hobson Block  
Name of Property

Fayette Iowa  
County and State

**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**

Contributing Noncontributing

- |             |             |            |
|-------------|-------------|------------|
| <u>1</u>    | <u>1</u>    | buildings  |
| <u>    </u> | <u>    </u> | sites      |
| <u>    </u> | <u>    </u> | structures |
| <u>    </u> | <u>    </u> | objects    |
| <u>1</u>    | <u>1</u>    | Total      |

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

Iowa's Main Street Commercial Architecture

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

- COMMERCE/TRADE/professional
- COMMERCE/TRADE/business
- DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling
- 
- 
- 

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

- COMMERCE/TRADE/professional
- COMMERCE/TRADE/business
- DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling
- 
- 
- 

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE VICTORIAN  
      
    

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK  
roof WOOD  
  
walls BRICK  
STONE  
other GLASS  
    

**Narrative Description**

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

Hobson Block  
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**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.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE  
COMMERCE

**Period of Significance**

1885

**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 a 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.

**Significant Dates**

1885

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Hobson, Joseph

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Easton, Edward

**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:

Hobson Block  
Name of Property

Fayette Iowa  
County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone Easting	Zone Northing		Zone Easting	Zone Northing
1	<u>15</u>	<u>597182</u>	<u>4757139</u>	3	_____
2	_____	_____	_____	4	_____

\_\_\_\_ 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 Olive Nash/Historian and Architectural Historian w/ assistance by Jennifer A. Price

organization Tallgrass Historians L.C. date January 2008

street & number 2460 S. Riverside Drive telephone 319.354.6722

city or town Iowa City state IA zip code 52246

**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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name Richard O. Woodard

street & number 114 S. Vine St. telephone 563.422.3831

city or town West Union state IA zip code 52175

=====  
**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 the 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 Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Hobson Block  
name of property

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## 7. Description

### *Summary Paragraph*

The Hobson Block commercial building sits in the center of West Union, the government seat of Fayette County, Iowa. Located on South Vine Street (the town's *de facto* Main Street), Hobson Block occupies a position in the center of a block that itself is centrally located within the town's 3-block long commercial district. This district is adjacent to and partially wrapped around the courthouse green square. Hobson Block overlooks Vine Street, which gently slopes to the south, and building and street are separated only by a wide concrete sidewalk. The attached commercial buildings on either side of the two-story Hobson Block are shorter, which is especially noticeable in the modest single-story storefront on Hobson Block's north side. Hobson Block's façade appears to be divided into three separate storefronts with three doorways, though the interior has been reduced to only two separate commercial suites. The middle sidewalk doorway now leads to a stairway to the upper floor apartments. Behind the building a combination of gravel and concrete covers the parking yard between the building and the alley. A newer non-contributing garage is located on the alley behind the building. Clad in modern siding, with a modern overhead door, this 1940 garage sits on a raised foundation necessitated by the slope of the alley. Though the raised foundation has a concrete smear on it, an exposed area where the smear has fallen away shows limestone and suggests this garage sits on the reused foundation of an earlier stable or outbuilding.

### *Exterior*

Constructed in 1885, the commercial building's façade is heavily decorated, while its side and rear walls are completely utilitarian. The windowless side walls are painted white, divided into three bays by pilasters/chimney stacks, and capped at the roof by clay tile coping. The rear wall is also painted white and contains tall window openings with segmental arch headers. Most of these rear windows have been reduced with smaller sashes or filled in. A single-story brick addition built in the 1910s projects from the central area of the rear wall; its tall windows are filled in with glass block, and its wide delivery door has been filled in with wood and a smaller pass door.<sup>1</sup> Foundation material where visible appears to be brick.

The façade of this Victorian building has decorative and structural elements that combine both the Italianate and Queen Anne styles of the late nineteenth century (Fig. 1). Its mid-1880s construction date and the heavy attention paid to decoration at the roofline suggests the Italianate mode, while the asymmetrical fenestration and rich surface textures created by mixing masonry materials are hallmarks of the Queen Anne style.<sup>2</sup> The façade's brick courses reveal stretcher sides only, suggesting the wall is veneered or, at the very least, tied to inner-wall bricks by means other than turning bricks to headers every few courses (the owner believes the walls are solid brick). Elaborate brick corbelling, rectangular clay tile plaques, and stone belt courses set up a horizontal pattern, while brick pilasters capped by rooftop entablature blocks and finials emphasize the vertical divisions. Until a wind storm blew them off in the 1930s, finials capped each pilaster. Today they are found only at each end wall and the central pilaster.<sup>3</sup> This current arrangement of finials results in the *apparent* division of the building—at least at the roof level—into two equal units. Below these finials, however, this balance dissolves and the building is better “read” as having three slightly unequal units, defined by street-level storefronts and their associated second-story windows. These three units are deciphered by locating brick pilasters at the street level and following them to the roof. From south to north (left to right in Fig. 1), the storefront widths are 12 feet, 15 feet, and 20 feet. The north unit is the most symmetrical and balanced, with a recessed central doorway flanked by two equal display windows, and, overhead, three evenly spaced windows (though the

<sup>1</sup> Sanborn Map Company, fire insurance maps of West Union, Iowa, 1913-1929.

<sup>2</sup> William Plymat Jr. *Victorian Architecture in Iowa* (Des Moines: Palladian Publishing Company, 1997), 55-59, 78-79. Also, Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The Queen Anne Movement, 1860-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, reprinted 1990), especially Chapter 9. “Queen Anne in America,” 208-223. Reprint used.

<sup>3</sup> Replacement of the missing finials in underway by the property owner.

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center one is slightly wider than those on either side). The middle and southern units are near twins, each with a street-level



**Figure 1 The front of Hobson Block. The building faces east. (Tallgrass Historians L.C., 2007)**

doorway placed to the north (right) end and two large display windows to the south (left).

Except in one location, cast iron columns divide the street-level interstices of the three units. Overhead, the associated second-story windows show more variation. The three windows in the central unit are the same size, but the window over the door is separated from the other two by a brick pilaster, while the other two windows sit close together and are separated from each other by only a cast iron column. This two/one arrangement of windows is repeated on the south (left) unit too, but the window over the street door is much narrower than any of the other windows on the second floor, remarkably so.

