

The Henry L. Russell House  
West Grove Township  
Davis County ↗ Bloomfield Vicinity  
Iowa

HABS No. IA-137

HABS  
IOWA,  
26-BLOFI,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HABS  
IOWA,  
26-BLOFI,  
1-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

Henry L. Russell House

Location: The SE  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the SE  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the SE  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the SE  $\frac{1}{4}$  Section 12, Township 68 North, Range 15 West. Route 6, Bloomfield vic., West Grove Twp., Davis Co., Iowa  
UTM: 15:540240:4505045

Present Owner: Philip E. and Catherine K. Goodson, Route 6, Bloomfield, Iowa.

Present Occupant: None

Present Use: Abandoned

Significance: The Henry L. Russell House is one of a handful of octagon houses remaining in Iowa. Built in 1859 of brick manufactured at the site, the house was Russell's adaptation of octagon forms promoted during the 1840's and 1850's by Orson Squire Fowler. The house incorporates details from the Greek Revival, and a plan nearly identical to one published by Fowler in 1854. Henry Russell came to Davis County from Ohio in 1854, and purchased this property two years later. A farmer and stockraiser, Russell specialized in breeding Spanish Merino sheep, a business that was continued, for several decades after his death in 1894, by a daughter and son-in-law.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1859
2. Architect: None. Influenced by designs published by Orson Squire Fowler.
3. Original and Subsequent Owners:

(Reference: Davis County Recorder's Office, Bloomfield, Iowa)

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U.S.A. to Greenville Hazelwood  
 Patent 9 July 1849  
 Original Entry Book, page 126

Greenville Hazelwood to Benjamin Brooks  
 Warranty Deed 9 January 1855  
 Deed Book E, page 608

Benjamin Brooks to Henry L. Russell  
 Warranty Deed 25 April 1856  
 Deed Book G, page 38

Jennie L. and W.D. Barnett to James E.  
 Russell  
 Quit Claim Deed 20 June 1903  
 Deed Book 47, page 83 1/2

James E. Russell et. al. to Chancey J. Porter  
 Warranty Deed 3 March 1909  
 Deed Book 45, page 390

Etta B. Porter to C.J. Porter  
 Will 7 July 1932  
 (Reference County Auditor, no other record)

Chancey J. Porter to Laura J. Barnett Porter  
 Change of Title 7 August 1935  
 (Reference County Recorder, no other record)

Laura Barnett Hall and John Thomas Hall to  
 Galen A. and Phyllis L. Cook  
 Joint Warranty Deed 13 June 1958  
 Deed Book 76, page 240

Phyllis L. Cook to Philip E. and Catherine  
 K. Goodson  
 Warranty Deed 26 January 1978  
 Deed Book 83, page 718

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: None documented. House believed to have been built from brick manufactured on-site, by Russell and local builders.
5. Alterations and additions: Original kitchen wing on northeast removed 1959, original dining room converted to kitchen use at the same time. Front porch dates from c. 1910.

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## B. Historical Context:

Henry L. Russell was one of many settlers who came to Davis County from the mid-Atlantic states during the 1840's and 1850's. Born 4 October 1826 in Greene County, Pennsylvania, he moved with his family to Athens, Ohio in 1841. In 1847, while still in Athens, Russell married Rhoda Love, with whom he had two children before she died in 1849. In 1851 (or 1853, accounts vary), Russell married again, to Mary E. Kurtz of Pittsburg. They were to have eight children.

Russell and his family moved to Davis County, Iowa in 1854, ten years after the county had been organized and land opened to settlement. Two years later, he purchased land in the southeast quarter of Section 12, Township 68N Range 15W (then Fabius Township), where he built his eight-sided house in 1859. By 1870, Russell was reasonably prosperous, the Federal census of that year valuing his real estate holdings at \$6360 and personal property at \$1515. Much of this prosperity was based on Russell's successful breeding of Spanish Merino sheep. Davis County was at one time described as a "Mecca" for polled Delaine Merinos, and Russell apparently participated in a number of experimental breeding projects.