Decorative finishes on the façade enhance this complicated structural arrangement. Cast iron columns all have patterned features that have been painted recently in colors that bring out the detail. Patterns include a circular floral medallion, floral tendrils, a shell motif, and pyramidal shapes. Clay tile panels over the second-floor windows have an acanthus leaf design. Ornate brick corbelling at the rooftop includes several rows of progressively cantilevered courses and a jagged mouse-tooth course, accomplished by angling the bricks to reveal their corners. Over the brick corbelling is a stamped metal cornice and the metal finials. The finial shape is a square block faced with a floral medallion and capped with a pyramidal peak.

Interior

Currently the building's ground floor houses the Woodard Real Estate & Insurance agency at 114 S. Vine Street, and the Bauer & Kloster Inc. business at 110 S. Vine Street, while there are three apartments on the second floor, accessed through the

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door marked by the address numerals "112 ½."

The ground floor interior is divided into three sections. Bauer & Kloster Inc. occupies the north section, which has been completely remodeled. Inside that space, a reception area is located near the front entrance and offices line up behind it along the north side wall. One of two stairways to the upstairs apartments is located through the middle façade door (the other stairway is in the south rear corner of the building). No access to either the ground floor or the basement level is possible through this Vine Street apartment entrance and stairway. Behind the enclosed stairwell, the other interior rooms in this middle section are now associated with the businesses to either side. Along the southern edge of the middle section, a hallway runs from the front of the building to the offices in the rear addition. The southern section of the building, which houses part of the Woodard Real Estate & Insurance business, includes a small enclosed vestibule or entryway leading into a reception area. The entryway and reception area both have original woodwork on the ceiling and walls. Two original doors, both with original transom windows, are also located in the reception area, one leading in from the entryway and one between the reception area and a hallway leading to the back of the building. An original 8' by 9' steel vault is located approximately 20 feet from the front of the building along the back wall of the reception area. The vault was built by Hall's Safe & Lock Company from Cincinnati and Chicago and installed for Joseph Hobson's needs. Its weight necessitated strengthening the floor with two brick barrel-vault arches in the basement directly under it.<sup>4</sup>

The basement of the building is also divided into three sections, one under each section on the main floor. Interior basement stairways lead up to the first floor of the building from the middle section. Access to the south section of the basement is by an exterior stairwell in the rear south corner of the building. In addition to the brick arches in the south section, other early or original features still exist in the basement. Arched doorways, for example, are still present in the brick walls, though they are now filled with rectangular doors. Also, the ceiling in the middle section of the basement remains partially covered with decorative metal panels. This area originally housed the "press room" for the *Argo* newspaper run by Joseph Hobson's two sons.<sup>5</sup>

On the second floor, the three apartments are accessed by a gateleg hallway that connects front and rear stairways. Finishes have been updated and remodeled. Room and corridor arrangements have been altered to accommodate the current use.

Garage

Behind the Hobson Block, a newer garage is located on the alley that runs through the center of the block on a north/south axis. Clad in modern siding, with a modern overhead door, this 1940 garage sits on a raised foundation necessitated by the slope of the alley (Fig. 2). Though the raised foundation has a concrete smear on it, an exposed area where the smear has fallen away shows limestone and suggests this garage sits on the reused foundation of an earlier stable or outbuilding.

Integrity

All seven aspects of integrity (location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association) are maintained at good to excellent levels. Hobson Block sits in its original location and, because it is surrounded by a historic streetscape of neighboring buildings, Hobson Block has excellent integrity of setting and feeling as well. Hobson Block's design elements and materials are intact or, in some cases, replaced in kind where missing or deteriorated. A recent rehabilitation resulted in a

<sup>4</sup> Provenance of the vault is confirmed by signage on the vault itself, and reference to it in the November 20, 1885 issue of the *West Union Gazette*.

<sup>5</sup> The *Argo* occupied the central unit of the building. Its quarters were described as: "The next room is the *Argo* office, with sanctum in the front, composing room in the rear, and press room in the basement, all appropriately finished for their respective purposes, roomy, light and airy." "The Hobson Block," *West Union Gazette*, November 20, 1885.

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number of inappropriate street-level storefront alterations being replaced with more historically appropriate storefront arrangements, including new tinted display- and transom-glass. Significantly, a fourth façade entrance, located just south of the present middle door and used for access into the central store unit, was replaced by a large display window. This brought the fenestration back to the original configuration. All of the present street-level façade doors are new and a result of the recent rehabilitation. At least one wooden, 5-panel door, which may have been original, was replaced. Second floor façade windows now hold single-light sashes, which are second or third generation replacements for the original 1885 glazing (likely at least 2x2 sashes). Because of the high integrity of the masonry, observed in the brickwork, the stone trim, and the decorative plaques, integrity of workmanship is excellent. As the only known commercial edifice that remains to reflect Joseph Hobson's professional life, Hobson Block has excellent integrity of association as well. A comparison of historic streetscape photographs (Fig. 3) with more current ones taken just before the rehabilitation project strongly suggests the building's current appearance and setting closely resemble those of the original commercial building designed by architect Edward Easton for Joseph Hobson. Figure 4 reflects the current, post-rehabilitated streetscape appearance.

Hobson Block as a Property Type within the Iowa's Main Street Commercial Architecture MPDF

Hobson Block is a good example of Property Type III,<sup>6</sup> a second generation building constructed as a brick replacement for buildings lost in a fire. It is multi-story in height, contains more than one storefront, and was constructed as a "block" with unifying architectural details. Further, its stylish façade suggests both the influence of national trends and the desire to demonstrate commercial success.



**Figure 2 The garage located behind the Hobson Block faces north. In this view, the camera is looking south, down the alley. (Tallgrass Historians L.C., 2007)**

<sup>6</sup> Jan Olive Nash, *Iowa's Main Street Commercial Architecture* (National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2002), Section 7, pages 40-42.