Russell seems to have had no political ambitions. The only organizational membership recorded for Russell was his long tenure as a ruling elder in the local Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a denomination he joined in Ohio in 1849. Russell died July 30, 1894, eight years after a stroke left him paralyzed. For over 20 years following his death, Russell's sheep farm was operated by his youngest daughter, Etta, and her husband Chancey J. Porter, as the "Maple Ave. Stock Farm". The property remained in the family, although at periods either rented or unoccupied, until it was purchased by Galen and Phyllis Cook in 1959. The house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

## A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The Russell house is two-story, eight-sided dwelling in a vernacular Greek Revival style, built in 1859. Bricks used in its construction appear to have been hand-made in a soft-mud process: they are not uniform in size, shape or color, and have a fairly low density. Many show striations left by scraping mud off the top of the mold.

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The house was clearly modeled on designs published by Orson Squire Fowler in his A Home For All, which had at least 7 printings between 1848 and 1857. The plan is nearly identical to that of the Howland House, published in the 1854 edition. How Russell learned of Fowler's work is not known, but the many editions of A Home For All, and the inclusion of Fowler's designs in innumerable builders' handbooks of the period, would have given Russell many opportunities to become familiar with it.

2. Condition of fabric: The Russell house is today in extremely poor condition and will probably be demolished in the near future. The east and northeast walls have totally collapsed, and a portion of the north wall has fallen out as well. This condition is the cumulative result of several factors: shoddy materials, poor masonry techniques, lack of maintenance, and inappropriate repair measures. As noted above, the house (including the basement) was built of bricks that are on the whole quite soft and light (some feel more like blocks of pumice than solid brick), with such low density that they absorb moisture quite readily. In addition, the bricks were laid up in a rather haphazard common bond, in which the header, or bonding, courses were not carried through the length of a wall, or were wholly omitted (thus resulting in a stretcher bond). Some structural stability was achieved by adding corner pilasters, but in the long run this could not overcome the initial problems of materials and masonry work.

The walls were further weakened by rising ground moisture and by insufficient attention to the gutter, which is an interior system (see below). Instead of flowing out the pipe provided for that purpose on the east side, rainwater and melting snow were trapped along the edge of the roof and gradually seeped down into the walls. Exacerbating the situation was the application of concrete from ground level to just above the first floor window sills, which forced rising ground moisture ever higher up the walls.

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## B. Description of Exterior:

1. Dimensions: 13'2" average from corners, but inexact. For example, the southwest wall is 12'8".
2. Foundations: Full basement with brick walls and dirt floor. Inaccessible.
3. Walls: Soft brick laid up in a rather random 6-8 course common bond with flush joints, two bricks (approximately 9") thick, with corner pilasters. The bricks are of irregular size and coloring, the latter ranging from a cream or buff to orange-red and gray-brown. A few are partially glazed. The outer bricks are a fairly uniform orange-red. Bricks used at corners are shaped to triangular points at one end (Fig. 1). A date stone was inserted in the east wall, in the spandrel between the windows, that read "H.L. Russell . A D 1859".

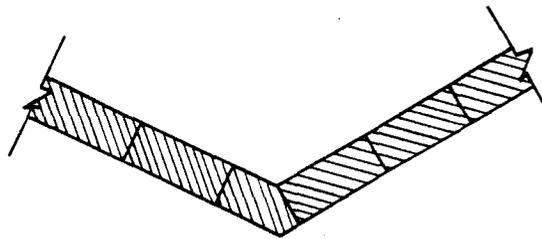


Fig. 1.

4. Structural system, framing: Brick exterior bearing walls, plus two interior bearing walls (also of brick) running parallel north-south approximately 3.64 meters apart. Other interior walls, where accessible, are of regular stud construction, or simply wood lath and plaster or (more recently) plywood partitions. There is evidence of wire lath behind the dining room fireplace mantel and in the rubble of the collapsed walls, but its original location could not be determined. The roof system (observed through a hole in

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the second floor ceiling) consists of sawed rafters radiating from an octagonal "compression ring" around the central chimney. They are parallel to one another on each side, this achieved by a three-"pronged" rafter at each corner (Fig. 2). Machine cut square nails are used throughout the house; modern work uses round wire nails. There is no evidence of mortise-and-tenon construction.

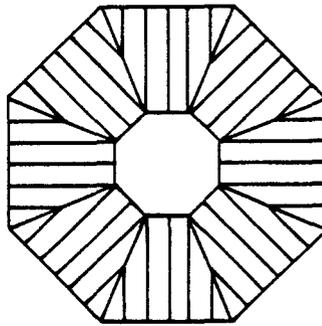


Fig. 2.

5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: A screened porch is located on the southeast (main) facade. Dating from the early 20th century, this porch has a shallow hipped roof above projecting rafter ends. The lower walls are finished inside and out with narrow clapboards, and the ceiling is finished with narrow beaded car siding. Concrete steps to the porch are quite new. On the southwest side are the remains of an opening to a coal chute (filled in). A cellar entrance with concrete walls is located on the east side.
6. Chimneys: A brick chimney rises through the center of the house, servicing back-to-back fireplaces on the first floor. Where it rises above the roof, it is eight-sided, and was originally flared at the top. The stack has been covered with concrete which has not

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prevented its deterioration. A metal flue is located at the east-northeast corner on the roof.

## 7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and Doors: Entrances are located in the southeast (main), northeast and north walls, the latter originally leading to the kitchen wing. The north entrance has an interior lintel of walnut, and a pine casing. The casing was held in place by small wooden wedges nailed to the outer sides and inserted in the joints of the masonry. The door, also of pine, is four-panelled.

The northeast doorway no longer exists, as the wall in which it is located has collapsed.

The main (southeast) entrance consists of a single four-panel door (since removed) in a wide frame that has a panelled soffit and reveals while lacking an exterior surround or architrave. The sidelights, above molded panels, consist of six lights, in pairs. Each block of sidelights is removable, being held in place simply with small square nails. Between the door and sidelights are single pilasters with narrow, molded caps. The transom is composed of twelve lights.

- b. Windows and shutters: There are no windows on the northwest side. The windows on both floors on the southwest and east sides were decorative only, being filled with brick and plastered over on the inside. Cellar windows with brick-lined wells are located on west and north sides. The south, west, north and northeast walls had a window in each story and there is a window above the entrance on the southeast side. Second floor windows are 4'9" high. First floor windows are 5'6" high, except the south (parlor) window, which is 6'6" tall. It is probable that the lower blind window on the east wall was of similar height. All windows are centered in the walls, and have 6" lintels and 2" sills of walnut. Most of the original 6/6 double hung

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sash have been replaced. Many of the narrow, splayed jambs show notches from which hung wooden shutters. Each shutter had an upper panel of fixed louvres, a bottom panel of movable louvres, and were hung on simple, wrought-iron pins.

## 8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof consists of eight pie-shaped sections radiating from a central chimney stack. Original wood shingles remain beneath light green asbestos shingling. About 18" from the roof edge is a metal flange, perhaps 4" high, which appears to have been part of the interior gutter system. The drainpipe is located toward the north end of the east wall near the eaves.
- b. Cornice and eaves: The house has narrow, boxed eaves and plain wood cornice that lacks an architrave. The detail is very restrained, consisting simply of a cyma recta molding at the "cymatium", and a cyma reversa bedmold. The narrow, unembellished frieze is held to the wall by small wooden wedges nailed to the back and inserted into the masonry joints.
- c. Dormers, etc.: There are no dormers, towers or other projecting roof elements.

## C. Description of Interior:

## 1. Floor plans: (See Figures 3 and 4)

- a. First Floor. As noted previously (B.4), two brick bearing walls run north-south through the house, dividing the interior into three major parts, the outer two of equal width but narrower than the center section. The main entrance opens directly into a hall, with staircase along the east wall. Toward the north end of this hall is a doorway leading to a small, triangular vestibule. The center section of the house features a nearly square parlor at the south end. On its north wall is a fireplace. A short passage on the east side

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of the fireplace (as long as the fireplace stack is deep) leads to what is now the kitchen (originally the dining room). Here, there is a fireplace centered in the south wall, and beside it a built-in cupboard with drawers below, part of which may be original. On the west wall there was a built-in desk and cupboard which has been removed, leaving a hole about 4' wide and 6' high in the brick bearing wall.

The west side of the house has a triangular closet at the south end, a small bedroom off which is a very small rectangular closet set beside the fireplace chimney, and a polygonal bathroom and triangular cupboard in the north end.