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**Figure 3** The Hobson Block is the fifth building from the right side. Its multiple finials are still present in this image from the turn of the last century. This view looks south, down Vine Street. (Woodard collection)



**Figure 4** Hobson Block, seen in this current photograph, is one of the most intact commercial buildings in this block of Vine Street. Many of the other buildings have lost the pressed metal cornices seen in the historic image in Fig. 3. The bright white building in mid-block is the Bank Block. (Tallgrass Historians L.C., 2007)

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**8. Narrative Statement of Significance**

*Summary Paragraph*

Constructed in 1885, Hobson Block is locally significant and individually eligible under Criterion C as a good example of Late Victorian commercial architecture as constructed in the small towns of Iowa by prospering merchants and professional leaders. Designed by the locally prominent carpenter-turned-architect Edward Easton, this stylish brick and stone commercial block rose from the ashes of a conflagration that destroyed a number of older wooden stores on the block. Hobson Block's heavily ornamented façade signified the sophistication of Easton as a local designer, as well as the success of its owner, Joseph Hobson, a lawyer, real estate speculator, and politician who was riding the crest of his professional career in 1885. Hobson Block is also eligible as a "Property Type III" building under the *Iowa's Main Street Commercial Architecture* Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF, 2002). It fits the description of such a property type and meets the registration requirements for significance under Criteria B and C. The Criterion B registration requirement of the MPDF, at page 41, states "Resources will have an association with important business men or women, the town's founder, or other key individual responsible for establishing the location and configuration of the town's Main Street." Joseph Hobson's residence is nonextant, no other extant building associated with Hobson has been identified, and the nominated building is the building used by Hobson for his professional activities leaving it the building that best reflects his business activities in West Union. The historic commercial district surrounding Hobson Block still contains many historically and architecturally important buildings, with varying degrees of integrity, but Hobson Block remains one of the most distinctive and intact commercial edifices in the district.

*Joseph Hobson and Early West Union*

By the time 35-year-old Joseph Hobson arrived in West Union, in 1858, to work at the county's new courthouse as the elected clerk of the district court, he had already traveled a long migratory path from his birthplace in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, acquiring a variety of skills along the way. Apprenticed as a boy to a cabinetmaker, Hobson expanded his training by learning carpentry. At age 25, Hobson was in rural southwest Pennsylvania working as a carpenter, acting as a partner in a foundry business, and, in his spare time, "reading the law" privately to learn the profession. Five years later, in 1853, Hobson moved to Cleveland, Ohio, to manage a brother-in-law's "building operations." After stopping briefly in Michigan, Hobson traveled on to Iowa in 1855 and settled on 240 acres of wide-open, level, and unplowed prairie 15 miles south of West Union. Over the next two years, Hobson built a residence and improved his land, traveling to the government land office in Dubuque to formally purchase his claim and receive his land patent on April 15, 1857. But still he was not satisfied, so Hobson rented his farm and moved four miles north to the nascent village of Westfield (now Fayette), where he opened a law office, taught school, and edited a newspaper all at the same time. He also ran for clerk of the state district court, an election he won in 1858.<sup>1</sup>

The village of West Union, to which Hobson moved as the new clerk of court and where he would live out his days, must have been a bustling town in 1858. Much of this general territory, including the southern portion of Fayette County, had been opened to eastern settlers with the 1832 Black Hawk Purchase, but the West Union town site remained within what the nineteenth-century historian and publisher A.T. Andreas called the "Reserve." Land within the Reserve, Andreas wrote, "was

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<sup>1</sup> *The United States Biographical Dictionary*, Iowa Volume (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing Company, 1878), 153-154; "Joseph Hobson," *History of Fayette County* (1910), accessed at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~iafayett/fhobson.htm> on December 27, 2007 (the title of the book used as the source for this website may actually be *Past and Present of Fayette County, Iowa*); "GLO Vegetation: Fayette County, Iowa," *Historic Vegetation of Iowa, 1832-1859* (accessed at <http://www.glo.gis.iastate.edu/maps/fayette> on January 17, 2008; *Patent Records*, Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records, accessed at <http://www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov> on January 17, 2008.

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in complete possession of the Winnebago Indians until their removal in 1848.”<sup>2</sup> Settlers flowed onto the Reserve with the Winnebago departure, and quickly established many of the settlements that became the area’s permanent towns, including Elgin in 1848, Clermont in 1849, and Knob Hill (renamed West Union) also in 1849.<sup>3</sup> A year later, the county was formally organized and the next year, 1851, West Union was named county seat. Despite periodic petitions from disgruntled citizens of more centrally-located villages, West Union never lost its coveted government status. Antebellum politics prompted a number of small newspapers to publish weeklies in West Union and declare either their Republican (the party of Lincoln) or Democratic sympathies. The *Pioneer*, the town’s first newspaper, with Democratic leanings, issued its inaugural weekly in 1854.<sup>4</sup> That same year, one of the original three landowners in the West Union area platted his first addition to the town, suggesting vigorous town growth.<sup>5</sup>

Construction on the county’s first courthouse, to be located on the rise or knob after which the settlement was named, commenced late in 1856. Joseph Hobson would both practice law and manage the court’s affairs in this building until 1869, when he was elected to serve one term in the state legislature. Hobson went on to serve a three year federal appointment as the United States Assessor for the Third District, and then joined with his former deputy clerk of court, William Cowle, in a real estate and law partnership in West Union. Together with Samuel B. Zeigler, another lawyer and land broker, Hobson figured prominently in the town’s financial and real estate affairs throughout the 1870s, a period of growth marked by the arrival of the first railroad and the formation of two banks in town. The first bank, with a national charter, was organized in 1872, the same year the railroad arrived. Hobson served as the president and Zeigler as vice president. Three years later, the two men assumed the reverse positions in a newly formed savings bank. Hobson’s status as banker, land agent, and lawyer in a county seat town growing with the arrival of the railroad certainly ensured his personal prosperity.<sup>6</sup>

Hobson and his law partner moved their practice into a new brick commercial block built in 1874 by his other professional colleague, Samuel B. Zeigler. This extant two-story building, known as the Bank Block, still occupies a wide expanse of Vine Street frontage and when built also housed “Zeigler’s Hall” and a music academy on the upper floors, while hardware, drug, and dry goods stores, and the Fayette County National Bank divided the street-level space. By the early 1880s, however, Hobson and Cowle had moved next door to their own, smaller wood-frame building—perhaps to have a sidewalk presence. When fire broke out in the downtown commercial district, this wooden building was one of several lost in the disaster.<sup>7</sup> Soon after the fire, Joseph Hobson constructed his new Hobson Block, the subject of this nomination.

<sup>2</sup> A.T. Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*. (1875. Reprinted Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1970), 458-459.

<sup>3</sup> The new town’s location was the decision of three land speculators, William Wells, Jacob LyBrand, and J.W. Rogers, who settled on the highest point of a wide ridge of land between the Otter and Glover creek drainage valleys. The bigger watercourse, Otter Creek, was located downhill to the south about a half a mile. Back to the east, towards the Mississippi River and the place from which these settlers came, the land quickly reverted to rugged valleys and heavy forest. However, the spot chosen by Wells, LyBrand, and Rogers, was at the edge of the great western prairie, a place that promised both the physical resources they would need to attract additional settlers (a mix of timber and flat prairie; ample water; and deer, turkey, and other wildlife), and the psychological comfort of not being too far out into the vast sea of tallgrass prairie. It would be up to later arrivals to move away from the forest margins onto the prairie proper.

<sup>4</sup> Later, during the Civil War, the *Pioneer*’s offices were ransacked because of its publisher’s Southern sympathies. Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, 458-459.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, 458-459; *The History of Fayette County, Iowa* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1878), 494.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, 458; *History of Fayette County*, 498. By 1875, Hobson had constructed a large brick home with ornate trimming on an expansive corner lot near the commercial heart of the town. An engraving of this home is featured in Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, at page 173 of the 1970 reprint edition. This building no longer exists and may have been demolished to build the existing Lutheran Church. Richard O. Woodard to author, email correspondence, December, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, 181; *West Union Gazette*, May 10, 1885.

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Town Fire – 1885

The conflagration began in the early morning hours of May 10, 1885, long before dawn. Thought to have been intentionally set, the fire began at the rear of a jewelry store and quickly covered all the wooden buildings from the corner of Vine and Elm streets south toward the two-story brick Bank Block (Fig. 5). Seven buildings occupying 150 feet of streetscape along Vine Street lay in ruins by the end of the day. To create a fire break and protect the important Bank Block, the single-story wooden building owned by James Cowle and occupied by the partnership of Hobson and Cowle (James was William’s younger brother) was pulled down by the town’s “hook and ladder boys.” A few days later, the *West Union Gazette* optimistically opined “had this little building remained, the consequences to the brick block would have been serious, although it is probable it would not have burned.” After reporting the losses of individuals and businesses, the *Gazette* concluded: “Thus has vanished another of the wooden rows that so long have caused anxiety to our town.” Displaced businesses scrambled for temporary quarters and plans for new buildings quickly emerged. Hobson and Cowle had been lucky. Their office contents were saved before their building was demolished, enabling the partnership to continue with minimal interruption. The *Gazette* wryly commented, however, that the two partners would once again “climb the stairs to their old office over the bank.”<sup>8</sup>

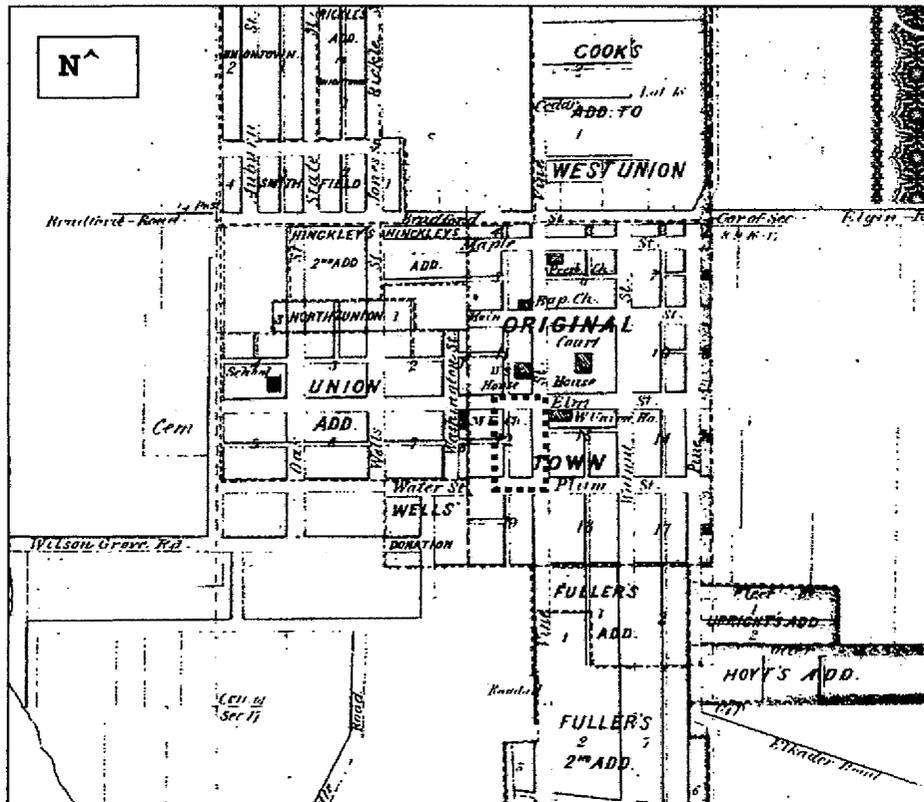


Figure 5 West Union town plan in 1875. The city block involved in the 1885 fire is marked by a dashed line. Hobson Block was constructed approximately in the center of this block after the fire. (From Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, [1875])

<sup>8</sup> *West Union Gazette*, May 15, 1885.