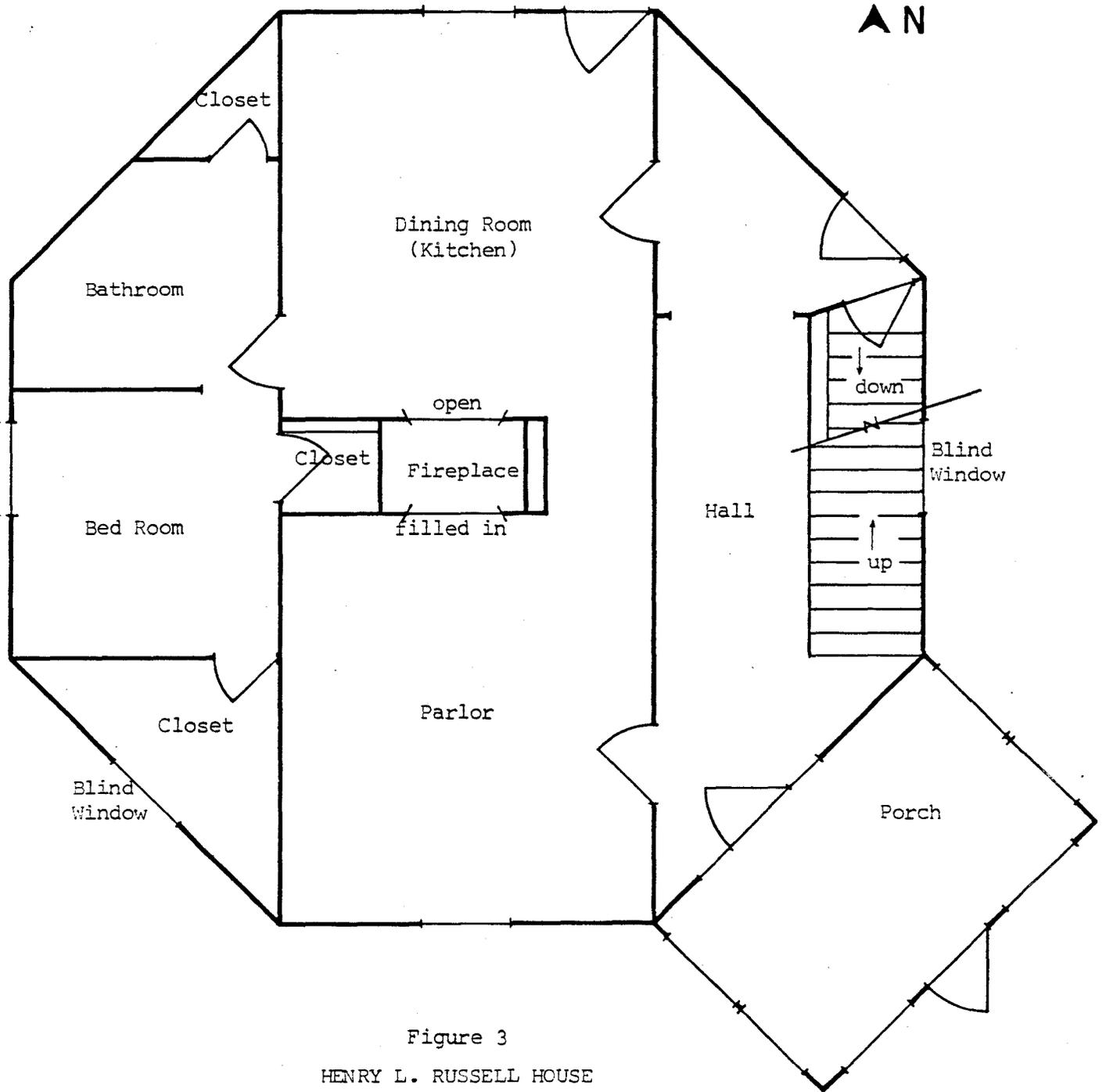


Figure 3  
HENRY L. RUSSELL HOUSE  
First Floor Plan  
Approx. 3/16 scale

Based on informal sketch plans submitted with the application to the National Register of Historic Places (1976), on file at the Division of Historic Preservation, Iowa State Historical Department, Iowa City, Iowa.