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The fortunate situation in which Hobson and Cowles found themselves in the short term also allowed Hobson to immediately plan for new permanent quarters. Just a month after the fire, the *Gazette* reported on a number of new brick buildings in the works and commented that “in place of the old wooden buildings brick blocks are to go up, and before snow flies there will be a decided improvement in that locality.”<sup>9</sup> Hobson quickly bought the lot owned by his partner’s brother for \$1000. He already owned the adjacent land that was also needed for Hobson Block. The land sale prompted the *Gazette* to write: “We hope this means a big business block.” Indeed, by the end of June, “dirt [had] begun to fly on the Hobson lots.”<sup>10</sup>

At the time of the fire in 1885, Joseph Hobson was 62 and certainly one of West Union’s wealthiest and most productive citizens. In addition to his professional, political, and financial endeavors, Hobson also served as West Union’s mayor for two years and was a school board member for 12 years. He and his wife, Elizabeth Baker Hobson, had two daughters and four sons. The two youngest sons published one of the town’s newspapers, the *Argo*, at the time of the fire, and did job-printing as well. When Hobson planned his new brick block, he included permanent quarters for his sons’ business as well as his own law practice.<sup>11</sup>

*The Hobson Brothers and The Argo*

Frank and Leroy T. Hobson, publishers of *The Argo*, were known familiarly and in their business partnership as the Hobson Brothers. The Hobson Brothers grew up in West Union and, along with their wealthy and prominent father, were well known to the community. Leroy began his career as a delivery boy for the *West Union Gazette*. He acquired “a handkerchief full of type and manufactured a press” and in 1873 began publishing the *Weekly Times*, “a diminutive sheet, selling by the year for ten cents.” Convinced of Leroy’s talent and determination, his parents bought him a “Novelty press and sufficient material to enable him to do real printing.”<sup>12</sup> Joined by his brother Frank as editor, the Hobson Brothers first opened a job-printing shop on a corner of Vine Street, and published an advertising sheet called the *Trade Journal*.<sup>13</sup> In 1880, they introduced *Hobson’s Monthly Magazine*, a literary paper that lasted one year. The Hobson Brothers next went into partnership with A. E. Winrott, publishing the *Fayette County Clarion* for a matter of a few months in 1881 before starting *The Argo* late that year.<sup>14</sup> One of the thousands of country weeklies started during the phenomenal post-Civil War growth of newspaper publishing, *The Argo* (Fig. 6) was a seven-column folio and the most successful of the brothers’ publishing ventures.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *West Union Gazette*, June 12, 1885.

<sup>10</sup> Warranty Deed, James and Caroline Cowle to Joseph Hobson, June 6, 1885, Town Lot Deed Record Book 14, page 31, Fayette County Assessor, Fayette County Courthouse, West Union, Iowa. Information compiled by Fayette County Abstract Company, West Union, Iowa, for Woodard Insurance; *West Union Gazette*, June 5 and June 26, 1885.

<sup>11</sup> *History of Fayette County, Iowa* (1910), 1216, accessed at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~iafayett/fhobson.htm> on December 27, 2007. Leroy T. Hobson showed an early interest in the newspaper business and by age 11 was already publishing an “amateur journal” with a circulation of 160 subscribers. Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*, 459.

<sup>12</sup> *The History of Fayette County, Iowa* (1878), 155.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

<sup>14</sup> *Portrait & Biographical Album of Fayette Co. Iowa* (Chicago: Lake City Publishing Company, 1891), 340.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), 161; *Portrait & Biographical Album*, 340. The size of a seven-column folio was 24 x 36 inches.

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Figure 6 Masthead of *The Argo*, published by the Hobson Brothers and established in 1881.  
(From an issue published September 23, 1885)

One dollar bought a year's subscription to *The Argo*, which was delivered by carrier or mailed.<sup>16</sup> *The Argo* was "all home print"—or local news—and politically declared as Republican.<sup>17</sup> Like all small town newspapers in the Midwest, *The Argo* struggled with the problem of "turning population into readership," and similar to many small publishers the Hobson Brothers continued job-printing to supplement their income.<sup>18</sup> They cultivated regular advertisers for their newspaper, encouraged readers to pay in kind as well as in cash, and may have offered enticements to gain new subscriptions as well as sending sample copies to potential customers.<sup>19</sup> Frank's witty editorial style and Leroy's technical skills enabled *The Argo* to continue under their partnership for the next decade. After that, the newspaper changed hands frequently until 1907, when Walter H. Beall acquired it. In 1910, Beall bought the *West Union Gazette* and combined the two newspapers into the *West Union Argo-Gazette*, for which Beall remained editor and publisher until his death in 1944.<sup>20</sup> Despite numerous owners and editors, *The Argo* continued to be printed in the Hobson Block until at least 1940.<sup>21</sup>

Architect Edward Easton and the Building of Hobson Block

According to an article in the November 20, 1885 *West Union Gazette*, Joseph Hobson hired local architect Edward Easton to design his new business block. In 1885, Easton was a prominent professional in West Union with at least two important commissions under this belt—the Fayette County Jail residence (1882) and an extravagant new Queen Anne residence (1882-83) created for Hobson's banking colleague, Samuel B. Zeigler. Born in County Kent, England, in 1833, Edward Easton and his parents had immigrated to the United States when the boy was five, settling in New York where Edward learned the carpentry trade as an adult. Census records and Easton's obituary indicate he arrived in the West Union area in 1855 and worked as a carpenter for several decades—work that was interrupted during the 1860s by service in the Union Army. He died in West Union in 1900.<sup>22</sup>

While little else is known of Easton's life, his two identified West Union commissions reflect an understanding and awareness

<sup>16</sup> *The Argo*, September 23, 1885.

<sup>17</sup> *Portrait & Biographical Album*, 340. By 1891, the Hobson Brothers had become the official printers for the city and county, printing ordinances and other legal notices.

<sup>18</sup> Atherton, *Main Street*, 164; Barbara Cloud, *The Business of Newspapers on the Western Frontier* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>19</sup> See Cloud, *The Business of Newspapers*, 35-51.

<sup>20</sup> *The History of Fayette County* (1878), 155-6; *West Union Argo-Gazette*, March 8, 1937; *West Union Fayette County Union*, March 23, 1978. Woodard Clippings File, Fayette County Historical Society, West Union, Iowa.

<sup>21</sup> Sanborn Map Co. fire insurance maps of West Union, Iowa, 1929 and 1948.

<sup>22</sup> Census data assembled by the Fayette County Historical Society; "Ed. Easton is Dead," unidentified newspaper clipping, June 1, 1900. Collection of the Fayette County Historical Society, West Union, Iowa.