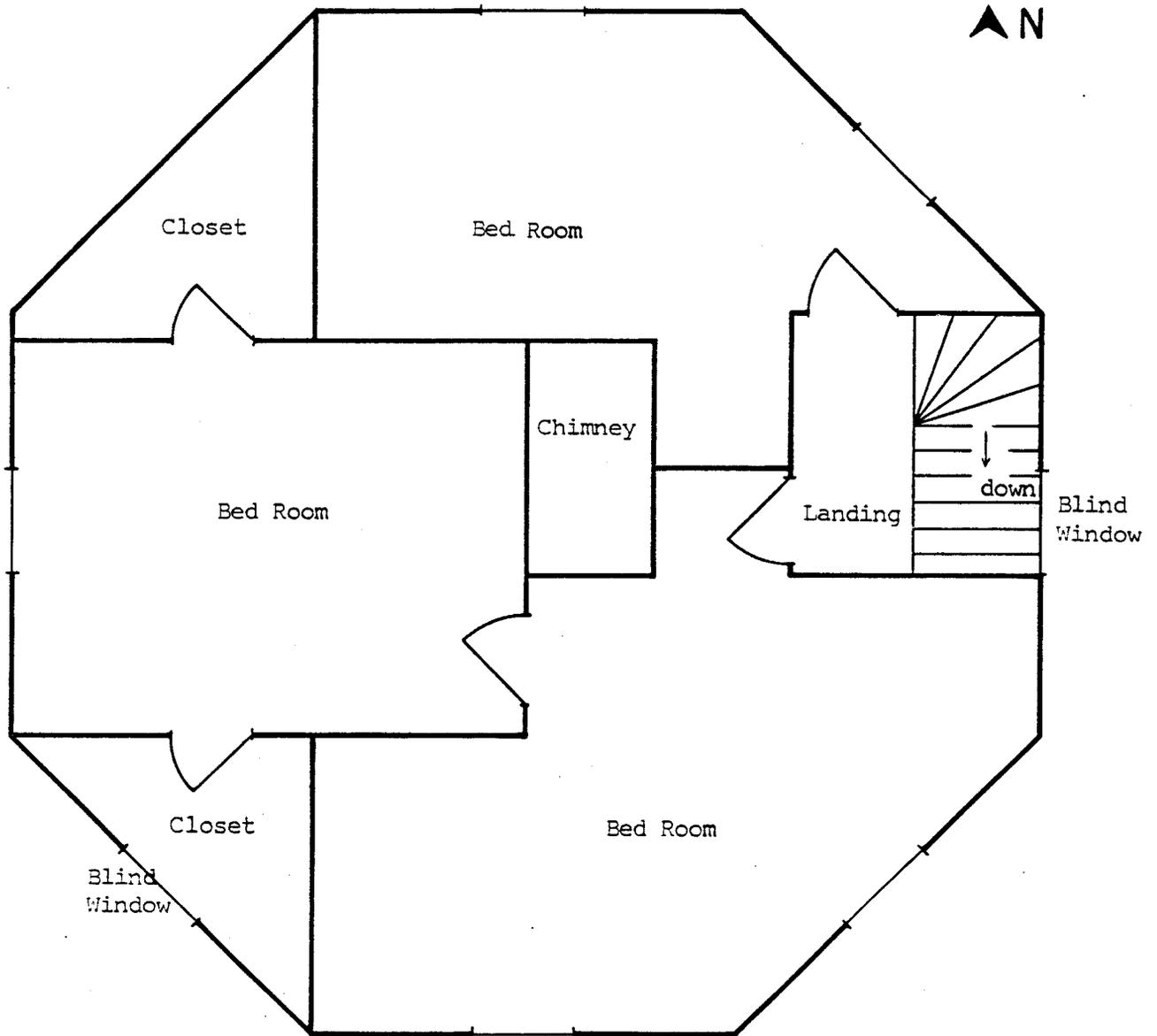


Figure 4  
HENRY L. RUSSELL HOUSE  
Second Floor Plan  
Approx. 3/16 scale

Based on informal sketch plans submitted with the application to the National Register of Historic Places (1976), on file at the Division of Historic Preservation, Iowa State Historical Department, Iowa City, Iowa.

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- b. Second Floor. While the main rooms on the first floor are all rectangular, this is not the case on the second floor. A short landing-hall leads to irregularly shaped rooms on north and south. Only the room on the west is rectangular. Triangular closets are located on either side of this room, along the southwest and northwest walls.