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of popular national architectural styles of the day. Easton's extant jailhouse residence sits near the courthouse on the public green. Italianate in style, the building was constructed of brick with a boxy, squarish shape and its two stories rise from a raised stone foundation. Windows appear singly and in pairs, with brick hoods and stone sills. A wide roofline overhang and fascia boards suggest the one-time presence of brackets that have since been removed. Centered on the south façade is a projecting two-story window bay crowned by a pediment. Easton's design for the building appears to pay homage a nearby local landmark, Iowa Governor William Larrabee's home "Montauk," built in 1874 just nine miles away in Clermont.<sup>23</sup>

Samuel B. Zeigler had so much confidence in Edward Easton's abilities that he went to Europe during the year it took to construct his stylish new Queen Anne residence (Fig. 7). Standing three stories tall (attic included), the frame house's façade had a "handsomely designed and elaborately carved porch" with an octagonal tower with "small balconies." Decorated with, among other things, "heavy brackets," stained glass windows, and a beltcourse finished in "Japanese designs," the Zeigler commission stood out in the community and "offered great contrast to the plain and unpretentious domicils [sic] all about us," according to the newspaper writer.<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 7 The 1882-83 Zeigler house is undergoing renovation by the young couple who own it.  
(Richard O. Woodard photograph, 2008)**

<sup>23</sup> A photo of the jail residence appears in Joyce McKay, "Iowa Correctional Facilities Survey: Reconnaissance Survey of Municipal and County Jails" (Study sponsored by the State Historical Society of Iowa, Bureau of Historic Preservation, 1991); a Montauk photograph may be found at Wesley I. Shank, *The Iowa Catalog: Historic American Buildings Survey* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), 40.  
<sup>24</sup> "The Mansion of S. B. Zeigler," *West Union Gazette*, February 20, 1883.

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The talents Easton utilized for the Zeigler “mansion” were put to good use in the commercial block designed for Joseph Hobson after the 1885 fire. The new building’s progress impressed C. H. Talmadge, editor of the *West Union Gazette*, and he toured it with the architect when Hobson Block was finished. The *Gazette* editor expressed “himself as well pleased with its handsome appearance, and solid, substantial character” (Fig. 8).<sup>25</sup> He recounted the tour for *Gazette* readers:

This is the handsomest finished structure in our city, architecturally and artistically, and is as well built as it is handsome. The front is of red brick trimmed with stone, capped with a deep cornice of brick out of which blossoms a pretty fringe of iron. The building is divided into three business houses, the south room to be occupied by Joseph Hobson as an office, and will be elegantly fitted. He has a roomy vault for valuable papers, a convenient consultation room in the rear, and other appointments to correspond. The next room is the Argo office, with sanctum in the front, composing room in the rear, and press room in the basement, all appropriately finished for their respective purposes, roomy, light and airy. The north room is intended for a store, but its occupancy, if known, is not public. The upper floor is divided into numerous pleasant rooms, all opening upon a wide hall or corridor crossing the entire block from south to north, terminating in a rear stairway. This hall is lighted by a patent sky light. The workmanship throughout the entire building is first class, creditable to all concerned, and the block is an ornament to our city.<sup>26</sup>

On November 18, 1885, the Hobson Brothers proudly announced their move to the central offices of Hobson Block as follows: “Removal. Many of our friends seem to fail to ‘catch on’ to the fact that the ARGO has moved into its new and handsome quarters. The ARGO office may now be found in Hobson’s block, two doors north of the National Bank. By next week we will be fully settled, and everything will be running in its usual groove. We will then be ready to receive visitors, and any of our friends will be made welcome.”<sup>27</sup> The following week, the Hobson Brothers announced that “Hobson & Cowle are now nicely settled in their new quarters in Hobson block. The general opinion seems to be that they occupy the finest law office in the county, if not in the State. In fact, it’s ‘tony’ enough for most cities.”<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 8 Detail of decoration on Hobson Block façade. (Tallgrass Historians L.C., 2007)**

<sup>25</sup> *The Argo*, November 18, 1885.

<sup>26</sup> “The Hobson Block,” *West Union Gazette*, November 20, 1885.

<sup>27</sup> *The Argo*, November 18, 1885.

<sup>28</sup> *The Argo*, November 25, 1885.

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Two years after completion of his stylish new commercial block, Joseph Hobson appears to have retired at age 64, resigning from the offices he held with both the national and savings banks in December, 1887, and, at the same time leaving his law practice in his partner's hands.<sup>29</sup> In 1889, Hobson Block was assigned to D. H. Clements to pay creditors, suggesting the aging Hobson may have suffered a financial reversal for some reason before he died in 1893. After Hobson's death, the building was acquired in 1894 by Levi Fuller, a prominent West Union citizen.<sup>30</sup> In 1912, local land agent R. O. Woodard acquired Hobson Block from the Fuller family and moved his business into it. Eventually Woodard added general insurance sales to supplement his real estate business. Hobson Block has been owned and occupied by the Woodard family-run insurance and real estate business ever since.<sup>31</sup> The present owner, Richard O. Woodard has recently rehabilitated the building, returning the façade to a more historically appropriate arrangement of storefronts.



**Figure 9** In this 1908 panoramic streetscape of West Union, Iowa, the courthouse is just out of view on the left edge, the camera is looking west down Elm Street on the left side, and south down Vine Street on the right side. The 1885 fire affected the block of buildings along the far right edge. The rounded peak of the Bank Building is located at the distant end of this right-edge block, with Hobson Block just this side of the Bank Block. Photo by F.J. Bandholtz, Des Moines, Iowa. (Woodard collection)

Architectural Role on "Main Street"

Hobson Block's façade, as designed by Edward Easton for Joseph Hobson (Fig. 10), reflects elements of both the Italianate and Queen Anne styles of the late nineteenth century. Its mid-1880s construction date and the heavy attention paid to decoration at the roofline suggest the Italianate mode, while the asymmetrical fenestration and rich surface textures created by mixing masonry materials are hallmarks of the Queen Anne style. Primarily, however, the Easton design is Victorian commercial vernacular and classic "small-town Iowa." As population centers grew in the nineteenth century, prospering business owners all over the state replaced their modest wood-frame Main Street shops with larger, brick buildings that

<sup>29</sup> *History of Fayette County, Iowa* (1910), 391-392.

<sup>30</sup> The Fuller name appears on more than one platted addition to West Union by 1875 (see Figure 1). Warranty Deed, First National Bank of Elkader to Levi Fuller, September 1, 1894, Book 20, page 226, Fayette County Assessor, West Union, Iowa. Information compiled by Fayette County Abstract Company, West Union, Iowa, for Woodard Insurance.