An undated snapshot, taken after the entrance porch was added, shows a portion of the original kitchen wing. It was a one-story wood frame structure, with gable end facing approximately north. A brick chimney was located toward this north end. On the east side, the wood-shingled roof was extended over a latticework "porch". This section was removed in 1959, and due to the overgrown nature of the area around the house, it is not possible to determine without archaeological investigation exactly where it was located nor its size.

2. Stairways: Along the east wall is a quarter-turn staircase with winders, originally held to the wall with large square nails. It is supported from below by a wall made of roughly-sawed vertical planks of varying width, nailed to the floor at irregular intervals and covered with narrow wood lathe and plaster. Walnut is used for the strings, while the treads, risers and balustrade are oak stained to resemble walnut. Each tread has two balusters, which have square bases and round, tapered shafts. The balusters are fitted into the moldings along the outer edge of the treads with half-dovetailed "tenons" nailed to the base of each, and at the top are inserted into holes drilled into the underside of the curved stairrail. The rail ends in a turned newel post with an octagonal cap. A decorative touch is provided by thin, flat pieces of wood, curved at the lower edge, which are nailed to the outer surface of the string and extend around the stairwell as a frieze.

Beneath the staircase is a small flight of steps leading to the cellar.

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3. **Flooring:** There is tan and white linoleum in the dining room, and tan textured carpeting in the first floor bedroom and bath. Flooring in the parlor and main hall is 2" quarter-sawed oak. (This material is probably beneath the dining room linoleum as well). The second story has roughly-finished 5 1/2" tongue-in-groove plank flooring. There is linoleum in the west bedroom.
4. **Wall and ceiling finish:** The interior surfaces of the outer walls are plastered, without lathe, and have been painted and/or papered many times. Ceilings are finished with paint and plaster on narrow wood lathe strips set very close together. In the dining room, linoleum in a tile pattern extends about 5' up from the floor, with wallpaper above.
5. **Openings:**
  - a. **Doorways and doors:** (See Figures 3 and 4) All doorways have molded architraves, differing slightly in width and elaboration depending upon their location (closet doorways are simpler and usually shorter, than doorways between rooms). Square unmolded corner blocks are featured on the south side of the doorway at the north end of the main hall, on both sides of the doorway between hall and parlor, and on the south side of the doorway leading from this room to the kitchen. The two parlor doorways have fluted architraves, 5-3/4" wide, and the doorway between hall and parlor has paneled reveals and soffit.

Most existing doors are of the four-panel type. Two exceptions are the door to the southwest closet (first floor) and door at the top of the cellar steps. Both of these are constructed of vertical planks set in a plank frame.
  - b. **Windows:** Originally, all functioning windows had 6/6 double hung sash, which are still in place on the second floor and in the parlor. All observable windows have simple, molded surrounds and narrow sills, except

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in the parlor, where the surround is fluted and has corner blocks to match the doorway architrave.

6. **Decorative features and trim:** The house has few decorative elements apart from door and window trim (see above) and main staircase (see above). Baseboards are as a rule low and quite plain, except again in the parlor and main hall, where they are molded and about 10" high. The dining room fireplace mantel (which probably dates from the early 20th century) is supported on short pilasters with molded caps and bases. The trabeated parlor fireplace mantel (no longer extant) had pilasters fluted to match door and window trim, with large, rather blocklike molded caps.
7. **Hardware:** Observable hardware includes several knob box locks with brown porcelain knobs and door hinges of common type. The keyhole of the lock on the door of the west bedroom (second floor) is framed by the inscription: "Pat'd. Dec. 11, 1842 & Ext'd." On the door above the cellar steps is a wrought-iron latchset, the bar of which is held in place by small rounded, curved pieces.
8. **Mechanical equipment:**

- a. **Heating, air conditioning, ventilation:** The central chimney originally served back-to-back fireplaces in parlor and dining room. The latter fireplace has been remodeled with tan firebrick interior and an outer facing of dark red brick set in a soldier arch above the opening. The parlor fireplace was filled in, apparently long ago, and the bricks are crumbling to powder. This fireplace has a segmental-arched opening and is 2'7" high and 2'2" wide.