<sup>31</sup> Warranty Deed, William E. & Clara H. Fuller to R. O. Woodard, October 28, 1912, filed October 31, 1913, Book 37, page 151, Fayette County Assessor, West Union, Iowa. Information compiled by Fayette County Abstract Company, West Union, Iowa, for Woodard Insurance; *West Union Fayette County Union*, August 2, 2006, and other clippings in Woodard Family Vertical File, Fayette County Historical Center, West Union, Iowa.

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showed a conscious sense of style and carried their owners' optimistic hopes for being fire proof. The dozens of images contained in A.T. Andreas' *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa* (1875) of multiple-store blocks similar to Hobson Block are testament to how popular these Victorian buildings had become even a decade before the disastrous Vine Street fire of 1885. Modern-day photographer William Plymat, Jr. has traveled Iowa for over thirty years photodocumenting domestic and commercial nineteenth century buildings in the state. His work suggests these handsome Victorian commercial blocks remain an important presence in the heart of many Iowa towns.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Hobson Block continues to serve in this role for West Union.

Its physical characteristics and historical role mean that Hobson Block also serves as an example of the "Property Type III" within the *Iowa's Main Street Commercial Architecture* Multiple Property Documentation Form (2002). The building meets the registration requirements for significance under Criterion B because of its association with Joseph Hobson, an important citizen who served his community in numerous ways and a variety of capacities, and under Criterion C as a good intact example of the Late Victorian vernacular commercial block.



**Figure 10 Joseph Hobson at age 52.**  
(Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa* [1875])

<sup>32</sup> Plymat, Jr., *Victorian Architecture of Iowa*, multiple pages.

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Verbal Boundary Description**

Lot 3 and the South 4½ feet of Lot 2, Block 12, West Union, Iowa.

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary is the legal description of the entire parcel historically associated with Hobson Block.

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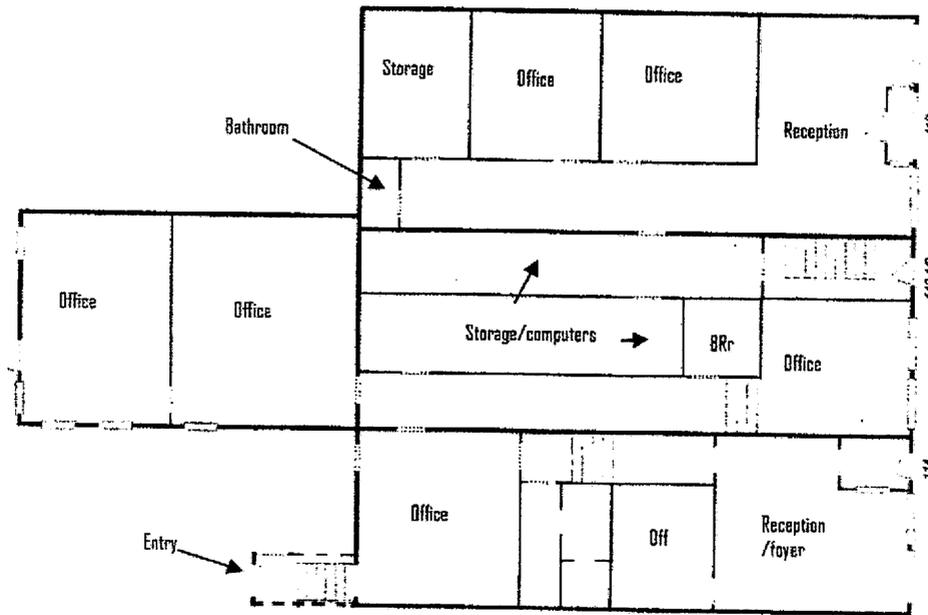
**Floor plans**

(sketched by Tallgrass Historians L.C., 2008)



**Ground (Main) floor**

Two office suites occupy the three original units of space.



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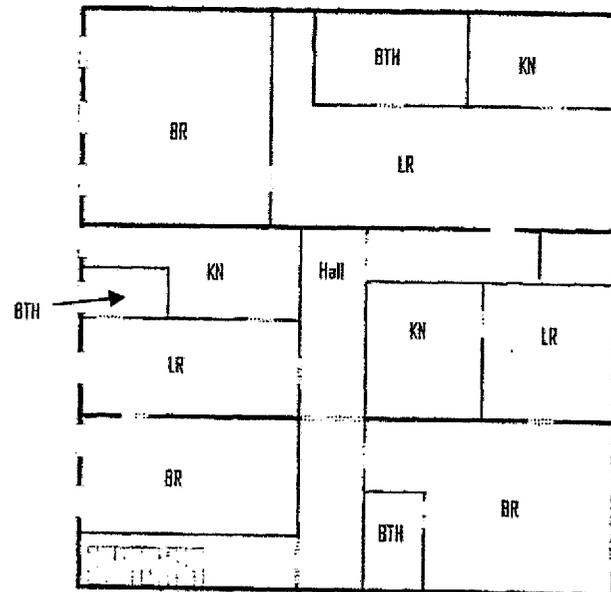
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**Second floor**

Three apartment units (living room, bedroom/s, kitchen, bathroom) occupy spaces accessed by the gateleg hallway.



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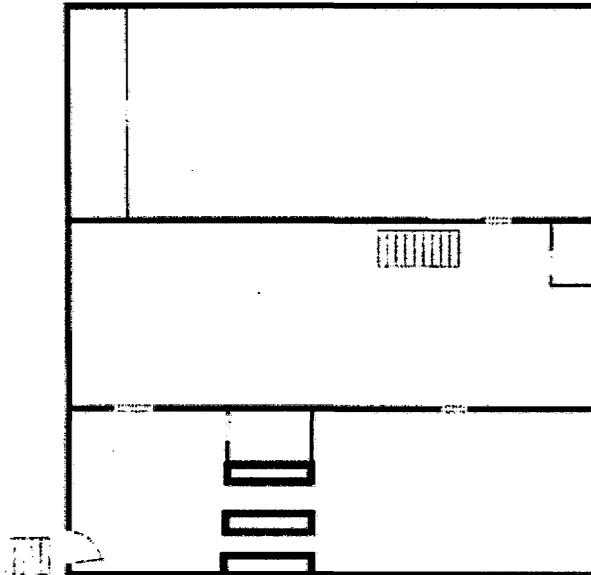
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**Basement**

All spaces function as storage.