Although the cellar was not accessible, it is evident that the house had a furnace by the turn of the century. There are rectangular, hot-air floor registers with metal grates in the parlor and upstairs bedrooms, which could date from the late 19th century. Of that

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date also is a large wood-lattice grating in the dining room floor near the passage to the parlor. More modern (1950's) registers are found in the baseboards of the hall (opposite the stairway) and the south wall of the parlor.

The flue cover above the dining room fireplace indicates that a stove was used in this room at one time.

- b. Lighting and plumbing: Both of these systems are fairly modern and unremarkable.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The property is located five miles west and three miles south of Bloomfield, the Davis County seat. The house is situated on a rise on the north side of a gravel road, the main elevation facing southeast. The surroundings are typical of rural Iowa: cornfield and some pasture land, gently rolling terrain, and farmsteads about a mile apart.
2. Historic landscape design: The original character of landscaping near the house is unknown. Currently, the entire area is heavily overgrown with tall grasses and weeds. There are large piles and rolls of hay scattered about the property. There are shade trees north of the house, including osage orange and black walnut. To the west is an apple tree, perhaps remaining from the 12-acre orchard Henry Russell planted, and to the southwest is a small spruce tree.
3. Outbuildings: (See sheet 1 of drawings for site plan) Associated with the house is an assortment of outbuildings, dating from the late 19th century to the present, which are arranged in a rough semicircle on the west, north and east. On the west is a large machine shed of modern "polebarn" type with corrugated metal rear wall and roof. North of the house, beyond a curving drive leading to the machine shed, are two groups of small

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late 19th century wooden outbuildings, all in deteriorated condition. The first group is of three sheds, two with wood-shingled gable roofs and metal ridge caps, the third with a corrugated-metal gable roof. Their post-and-stud construction includes peeled and unpeeled posts, and they are sheathed principally with horizontal shiplap siding. The center shed also features vertical plank walling beneath the siding. East of these is a group of two structures. One is a one-hole privy with wood-shingled front-gable roof; the other is a small animal shed sheathed with vertical planks.

East of the house is a medium-sized front-gable machine shed on a poured concrete foundation that retains the imprint of the wooden molds. It is faced with vertical plans approximately 9" wide. Battens appear only on a portion of the north wall. Between this building and the barn is an animal pen. The barn, which has partly collapsed, is a large front-gable structure with lean-to shelters on north and east sides, and a steep wood-shingled roof. Most of the structural system is stud construction, but some of the interior framing is of the pegged mortise-and-tenon type. The walls consist of vertical plank siding without battens.

Northeast of the barn is another outbuilding, oriented east-west on a concrete slab. It is an asbestos-shingled gable roof, projecting rafter ends, and is sided with 5" tongue-in-groove vertical boarding. Nearby to the east is an hexagonal chicken house, walls made of tightly-fitting  $3\frac{1}{2}$ " vertical boards, a sheet-metal roof (6-part, with a center "monitor"), and ceiling of beaded car siding.

Finally, there is a round corrugated steel Butler storage structure near the southeast corner of the barn.

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PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

## A. Bibliography:

## 1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Haufe, Lillian. National Register nomination (10-300) for Russell House, Davis County, Iowa.

Sissell, D. Kent. Research Notes. On file at Iowa State Historical Department, Division of Historic Preservation, Iowa City, IA.

## 2. Secondary and published sources:

Bloomfield Democrat, August 9, 1894.

Creese, Walter. "Fowler and the Domestic Octagon." Art Bulletin 28 (2), June, 1946, pp. 89-102.

Davis County Republican, August 9, 1960.

Federated Women's Clubs of the County (comp., 1924-1927). Pioneer History of Davis County, Iowa. Bloomfield Democrat, publisher.

History of Davis County, Iowa. Des Moines: State Historical Co., 1882.

Sissell, D. Kent. The Octagon Form in Nineteenth Century Domestic Architecture in Iowa. M.A. Thesis, University of Iowa, 1969.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the Henry L. Russell house was completed during August-September 1981 for the Iowa State Historical Department, Division of Historic Preservation by Dennett, Muessig & Associates, Ltd. of Iowa City, Iowa. The project was undertaken as an emergency recording effort for a National Register property whose fabric is rapidly deteriorating. The recording team consisted of Hans Muessig, Supervisor and photogrammetrist; Sarah J. Dennett, photographer; Martha H. Bowers, architectural historian; and Angela J. Schiller and Marie A. Neubauer, assistants.