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**City of West Union, Fayette County, Iowa with the general location of the property circled.**  
(map obtained from <http://cairo.gis.iastate.edu> on December 27, 2007; base map is from USGS)



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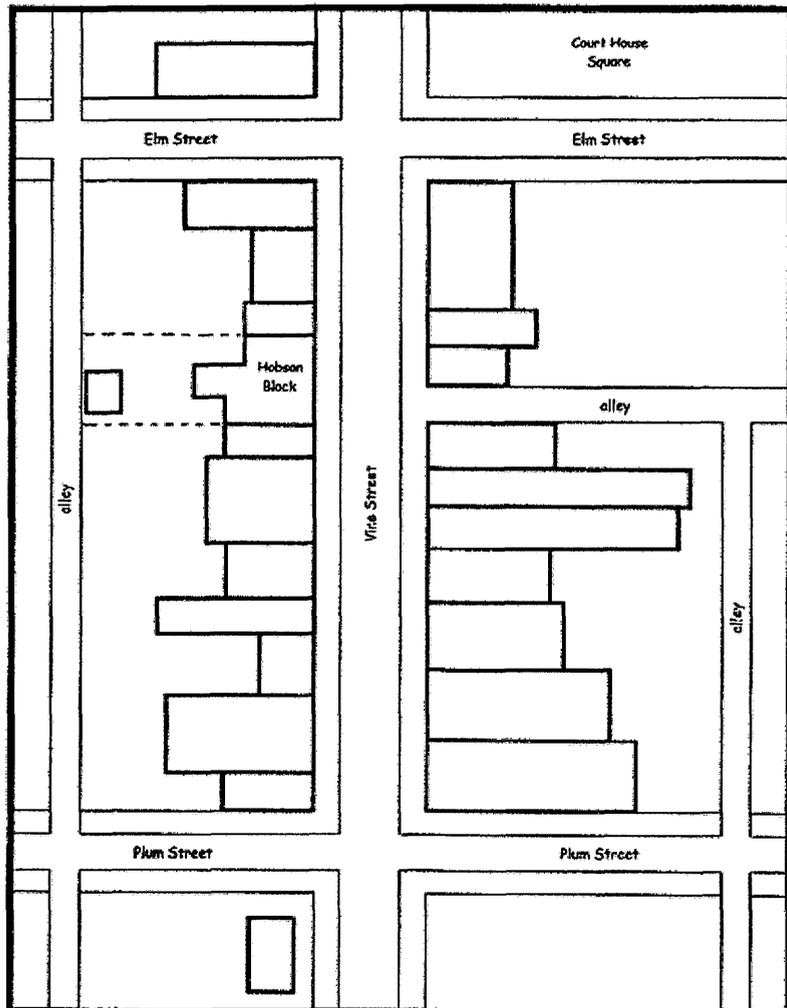
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**Site Plan – Hobson Block property is labeled. Dashed lines indicate rear yard boundaries.**  
*(sketch map by Tallgrass Historians L.C., 2007)*



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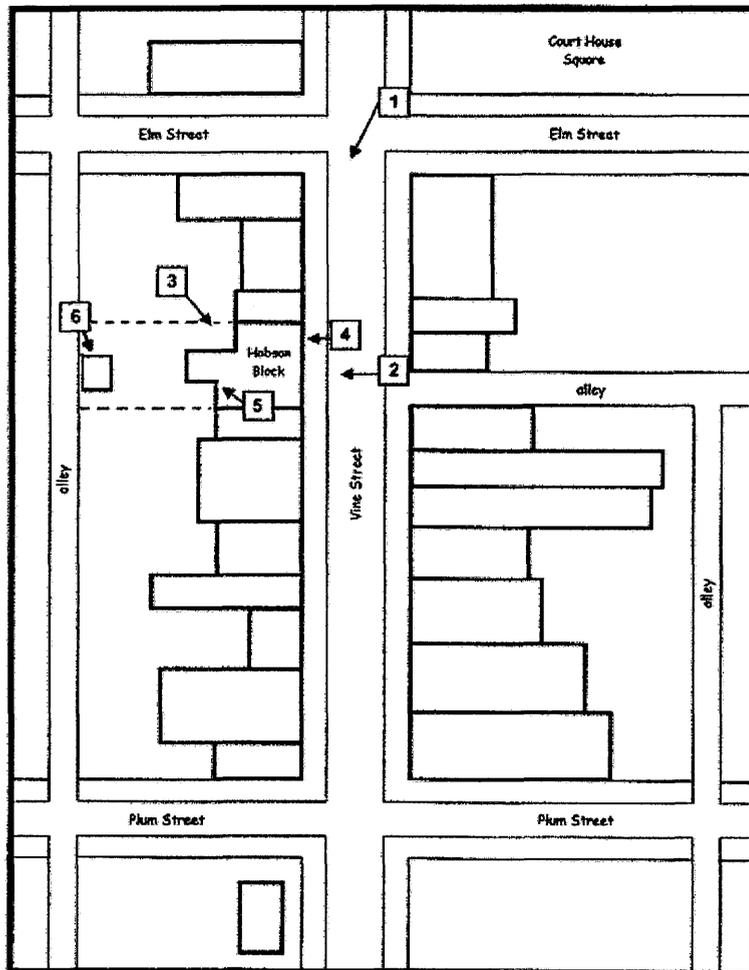
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**Photograph Locations**



**Photograph Label Information (## 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5 share information)**

1. Hobson Block
2. Fayette Co., IA
3. Tallgrass Historians L.C., Eric Lana
4. July 20, 2007
5. Tallgrass Historians L.C., Iowa City, Iowa
6. Photograph #1: Streetscape, facing SW  
Photograph #2: East façade, facing W  
Photograph #3: North side, West rear, facing SE  
Photograph #4: Façade roofline detail, facing W  
Photograph #5: Interior detail, vault door, south storefront, facing NW  
Photograph #6: Garage on alley, facing SE